Urban Ethnographies and Difference.
Resources and Routes of an Italian New Wave

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In recent years, when many authors speak about the end of the city and the death of public spaces, dozens of Italian researchers are engaged in observing and analyzing the transformation of cities and of their public spaces. This inter-disciplinary trend of research has been creating a new field of urban scholars.

The aim of this work is to emphasize the quantitative and qualitative importance of the main outcomes of this new research literature. This attempt is twofold: the first objective is to examine six distinct yet interrelated concepts which have drawn considerable attention within this growing research. The second one is to highlight some limits of this new trend and three possible routes to enhance its analytical potentiality and, in some sense, its socio-economic impact.

Urban Ethnographies and Difference

In recent years, when many authors speak about the end of the city and the death of public space, dozens of Italian researchers are engaged in observing and analyzing the transformation of cities and of their public spaces. This trend of research, fed by several disciplines, has been creating a new field of urban scholars. Many of them are ethnographers **got the seat of their pants dirty** in the same fieldwork research, in the same streets and neighbourhoods: in Milan in Via Padova (Andriola, 2005; Arrigoni, 2011), at the Isola neighbourhood (Cognetti, 2007; Semi, 2012) and Via Paolo Sarpi (Cologna, 2002; Manzo, 2009); in Padua in Via Anelli (Vianello, 2006; Ostanel, 2012) and at Arcella neighbourhood (Cancellieri, 2010; Briata, 2011); in Turin at Porta Palazzo (Semi, 2004; Cingolani, 2006); in Rome at Pigneto (Scandurra, 2007; Pompeo, 2011) and Esquilino neighbourhood (Attili, 2008; Scarpelli, 2009); in Verona at Veronetta neighbourhood (Maher, 2005; Ronzon, 2008; Briata, 2011); in Urbino in the so-called Urbino2 (Saitta, 2006; Barberis and Cancellieri, 2012). This is only a short list, it is just a part of a larger number of new urban Italian scholars. Unluckily these young researchers rarely intertwine their competences and disciplinary gazes; they are studying the same places with similar research questions but they are usually unknown each other. Some interesting exceptions we have met with in recent years are Cellamare (2008) and Herzfeld (2009) in Rome at Monti neighbourhood, Scarpelli and Romano (2011) in the city of Pienza (Tuscany) and the interdisciplinary group of Milan Polytechnic (Bricocoli and Savoldi, 2010). Equally meaningful is the experience of Tracce Urbane, a network of young planners, sociologists and anthropologists that has been promoting interdisciplinary conferences, workshops and research (Cancellieri, Scandurra, 2012).

A first suggestion of this paper is to explicitly recognize this new field of research and to support the interdisciplinary dialogue among researchers who are addressing their interest to similar topics. The aim of this work is in particular to emphasize the quantitative and qualitative 'weight' of the main outcomes of this new research literature. This attempt is twofold: first, I examine six distinct yet interrelated concepts which have drawn considerable attention within this growing research. Second, I highlight some limits of this new trend and three possible routes to enhance its potentialities.

Six emerging concepts

The first concept underlined by this new wave of research is the *transnationalism*. New migration flows, thanks to new technological devices, are generating growing transnational linkages between different countries and continents. Many researchers are focusing on this social dynamic: on transnational Senegalese migration (Riccio, 2007), on Bolivian trans-local spaces (Marzadro, 2008), on Romanian and Ecuadorian transnational social practices (Cingolani, 2009; Boccagni, 2009) and on the rhizomatic reproduction of the Latin Kings Nation (Queirolo Palmas, 2006). These works show the connections and exchanges among places that engender a transnational field and a parallel geography. They reveal that cultural identities act as a rhizome: they are transformed by the local contexts and they transform them, creating 'on the ground' nodes and new local territories. Theses rhizomatic identities feed, in such a way, both routes and (new) roots, bringing about strong transformations in Italian cities.

The second main concept emerging from this new ethnographic research is *everyday multiculturalism* (Colombo, 2002; Colombo and Semi, 2007). This term, stressing lived experiences of multiculturalism in spaces of everyday life, focuses the attention on encounters and interactions. In recent years, many studies emphasized this concept in a more or less explicit way (Semi, 2004; Cancellieri, 2009; Marzorati, 2010) proposing a conscious constructionist approach. Research on everyday multiculturalism putting into question the false dichotomy between essentialism and anti-essentialism, highlighting how multicultural struggles for urban spaces often are conflicts about the use and the sense of places (Rossini et al., 2009; Scandurra, 2009). It also brought to light the ambivalence of difference emphasizing how differentiation processes can be both used to request social justice and inclusion and to get privileges and forms of exclusion (Colombo, 2006). Eventually, this perspective focused the attention on the local and micro negotiations with difference that constitute the social order.

