Spatial Asymmetries: Urban Peripheries in the Contemporary City. The Case of Milan

Stefanizzi S*

Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy

*Corresponding author: Sonia Stefanizzi, Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy, Email: sonia.stefanizzi@unimib.it

Spatial Asymmetry

Asymmetries dominate the era in which we live and are shaping every aspect of human existence and our relationship with space. The asymmetry of spaces is the rule rather than the exception of metropolitan areas and constitutes their essential feature. In the contemporary city, spatial hierarchies are no longer produced by a centrifugal dilatation from the urban centre, but follow different and multiple directions. The processes of peripheralization are therefore no longer readable only as distance from a centre or as geographical marginality. In recent years, several authors Castells M [1] have highlighted how the processes associated with globalization have not only modified the economic, political, social and cultural life of cities, but how they have also transformed their geographical configurations. In contemporary cities, there no longer seems to be an unambiguous and coherent logic underlying spatial and temporal processes; the relationships between the centre and the periphery are changing, or rather, the boundaries that we used to use to distinguish centre and periphery are tending to dissolve. In contemporary metropolises, if on the one hand the idea of a centre is not definitively erased, on the other hand the centre expands, multiplies into innumerable centres (business centres, shopping centre, public entertainment spaces) that rise beyond the traditional urban area in its suburbs [2]. As a result, the traditional conception of the periphery, i.e. of a closed, residual cultural and social universe inhabited by minorities, a boundary to the consolidated city, characterized by homogeneity of economic, employment and cultural conditions and by problems of social integration, is disappearing.

The debate that has developed has opened up reflection on the role of the periphery in relation to the city more generally, on its representation as a living, rooted part of the city or as a place excluded from the urban in which the absence of communication and social exchange prevails. Rethinking the suburbs today means conceiving them as an inhomogeneous territory, a sort of patchwork in which different populations, residential neighborhoods and social housing areas, modern infrastructures and precarious and temporary settlements of migrants, interstitial spaces coexist [3-5]. What appears interesting, in this context of transformation of the contemporary city, is the redefinition of the internal and external geography of city boundaries, understood as physical, political and symbolic devices [4,6]. The social processes induced by globalization transform the forms of the city's space and time, many of its fixed variables such as central and peripheral positions are modified, generating on the one hand, an expansion on the territory of cities and consequently a redefinition of its fixed and linear boundaries; on the other hand, a re-composition of other boundaries far from their canonical traces that reconfigure new liminal spaces that separate, bringing together people, cultures, identities [7,8]. The redefinition of the city's physical boundaries, due to contemporary-induced urbanization processes, generates a series of interstitial spaces, a kind of 'neglected spatiality' that we can conceive of as a liminal zone alien to the prevailing urban rhythm, difficult to classify and characterized by degradation and a temporal situation of social suspension waiting to be reconnected with prevailing urban practices [9-11]. Some authors have linked this situation of liminality, of transitional territories to so-called 'in-between' spaces [12-16].

The characteristic feature of these spaces is that they belong to the degraded and marginal neighborhoods of contemporary cities, often places of abandonment by institutions, populated by social groups differing in

Spatial Asymmetries: Urban Peripheries in the Contemporary City. The Case of Milan

Anthropol Ethnol Open Acc J

economic and social capital, language, modes of expression and often competing for the use of public spaces. Although it is difficult to classify these spaces, due to the variety of the population living there and the settlement situations, we can nevertheless identify two prevailing types: a first type of territory characterized by buildings/industrial or railway areas inhabited by a plurality of actors with particular lifestyles or routines who monopolize the space, materially excluding the possibility of others using it. These are spaces contested by a series of new urban populations that make multiple and diverse uses of them. In particular, these are spaces in which a culturally homogeneous group of actors makes a certain use of it such that it is perceived by other urban actors as tending to exclude other uses and is therefore preferentially avoided. A second type of space refers to an urban planning and settlement configuration from a different epoch than the present one, whose importance in both functional and symbolic terms has taken on new meanings. In this case, the encounter between old and new populations creates problems of communication between different urban cultures in their codes of reading and use of space. A unifying aspect of these new interstitial spaces is given by the fractures, albeit subtle, that exist between the inhabitants; fractures produced by the diversity of lifestyles, cultural codes, the type of use of the city and the ways of relating to other urban actors [6,17]. These spaces in the city, precisely because they assume different values and meanings, become contested places, often the scene of conflict between inhabitants. But how is the relationship between space and resident populations structured? As Bourdieu P, et al. [18] states, there are 'difficult' places, unchosen social spaces that bring together people with no points of contact, forcing them to cohabit either in mutual ignorance or incomprehension, or in conflict, latent or declared, with all the suffering that comes with it' [18].

