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Making the Neighbourhood Relevant. A Study on How Events Territorialise their Outcomes

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RÉSUMÉ

Les territoires changeants et multiscalaires ne sont pas seulement générés par le capital et les entreprises. Des organisations à but non lucratif, communautés locales, adoptent de plus en plus des formes d'action comme l'organisation d'événements, ce qui questionne les relations entre distance spatiale et proximité sociale. Dans cette communication, je me concentre sur l'utilisation, par ces organisations, des événements qu'elles organisent comme bases visant à rendre le voisinage actif dans le développement du lien social et, de fait, dans l'amélioration de l'intégration sociale au niveau local. Pour rendre compte de la variété des conséquences, trois cas sont présentés qui soulignent que ces résultats dérivent à la fois du type de processus de territorialisation par lequel les événements se développent et du niveau de complexité territoriale. Cet article introduit une approche utile pour spécifier les formes que peuvent prendre des revendications de l'espace local et pour analyser le lien entre des formes de territorialisation et les conséquences qui en découlent.

MOTS CLÉS

Événements, territorialisation, résultats, voisinage

ABSTRACT

Shifting and multi-level territories are not only generated by the mobility of capital and companies. Non-profit, community-based, groups increasingly adopt forms of action, such as the setting up of events, that directly question the taken-for-granted relation between spatial distance and social proximity. In this paper I focus on non-profit groups' use of events as space infrastructures to make the neighbourhood relevant for the development of social ties and, thus, for the enhancement of local social inclusion. In order to account for the variety of outcomes produced by this strategy, three cases are introduced to show that the observed outcomes derive from the type of territorialisation process through which events develop and from the associated level of territorial complexity. This paper introduces a territorialological approach useful to specify the different shapes that similar temporary claiming of space may take and to analyse the link between territorialisation forms and the deriving outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Events, territorialisation, outcomes, neighbourhood

INTRODUCTION

Shifting and multi-level territories are not only generated by the mobility of capital and companies. Non-profit, community-based, groups increasingly adopt forms of action – such as the setting up of events – that directly question the taken-for-granted relation between spatial distance and social proximity in a time when sociologists indicate these two elements have long separated (Castells, 1996). These groups organize events that

temporarily infrastructure space to make it relevant for city dwellers, in particular struggling to restore the neighbourhood as a relevant source of social relationships. Thus, events give birth to “new forms of human sociability, new models of reciprocity that widen social relations in new ways” (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 72): not by stretching them in space and time (as many modern devices have done) but by focusing them on the co-presence of specific space-time delimited settings.

According to the conducted study, the non-profit groups' use of events to make the neighbourhood relevant produces a variety of outcomes. In order to account for such variety the paper focuses on the territorialisation processes (Kärholm, 2007) involved in the situated setting up and unfolding of events. The analysis carried out offers a critical approach on processes of territorialisation characterized by the temporary occupation of space. It shows the bottom-up formation, promoted by community-based groups, of multi-level territories that challenge the logic of local territories to open it up to new possibilities thanks to temporary use of space during events.

1. PUZZLING CASES

In broad terms, events are forms of temporary space-time social organization (Boullier, 2010) whose recent rapid growth (Quinn, 2005) has been associated with deleterious effects such as the disembedding of social ties and the substitution of previous, allegedly stable, everyday social relations with pre-organized and ephemeral interactions (Magatti, 2007).

In spite of these expectations, the study of community-based groups using events to regenerate shrinking local social fabric uncovers much more complex and ambiguous empirical findings. Below, some examples of such findings are introduced. They come from both a previous study (Citroni, 2010) and the ongoing research I am conducting on shifts and outcomes of initiatives developed by community-based groups. Overall, I have empirically analysed 52 events set up from 2008 to 2012 in two different districts of Milan (Milan zone 4 and via Padova) by 12 non-profit groups with the goal of enhancing the sense of local attachments, promoting public spaces and strengthening the local social fabric. The research techniques used for collecting empirical data are *semi-structured interviews* of the events' attendees and members of the observed groups, *participant observation* of events unfolding and setting up, *discourse analysis* of newspaper articles, Internet blogs and email conversations.

