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Segregated Bodies, Passer-by Bodies, Bodies in-Action

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The opposing principle 'dominant and dominated' seems to me to represent the leading concept for my analysis of the bodies in the contemporary urban space. I will give some examples of what I consider three peculiar conditions for individuals and social actors to make experience of their bodies in contemporary urban societies. I will call them respectively Segregated Bodies, Passers-by Bodies and In-Action Bodies. The so called 'culture of fear' affects the entire physicality of the city, producing policies whose main victims are urban outcasts to be segregated in 'iperghettos' conceptually similar to landfill wastes as well as children. Urban sprawl and fast commuting share the responsibility for having transformed the streets into a single-minded space for passers-by bodies, terrified to get lost and worried to occupy a physical space in personal, significant actions together with others. Public actions like Flashmobs are vice versa confirming the irreplaceable power of bodies in comparison to virtual communication.

Introduction

The lived space has been acknowledged as crucial for the well-being of human kinds by many philosophers, like Marx and Heidegger, as well by many social scientist. Also, it had been convincingly argued that the nature of experience lay exactly in the relationship between lived world and living bodies.

The French anthropologist Marc Augé has for instance pointed out the widely diffused conception, among many societies, of the house as a human body. According to him, the functions of the latter are applied to the inner spaces of the house, so that the bedroom is perceived as a womb, and the fireplace as lungs that breathe (Augé, 2011).

Pierre Bourdieu's ethnography of the Kabyle house had been for many decades the most important and enlightening study about domestic space. The akham, the Kabyle house, exemplifies the complexity of its symbolic associations with the space, whose functions are mirrors of the bodies and of the fundamental socio-cultural opposition structuring kabyle society: the division between the sexes (Bourdieu, 1990).

Starting from the threshold, symbolically connected to the function of passage of socially defined trajectories, every space express basic material and normative opposing principles like east and west, masculine and feminine, dominant and dominated.

And exactly the opposing principle 'dominant and dominated' seems to me to represent the leading concept for my analysis of the bodies in the contemporary urban space.

The growing centrality assigned to private spaces by Western culture has something to do with the crisis of the city as a common good. In fact, the neo-liberist dominant ideology has demanded the sacrifice and annihilation of public space in his real sense of multi-functional, multi-purpose, multi-social and democratic realm.

Thanks to Foucaultian analysis of biopolitics I see the strategy of the social and political power as centered on the cultural production of self-disciplined bodies, accustomed to accept their displacement from public space as a necessary price to be paid for their security.

In the following paragraphs I will give some examples of what I consider three peculiar conditions for individuals and social actors to make experience of their bodies in contemporary societies. I will call them respectively Segregated Bodies, Passers-by Bodies and In-Action Bodies.

Segregated bodies

Liquid modernity is, according to the well known definition given by Zigmund Bauman, a civilization who is based on excess, on oversupply, on waste and on landfill wastes (Bauman, 2004).

Unlike the refugees, who are the human waste of the global frontier's land, outsiders out of place everywhere, there are other human beings (and bodies) who are clearly special kind of insiders: the urban outcasts. However, their segregated bodies, due to saturation of the planet, cannot be deported to uninhabited frontier lands or cannot find any job elsewhere. Just because they are totally not employable, a chronic labour's oversupply, they become urban outcasts to be segregated in 'iperghettos' conceptually similar to landfill wastes.

The images that I have in mind are from an Italian photographer, Valerio Spada, who has entitled 'Gomorra girl' a collection of very intense and meaningful pictures of girls from Naples and Scampia, one of his worst outskirts¹.

Gomorra is the title of a famous book by Roberto Saviano, translated in many languages, which describes the power and the violence that Camorra (local mafia families ruling Naples and the surrounding region) is pervasively exerting on the majority of lives and bodies. Gomorra girls' bodies are quite eloquent in communicating to the observer the multiple dimensions of their marginality and segregation, not only when photographed in the interiors of flats and buildings seriously degraded, or in rooms where every object highlights the need for keeping and showing the dominant symbols of a consumer society who is anyway out of reach. Antonio Gramsci would have called that kind of commodities 'the degraded wastes of dominant

1 <http://www.valeriospada.com/?show=3>



culture' adopted by the dominated (see for example picture 26) (Gramsci, 2007).

Also, their bodies are quite eloquent when the girls are portrayed outside home. Indeed they seem to visualize and show up the moral effects of their physical segregation: human flesh expressing gender oppression and subordination as well as the commodification of women's bodies, the same that they watch on the most common and popular trash TV programs that daily gorge Italian society.

The so called 'culture of fear' which is nurtured through 'moral panic campaigns' for the criminalization of poverty and that claims the iper-ghettoization of the urban outcast, has a pervasive effect even on the economic élites as well on weakest social categories like children or aged. Therefore it affects the entire physicality of the city.

Segregation is in fact a pervasive phenomena, involving now even the bodies of upper wealthy social groups, whose preference for self-segregation in gated communities is spreading all around the world. Of course, there is a significant difference between the two social groups, but it has been widely documented how disruptive of the social order and of 'social happiness' can be a segregated society, with people more and more affected and influenced by media campaigns against any kind of deviant behaviour. The Mexican movie 'The zone' is convincingly suggesting that 'golden gates' cannot guarantee a community to live in peaceful and integrated way. The warm of distrust and insecurity sooner or later will affect from the inside the privileged group, whose survival requires in any case the work of the inhabitants of the ghettos for all service activities necessary to their welfare, included the security staff.