A different amount of research has examined a third concept, the *gentrification*. The term refers to the changes resulting when wealthier people and rising middle classes (e.g. young artists and professionals) acquire or rent property in low income and working class areas. This demographic transformation often produces increased rents or house prices and the creation of new urban spaces characterized by class specific lifestyles (according the Bourdieusian distinction in the use of space). In Italy this research can be traced back to the work of Semi (2004) in Turin in the 'Quadrilatero Romano', transformed from decay zone to the 'Quartier latin' of the city centre. A growing number of studies (Scandurra, 2007; Herzfeld, 2009) analyzed at neighbourhood level the demographic turnover involving different social classes. Research on gentrification consistently show how urban regeneration programs can hide exclusionary social processes and the expulsion of weaker inhabitants. In conclusion, this concept reveals the intertwinement between residential dynamics and demographic, economic and urban factors.

A meaningful amount of studies has examined a fourth concept: the *re-territorialisation*. The term, coming from Deleuze and Guattari and firstly systematized by Raffestin (1984), underlines actions and representations through which urban spaces can be re-marked and re-appropriated by individual and collective social actors. These studies, with a phenomenological approach, took into account re-territorialisation in home spaces (Cancellieri, 2012), public spaces (Dines, 2012) and public-private spaces (Cingolani, 2006). Such interstitial territorialities (Cottino, 2003; Brighenti and Mattiucci, 2012) engender a sort of 'spatial capital' (Cancellieri, 2011), that is a portfolio of meaningful places able to provide symbolic as well as material resources. These spaces are usually marked by (ethnic) differences and they can be spaces of segregation, contact zones for social inclusion or places of freedom and/or resistance. This research have drawn considerable attention on the so-called 'homing desires' (Queirolo Palmas, 2006): the social actors are spatial actors and they need to make space (Cancellieri, 2012). Through these new productions of territory, individuals and groups act as contesting and contextual subjects: they contest the previous territorialities and they adapt and use resources from specific contexts.

The fifth expression this new wave of research focus on is *liminal space*. 'Liminality' refers to the precariousness and serendipitous spaces engendering intercultural relationships. Amin (2002) spokes of 'the micro-politics of everyday social contact and encounter'; Anderson (2004) of 'cosmopolitan canopies'. Liminal spaces analyzed in recent years in Italian context are 'Trotter park' in Via Padova in Milan (Lanzani et al. 2006), Hotel House's ethnic shops in Porto Recanati (Cancellieri, 2012) or at Arcella neighbourhood in Padua (Cancellieri, 2011), the Bologna's archades (Scandurra, 2009) and the game spaces for children analyzed by Zoletto (2010).
Multicultural encounter in these spaces do not always entails meaningful and positive contacts, as often suggested by a naive interpretation of the Allport's contact theory (1954). Moreover the opposition towards some social groups can last despite positive individual encounters with member of such group. A mix of 'real' and 'imagined' stories and memories (Valentine, 2008) mediates, indeed, intercultural relationships and the possibilities to loosen social boundaries. Nevertheless the research on liminal spaces emphasized the dynamic and ongoing nature of urban spaces and highlighted the resources available in some spaces to ease learning to live with difference (Valentine, 2008; Cancellieri, 2010).

The last concept I would focus the attention on is *spatial exclusion*. Last years many research analyzes the territorial stigmatization processes of some parts of the city, as well the social exclusion of some bodies considered 'out of place' in public space. These studies recently focused their interest on repressive policies (Ambrosini, 2012) aiming to empty and to domesticate public spaces (Marzorati, 2010; Arrigoni, 2011; Semprebon, 2012). Such policies strongly limited the possibility to use everyday life urban spaces: e.g. to lay out in a public bench (Pappalardo and Marazzini, 2011) or to sit in a tramway stop. Semprebon (2011) highlighted how the mayor's ordinances against phone-centers in Modena undermined the role played by

these spaces as hot spots for migrants, as spaces to meet each other and to collect meaningful information. Furthermore these studies on spatial exclusion suggested that these policies powerfully contributed to transform the spatial practices' heterogeneity in a problem of public order and urban aesthetic. This kind of research has been mostly incisive when it gave voice to the 'otherness' avoiding social determinisms and a vicious circle of victimization.