Social Asymmetries: Identities in Motion

The urban system is thus configured as a large network of interconnected spaces that have their strengths in urban nodes. Cities become part of an urban system that no longer follows logic of territorial continuity, but is structured according to nodes (the urban centres) and axes (flows of goods, people, capital and information) that connect them. In this framework of change, the emerging phenomena of the city, which can be summarized as fragmentation, complexity, fluidity and flows, deeply condition the relationship of continuity and significance between inhabitant and local milieu [12,19-21].

As Sassen S [8] says, we are witnessing the multiplication of boundaries that isolate or interrupt the flow of communication and resources between the different areas that make up the contemporary city, creating new inequalities and disparities between territories and the people who inhabit them. In increasingly globalized cities, poverty, marginality and difference are concentrated and sometimes segregated in the suburbs or slums, ending up creating strong social polarizations in urban spaces in which the rich are in opposition to the poor and the indigenous population is in opposition to foreigners. New metropolitan models of socio-territorial organization emerge, replacing the traditional forms of urban society, the neighborhood, the community. The conformation of spaces strongly influences the identity of its inhabitants, just as social practices and relationships shape spaces [22]. In the Simmelian conception, space is not considered as an objective fact, but as a condition of existence of social organizations, a property of society. Spatial forms are, therefore, those configurations of social relations that find their concretization in space. For this reason, we believe that the concept of a neighborhood should not be given a priori, but represents a space, the outcome of the interaction of different subjects and processes, in turn bearers and producers of different identities. An urban space, a "neighborhood" represents the stratification of different identities defined or imposed from the outside in relation to the images one has of that context. Although certain spatial conformations (the urban fabric, the prevailing building types, the historical phases that led to its construction, etc.) can also be clearly identified and defined, and often constitute the reference for the lives of its inhabitants or frequenters, a "neighborhood" remains difficult to define.

Shifting the analysis to Milan, some urban spaces such as, for instance, Gratosoglio and Rogoredo-Santa Giulia exemplify the above. In fact, these spaces are highly inhomogeneous in their social composition and the diversity does not only arise between the inhabitants of the two urban contexts and the rest of the city, but also between the inhabitants themselves. A recent research[1] conducted in the Gratosoglio and Rogoredo-Santa Giulia "neighborhoods" shows how it is not possible to think of them as isolated and closed local communities based exclusively on endogenous social relations.

Locality-Based Identities Intersect with other Identities

Social memory, historical identities, as well as urban practices developed in everyday life may represent other sources of meaning. The neighborhood of residence can be one of people's multiple life-worlds, where they can choose whether and how much to participate in public life, create

1   See research Margin-Total Insecurity in Marginalized Areas (www.marginproject.eu). Call H2020-FCT-2014.

Stefanizzi S. Spatial Asymmetries: Urban Peripheries in the Contemporary City. The Case of Milan. Anthropol Ethnol Open Acc J 2022, 5(2): 000185.

Copyright© Stefanizzi S.

social relationships and leave if local conditions, interests and motivations fail [23]. Furthermore, it is well known how settlement and living patterns are often 'imposed' in cities, which can then have an impact on the constitution of local urban identities. Living may not be a choice, but it may in fact be very much influenced by urban situations and the dynamics of the housing market. There are segments of the population that can afford to choose where to live and as Savage M, et al. [24] says where one resides thus becomes an important, arguably the most important, identifier of who one is. The selective process by which people decide to live in certain places and abandon others is at the heart of contemporary struggles for social distinction' [24]. Housing becomes an important factor in the rearticulation of social identities and the structuring of life opportunities for city dwellers.