As the more recent literature shows, there is at least a general agreement about the correlation between income and health /social problems and the interesting critical debate on Wilkinson and Pickett's book, *The Spirit Level*, (2010) is still going on, showing more evidence that large income inequalities damage the social fabric and the quality of life for everyone.

As to children, their segregation in the cities has been widely studied and documented (Forni, 2002 and 2011; Christensen, M. O'Brien, 2003). Justified by adult's fear for their security connected to the supposed uncontrolled presence of 'dangerous' groups and individuals like pedophiles or to motorized traffic, the physical exclusion of children by public urban spaces and their reclusion into adult supervised places has become a matter of fact. The problem is, that the risk related to the presence of dangerous individuals is often overestimated, as it is part of the above mentioned 'social construction' of fear, while the traffic issue is declined in a wrong way, as if motorized mobility and its dangerous effects were as inevitable as unavoidable (Hillman M.J. Adams, J. Whitelegg, 1990). Actually, we'd consider the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child as a pillar of a civilized society and thanks to it we now are reversing our approach to the problem of children's safety. Furthermore, we'd be aware of negative effects on future adults of depriving them, when in their childhood, of public space as a gym for progressive empowerment and development of appropriate social skills. Segregated children today will become passive, obedient, self-disciplined consumers tomorrow, or seriously deviant and anti-social adults.

Passer-by bodies

My purpose here is to consider the multiple dimensions of bodies transiting in urban spaces. The so called 'local mind' always arises from the primordial experience of disorientation, connected to the need for the definition of clear boundaries for the group or tribe settlement.

Since the paleolithic era, erratic walking has been the way for mapping and controlling the territories. The Australian aboriginal culture, for example, created the Walkabout system of trails for mapping the entire continent (Careri, 2006; p. 25). Every trail corresponds to a story sang for telling the history of the origin of human kind connected to a specific part of the territory. The physic space started to be signified through mystic and sacred symbols thanks to this kind of erratic practice which gave birth to both sedentary and nomadic cultures, the former dominated by the builders of settled cities and the latter by the builders of erratic cities. Careri is convincingly suggesting that it has been the bodily, physical presence of men in a space not yet mapped and the changing perceptions registered passing through it to determine the cultural

shift from space to place. A kind of 'symbolic architecture' made possible just passing by in an active way. This is the premise for Careri to develop his analysis of the crucial changes in contemporary cities, where urban sprawl is seen by the architects (as well as by those social strata who share the same vision of the city as an ordered and regulated space) as a chaotic emptiness. The 'presence' which characterizes this marginal parts of the cities is exactly the vacuum. Loose space is actually much more inhabited than any lobotomized citizen of the inner city could imagine. The activities that are performed in this kind of loose spaces are of great interest for social scientists and urban planners (Koolhaas, 2006; Hayden and Temel, 2006; Frank and Stevens, 2007). I'll try to make some reference to some of them in the next paragraph. Instead, the inner city and many outskirts of contemporary cities pay the price of the phenomena described previously. The loss of an active and genuine relationship with the territory, due to the prolonged segregation, has been replaced by a generic, impersonal and inattentive attitude to use public space as place of transit, just following the tide. Modern technologies, like the use of GPS, mortify the important ability to orient oneself, thanks to local knowledge and/or to a broader attitude to explore, recognize and connect the different network nodes that the city is preserving or creating.

Getting lost, a condition that should be considered a positive means for catching the 'soul of places' (Hillman, 2004) for developing the 'knowledge of places', for placing oneself into the surrounding environment, for becoming an active actor with a deeper local knowledge, is today a neglected condition if not even a distressing experience (La Cecla, 2005). The city is going to be more and more a dual body, where social equity has been replaced by individualistic, private, unequal responses to uneasiness and fear and where public spaces are mainly responding to the single-function of fast and efficient crossing for productive and consumption purposes rather than to multi-functional purposes of sociability, communication, creativity, beauty, human and cultural exchanges and interactions.

As organisms working 24 hours a day, cities had developed many diverse strategies for commuting in the fastest way to work, social life, shopping, school, sport, etc. Even vital and intimate activities of our body like sleeping or eating are made while commuting. A new generation of cybercars, automated drive-less vehicles, are ready to invade our streets: "the passenger is free, he can sit back, chat, get some work done or admire the view, as though in their own living room" (Rubini, 2012). What more could we want?

Bodies in-action

We could want the opposite solution, like slow motion, fewer hours of work per week but for all, less CCTV control and more informal social control in public spaces, more time 'wasted' just hanging around, just walking like our Australian ancestors, or like the nomadism of 'urban beduins' described by Mike Davis or like artists from Dada to Situationists movements, even more political conflicts lived in the street, like Occupy Wall Street.

There are some examples I'd like to present at the close of my article. One is about responses to the neglected right to truly free and equal space which has been experimented in Manhattan.

It is called 'I SEE', the draft prepared by the Institute for Applied Autonomy, whose purpose is to contrast urban public policies based on fear of populations deemed undesirable. A software cartography was made available to give users a route, the less exposed to CCTV control. But the more important aspect of it is that: "By trying your best to avoid CCTV, you end up drawing sinuous itineraries corresponding to lines of reduced surveillance. You also avoid the principles of good time and space management. In a word, you take your time but do not waste speed, to keep away from the dubious virtues of slowness" (Rubini, 2012; p.141).

Flashmobs are another example of bodies in-action that I find of great interest. They are large group of people gathering in public spaces previously chosen, where a performance takes briefly action and then quickly disperse. As a social phenomenon which started in the 1980's it is of great communicative impact and it is confirming the irreplaceable power of bodies in comparison to virtual communication.



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