Three possible routes

In previous chapter, I quickly outlined six representative concepts of this new wave of Italian urban ethnography. In this second part I would introduce some limits of this trend and, in particular, to suggest three possible routes to enhance its analytical potentiality and, in some sense, its socio-economic impact.

The first concept I would introduce in a more explicitly way is *intersectionality*. This term recommends to study relationships among several differentiating factors: gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and other axes of identity which interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to very complex (and sometimes very oppressive) social identities. Ethnographic studies has too much tended to concentrate on migration and 'ethnic' differences. Recently Broccolini (2010) remarked the lack of a gender perspective and the invisibilities of women, always seen through men's eyes, in urban ethnographies. Following the established Anglo-Saxon feminist geography (Rose, Bondi, Mc Dowell), Borghi (2010) goes further highlighting the absence of different sexual points of view. The author remarks the need to deconstruct the 'eteronormativity of public space' and to focus the attention on bodies' performances as social fields where identity productions takes place. She suggests to put into question the relationships between spatiality, identity and power.

Religious differences, as well, are traditionally forgotten in these studies or confused with the ethnic dimension. Instead religion play a specific and growing role in the processes of everyday marking of the cities: embodied religious performances in diaspora and the sacralisation of new urban spaces are creating plural and lively religious landscapes (Cancellieri and Saint-Blancat, 2012). Such a focus on religion goes beyond the supposition of much urban theory that it is peripheral to the discussions on the urban condition. Identity religions are fluid and intersectional and they are actively made and defended (or blurred and changed). The relative 'boundedness' of religious identities can vary across and within contexts, and the boundary-making process is a location for simultaneous inclusion and exclusion social processes (Edgell, 2012).

Last but not least, age differences are often undervalued in this new urban ethnographies. We have seen many interesting works on young migrants (Colombo, 2010; Riccio and Russo, 2011; Frisina, 2012). They are still rather few ethnographic attempt to explore two other generational gazes. First, the children's gaze, that is children's spatial practices and representations of urban spaces. A good exception is Satta's work (2012) which analyzed how children gradually disappeared in urban spaces and stay confined in specific sport and recreational spaces designed for them. Through this urban geography, dominated by parental fears, children lose the possibility to play in urban spaces as a (temporary) form of appropriation of the city. Second, the elderly's gaze, that is the specific symbolic and material limits and resources elderly people can find in city spaces. Notwithstanding the demographic role of elderly people is gradually increasing (Piccoli, 2011), they remain invisible in ethnographic research.

The second analytical route I would suggest to emphasize is the *socio-spatial dialectic*. Space is not a container or a simple reflection of society. At the same time it is not a separate structure with its own autonomous laws of construction (Soja, 1980). Social processes shape spatial practices and representations and the material and symbolic spaces, strongly marked by signs and prescriptions, contribute to shape social actions, acting as spatial affordances (Bricocoli and Savoldi, 2010; Bricocoli, 2012). We need a fuller recognition of the mutual constitution of space and social relationships as a fundamental issue. The recently widely acknowledged *spatial turn* strongly stressed the role played by space but its application has been often reduced to the use,

and sometimes to the abuse, of spatial metaphors and spatial rhetoric; to an excess of representations (of space) that undermines the analytical understanding of the socio-spatial dialectic. Space, indeed, is a sensible manifestation of things and adopting a spatial perspective means to adopt a specific sensibility to the 'multi- sensoriality' and to the material and affective components of spaces and social actions. Furthermore, it means to recognize that space is a plural and ongoing field of struggles and encounters.

A third route this paper wants to outline is the need to find *spaces of politics* (Briata, 2011). Too often ethnographic research gives rise to idiographic or merely empirical works, lacking of thick theoretical conceptions and exceeding in a deconstructionist perspective. This paper invites to go further and researching resources, bonds and possibilities of subject's empowerment. For example identifying practices, policies and (in)formal everyday bottom-up forms of planning, as recently remarked by Cellamare (2008). This does not mean that every informal bottom-up social practice has to be recognized and supported: the recognition of difference is not overlapped with social justice because the expression of difference can be used to create privileges and social exclusion. The 'otherness' has not a pre-defined meaning: it is not something always to assimilate, to deconstruct or to defend. Research should therefore analyze the spaces of difference that contribute to the marginalisation or to the empowerment of individual and collective actors and to the transformation of power structures, identifying bonds and potentialities that can be struggled or developed.

If, until some years ago, it was the time to reveal the awakening of Italian urban ethnography (Semi, 2009), now it is the time to enhance all cultural and political potentialities of this new wave.

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