The search for residential contexts in which one feels comfortable, in relation to specific habitus, generates a kind of 'elective belonging' to the residential context and new status configurations recognizable by oneself and others [24]. This phenomenon, which characterizes a residential context such as-Rogoredo Santa Giulia- highlights the process that Atkinson R [25] defines as the "enclavism" of the middle-class population. The search for social homogeneity pushes the upper-middle classes to seek 'protected', socially and culturally homogeneous housing dimensions that provide the illusion of living in a community (the gated communities). Traits that can to some extent be found in the context of Santa Giulia, which was also built with this in mind. The resulting risk is that the city becomes a territory characterized by homogeneous enclaves of different types and with different levels of isolation (from gated communities to enclaves of disadvantaged social groups confined to degraded urban spaces).

References

1. Castells M (1975) Urban Sociology and Urban Politics. Critique to New Trends of Research.

2. (2004) The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective. Northampton, MA, Edward Edgar, Cheltenham, UK.

3. Petrillo A (2018) The new suburbs Inequality, spaces, cities. In: Franco Angeli, 1st (Edn.), Milano, Italy, pp: 1-176.

4. Brighenti AM (2009) Migrant territories. Space and control of global mobility. Ombre Corte, Verona, Italy, pp: 1-160.

5. Vroelant CL (2003) The avatars of the passing city. The Annals of Urban Research 94: 96-106.

6. Rossi U (2016) Cities in global Capitalism. Polity press, UK.

7. Castells M (2009) The rise of network society. 2nd (Edn.), 1st (Vol.), John Wiley & Sons Inc.

8. Sassen S (2001) The New Labor Demand in Global Cities. In: Smith MP (Ed.), Cities in Transformation. 2, 5 (Chapters), Sage, Beverly Hills, CA, USA.

9. Ash A, Nigel T (2002) Cities: Reimagining the Urban London. Polity Press, UK.

10. Brighenti AM (2013) Territory theory. Scienza & Politica 25(48).

11. Victor T (1967) The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual. Cornell University Press, USA.

12. Sennett R (1991) The conscience of the eye: the design and social life of cities. Faber & Faber, London, UK.

13. Hajer M, Reijndorp A (2001) In Search of New Public Domain. NAI, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

14. Shields R (1991) Places on the margin: alternative geographies of modernity. Routledge, London, pp: 1-352.

15. Worpole K, Knox K (2007) The Social value of public spaces. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, New York, USA.

16. Zukin S (1991) Landscapes of power. From Detroit to Disneyworld. University of California Press, Berkeley, USA.

17. Poli D (2007) Editorial in Contexts. Cities, Territories and Projects.

18. Bourdieu P, Accardo A (1993) The misery of the world. Editions by Seuil, Paris, France.

19. Harvey D (1989) The condition of postmodernity. Blackwell Publishers, USA, pp: 1-379.

20. Bauman Z (1998) Globalization: The human consequences. Columbia University Press, USA, pp: 1-136.

21. Putnam RD, Leonardi R, Nanetti RY (1993) Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy. Princeton University Press, Princeton, USA, pp: 1-280.

22. Simmel G (1908) Sociology, Duncker & Humblot. Leipzig.

23. Janowitz M (1951) The Community Press in an Urban Setting. Free Press, Glencoe, Scotland.

24. Savage M, Bagnall G, Longhurst B (2005): Globalisation and Belonging. Sage, London, pp: 1-248.

25. Atkinson R (2006) Padding the bunker: strategies of middle-class Disaffiliation and Colonisation in the City. Urban Studies 43(4): 819-832.

Stefanizzi S. Spatial Asymmetries: Urban Peripheries in the Contemporary City. The Case of Milan. Anthropol Ethnol Open Acc J 2022, 5(2): 000185.

Copyright© Stefanizzi S.