Case 1. “Cuccagna” is a Milanese former farm that an alliance of 10 non-profit groups legally managed with the goal of turning it into a “new local public space”: a place where the fragmented local social fabric would be strengthened by events that gathered citizens together so that they could interact and establish contact with each other.

According to the perspective of the observed groups, the events that they organized in the farm did not succeed in making the neighbourhood a basis for the development of new social ties. The massive events organized (such as parties, concerts or art shows) instead provoked complaints from the local population because of their impact in terms of noise and traffic. The events also affected the local media public discourse, bringing to public attention (and potentially onto the political agenda) new framings for discussing topics such as the collective use of crumbling public buildings and the lack of adequate spaces in the city for free sociality practices.

Case 2. “Trotter association” is a voluntary organization founded by the parents of children attending a public elementary school situated in a Milanese urban park ¹. The goal of the organization is to preserve and promote the spaces of the park. Over time, the group has increasingly organized events (such as parties, theatre performances and movie projections) in the park that made its spaces known to and attended by a large audience, often coming from beyond the neighbourhood.

From the organization’s perspective, these events produced two main outcomes: an increasing perception that the group was closed to external participants (the elementary school, other civic groups and everyday users of the park) and the development of internal conflicts that broke long-lasting group social ties, seriously threatening its sense of solidarity and its very existence. Such outcomes were attributed by the group to the events that they set up because their success was perceived by some of its members and constituencies as a betrayal of the group’s founding goals.

Case 3. “Via Padova is better than Milan” is a voluntary group whose main goal is to foster social integration in a highly multi-ethnic Milan neighbourhood through the setting up of a huge street party, an event lasting three days and comprising of a variety of small cultural events organized by local groups (mainly concerts, readings and exhibitions). Over time, the organization increasingly succeeded in actively involving local groups and citizens in the bottom-up organization of the event, strengthening and widening the local social network of civil society subjects in ties that went beyond the concrete tasks associated to the organization of the event. In each of its renditions, the event made the neighbourhood relevant for new city dwellers, both during the taking place of the event and in months during its setting up.

These three cases directly question the knowledge produced by researchers about the relationship between space and social relationships according to at least two points of view. First, they encourage the revision of those accounts that unambiguously attribute disembedding effects to the spreading of events, by showing (particularly in the third case) outcomes in which a portion of the city is turned into a relevant feature of the structuring of local civil society ties. Second, the cases question the implicit idea that the development of infrastructures able to embed social relationships in space should be stable, indicating instead how this work can benefit from mobile, temporary devices such as events. The comparison between the last two cases is particularly useful in this respect: it shows, on the one hand, the undoing of social ties associated with a stable space infrastructure such as the public park and, on the other hand, the development of local ties as a result of an event with multiple and mobile venues. However the factors accounting for the above-mentioned variety of outcomes deriving from such apparently similar events must still be ascertained.

2. EVENTS AS TERRITORIAL PRODUCTIONS

Sociological accounts underline the way in which mobility and technologies mean that space is no longer a “natural” source for social relations, stressing instead the importance of “territorialised” social networks in making the neighbourhood relevant to residents’ daily life (Andreotti, 2013). I built on this idea to emphasize the way that *different types of territorialisation processes may lead to different outcomes* in terms of space relevance.

1 A park closed to the public during school hours.

I propose to shift from considering events as given infrastructures to the development of a territorial analysis of the processes of “infrastructuration” of space with events. In this analysis, “territories” have a processual dimension, constituting “spatial institutionalisation” (Kärholm, 2007) that develops through the “material inscription of social relationships in space” (Brighenti, 2010: 6). Territories may develop through different types of processes (Kärholm, 2007); furthermore, diverse forms of territorial production may cohabit in the same space, intermingling or layering, in each case, contributing to the territorial complexity of spaces (*ivi*). According to the proposed argument of this paper, events work as adequate infrastructures to make the neighbourhood relevant for city dwellers if they enrich, instead of diminish, the territorial complexity of a space.

