

Il quartiere: il nostro campo da gioco. Verso una sociologia ‘spazialista’¹

Book Review

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Lidia Manzo's book is an excited and informed invitation to engage into different methods of participative social research. The book cannot properly be defined as a methodological account for urban studies. It is rich in theoretical and conceptual material and it is consistently oriented to frame urban research within the established field of urban sociology. Nonetheless its main achievement is not theoretical *per se*; it is rather its capacity to transmit the passion for active research and fieldwork in urban studies.

The main argument of the book is that urban research is a 'practical' exercise. It takes place as digging, deepening, enquiring, observing and touching what happens in the field. The title is in this sense highly evocative: the neighborhood – and, more broadly, any confined space selected by a specific research – is the playground of the informed sociologist. Shifting from theoretical accounts to empirical concepts and concrete examples, the author further emphasizes the circularity of any research process, which does not develop as a linear pattern of selected steps. Research is dialectic, a continuous communication between conceptual framing and observation. It is an abductive operation that puts side by side a sound theoretical account, several intermediate steps and operational tools to address the complex reality, with the ultimate aim to enrich, readapt and mutate the initial hypothesis.

This is a lot to put in a little booklet such as this. This is both the limit and the potential of this piece of work. There is no space for deep theoretical discussions; yet, the extensive bird's eye view of major works of urban sociology provided at the beginning is useful to transmit the message. The argument on the meaning of space and on its social construction departs from Lefebvre (1974), moving back to the early urban sociological works (Simmel, 1903; Tonnies, 1887) and eventually opening up to the most recent debates on post-structuralism theories, including key works by De Certeau (1990), Deleuze and Guattari (1980). Despite the high density of this overview, the reader ultimately understands that urban sociology is certainly a heterogenic field. But also that all these theoretical approaches have one important element in common: they provide fertile humus for the researcher interested in the diversity, density and dynamism of 'the urban' (Park, 1952).

Lidia Manzo seems to suggest, and rightly so in my opinion, that whatever specific theoretical framework we could adopt, still it is fundamental to make it coming down to earth into a practice of concrete 'situated' observation. She seems to sustain that constructivist approaches are more fertile for engaged participatory research but yet she leaves open opportunities to address other concepts such as global and world cities through this type of methodologies (Sassen, 1991; Hall, 1966). The variety of citations throughout the whole book ultimately shows how, despite different hypothesis of research, different theoretical works are all confronted with same empirical challenge of grasping the relationship between

¹ Manzo, Lidia (2013), *Il quartiere: il nostro campo da gioco* Verso una sociologia 'spazialista' [Eng. Translation: "THE NEIGHBORHOOD: OUR PLAYGROUND" Towards the 'spatial turn' in Social and Urban Theory], I libri di Emil publisher: Bologna, 95 pages, ISBN: 978-88-6680-071-2.

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society and space (not necessarily urban but also global). Yet, it is only by engaging in field observation that any of these accounts can get the nuances, complexities and details to 'make sense' of what we call 'the urban'. This is the core of Manzo's 'spatialist sociology'. It is not sociology of space, but it is sociology in space. It is not simply about space, but it also engages with it. It is embedded into social interactions, and it interprets them 'from within'.

Which space for empirical observation? According to the author the neighborhood is the best 'scale' for spatialist sociology. Any human observation starts from a frame (Manzo strategically brings forward Kantian epistemology). A frame provides limits and borders to understand particular phenomena. In urban sociology the neighborhood can constitute the space where micro, meso, and macro social dynamics can be grasped as they unravel. In the neighborhood the research is confronted with practices of social production, interaction, spatial appropriation and symbolization. The researcher actually 'plays' with them in the neighborhood, by merging its concepts with the observed reality.

This reference to the neighborhood is not new in the field of urban studies. Since the Chicago School or the early works by Engels on industrial cities, social research has always observed the space at a meso-level. It is not surprising that today's practices of urban intervention and regeneration are all tailored on a neighborhood scale, often defined as area, or zone (Andersson and Musterd, 2005). The author is certainly aware of the established relevance of the neighborhood as a space for research (and practice) and her argument goes beyond that. In my reading of her work, she argues for a going back to the neighborhood to actualize existing research. The neighborhood becomes more than something to be observed, turning into a laboratory for theoretical innovation in times of radical socio-economic change. New dynamics of multi-culturalism, inclusion-exclusion and social change cannot be easily 'deducted' from existing theoretical constructs, but need to be inductively looked and interpreted in today's neighborhoods.

The relevance of the neighborhood is extremely clear in the book, however the author does not engage in any kind of discussion about the potential limitations of this spatialist, neighborhood based, field research (perhaps for reasons of space limitation). For the past 20 years, major urban theorists have expressed how one of the main problems with urban research and urban policies is exactly an objectified definition of social interaction. By choosing a spatialist approach, we fix borders to social practices that are instead not objectified in space. Some dynamics surpass physical boundaries or take place as fluid layers of social relations (Graham and Healey, 1999). Only few material features of a social phenomenon (e.g. inter-ethnic conflict) take place within the neighborhood, and not necessarily the most relevant for urban policy making.

The book concludes by addressing the meaning and relationship between practices and policies. It is here that the political account of Manzo's work comes strongly forward. Sociological research is certainly interested in the observation and understanding of those practices that construct space. These are the events that allow the urban researcher to get the 'sense' and 'meanings' of human interaction. The urban space gives several elements to discuss how symbols and meanings are challenged and constructed. Yet, the association of practices with policies is particularly suggestive. Practices become policies. Such an argument contains, in my opinion, the plea for a (re)democratization of both research and action in cities (Swingedouw, 2009). Considering practices situated in space the construction of a political meaning of space leads to the argument that spatialist sociology is indeed a political effort. It gives the capacity to understand power dynamics in space and to better inform (or change) policies into more responsive and contextualized interventions. In a more implicit fashion the conclusive remarks seem to emphasize the importance of embedding the policy process into real social dynamics, of making a localized approach the center for political intervention and eventually strengthen the policy process as a participatory (and therefore localized) endeavour. These have been moral ambitions of sociological and political research for the last 20 years, but still today this message appears to be often unheard by policy makers.

In conclusion, the book is an effective work on urban studies. Early students approaching the field of urban research will find in it an excellent and (perhaps too much) synthetic overview of the classic works on the social production of space. Scholars will instead find in it a concrete and sharp argument to revitalize participatory observation today. A strongly suggested reading.

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