This territorological perspective (Brighenti, 2010) has been developed by conceiving the observed events as forms of temporary “claiming of space” (Storey, 2001). The proposed approach has been useful to specify the different shapes that such claiming may take and, especially, to outline the link between the observed events outcomes and the forms of territorialisation through which the events developed.

3. SEARCHING FOR TERRITORIAL ACCOUNTS

Let us now return to the above cases to try to account for the perceived effects as outcomes of specific, varying, processes of territorial production.

Case 1. Cuccagna groups organized large-scale, massive, cultural events that attracted a wide audience from the entire city and beyond. The setting up of these events was highly professionally oriented, including media advertisement campaigns and interactions with commercial suppliers. The events contents and their unfolding were planned in detail and well in advance by a few organizers, without the possibility of input from external subjects. The daily meaning-making practices that developed in the farm spaces were suspended during the event: the bocce court used by the elderly and the silence accompanying the game disappeared during concerts, thus imposing a unique territory, where normally a variety coexisted, coordinating with each other in space and synchronizing in time. The “meaning-effects” (Ploger, 2010) in which the organizers invested to extend the event in space and time after its material unfolding were tailored for mass media visibility, with univocal and clear-cut meanings that ignored the complexity of territorial productions that developed even during the event.

What made Cuccagna events unsuitable infrastructures for developing local social ties was the type of exclusive territorialisation processes through which they developed. This type of territorialisation used events to invest exclusive meaning in the farm spaces ignoring other territorial productions and oversimplifying the territorial complexity of those spaces.

Case 2. Though events organized by the Trotter group took place inside the public park where the elementary school was situated, their setting up and unfolding developed on a much wider spatial scale. Furthermore, events often required the purchasing of a ticket, attracted a large audience from beyond the neighbourhood and addressed topics increasingly disconnected from the concerns of the local elementary school. Such a use of the park spaces by the Trotter group had not been formally arranged with the other subjects who made daily use of the park and it provoked complaints from inside the group, the elementary school and also from everyday users of the park and local groups.

The resulting conflicts did not stop the group, which kept territorialising its events in a monopolistic and exclusive way similar to the previous case. While in the latter case the conflicts remained latent, here they developed openly: in any case, events failed in their efforts to focus the development of social relations at a local scale because they ignored –instead of building on and cohabiting with– other territorialisation processes occurring in the same space.

Though the park and the local school context are clear, stable, space infrastructures that work as a basis for the development of daily social interactions, their unrecognized and monopolistic use through the setting up of events made them occasions of division and further unravelling of the local social fabric.

Case 3. Using their own words, “Via Padova is better than Milan” conceived the event they organized as an “occasion to facilitate the coming together of citizens in order to take care of their neighbourhood through the organization of a large street-party”. The setting up of the event developed through the voluntary efforts of citizens who, during their leisure-time, explored their neighbourhood trying to understand what would be most useful and suitable for each of its parts. Here, the event developed through cautious processes of territorialisation that encouraged citizens to firstly increase their knowledge of the daily practices taking place in the neighbourhood, and then to think how the event they were planning might cohabit and even respond to the needs of those practices.

The perceived outcome of citizens’ local involvement did not come just from the situated unfolding of the event but took shape during the preceeding months, for example through the organizing meetings set up in public real estate units by the Via Padova group. Through such practices the organizers interacted with city dwellers, recognizing the legitimacy of their uses of the space and proposed that they be involved in the event to temporarily expand the visibility and reach of such uses, instead of threatening them.

In the presented cases different voluntary groups shared the strategy of setting up events to make the neighbourhood relevant for social relations, thus enhancing local social integration. Such a strategy territorialised itself in ways that impacted upon the outcomes it produced.

In the first two cases, events *exclusively* territorialised the space and this made it particularly difficult to achieve the groups goals. In the latter case, the event *cautiously* territorialised the space by building on existing space practices and this turned it into a mobile infrastructure that offered citizens the possibility of either keeping, or of starting from scratch, when attempting to make the neighbourhood the source of social relations. These findings have been verified and specified with reference to all the observed events, showing in any case their outcomes were tied to the type of territorialisation (more or less close to the ideal-types of *caution* and *exclusion*) through which events developed and to the associated level of territorial complexity.

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