

**“Urban Conflicts and Immigration.
Resources and Risks for Social Innovation”**

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Introduction: for an agonistic and transformative perspective of urban conflicts

The conflict is not an occasional pathology that interrupts the normal and harmonious experience in urban spaces. Conflicts are a constitutive part of the cities. Nevertheless, in too many cases, the conflict is represented as a pathology that disturbs the cities' urban metabolism. The "sacralisation of the consensus" (Mouffe, 2000; 13) of the dominant approach place the emphasis on shared and consensual norms that have to be set "before allowing time and space for exploration, for action and interaction between actors" (Göle, 2014). In this way, the conflict is something that has to be avoided or removed as soon as possible to ensure the regular functioning of the "urban growth machine" (Logan and Molotch, 1987).

The significance of social conflicts has been traditionally underlined by Marxist scholars who mainly addressed the class struggle in industrial societies as the most important conflict that subsumes all the others. This perspective, also applied to the study of new social movements, more or less explicitly is driven by the idea that the conflict against the established order is always 'good' and all the other conflicts are minor or 'bad'. This conception is strongly reductionist and little helpful to understand social processes in empirical reality. Social conflict is something more complex and pervasive than class conflict, even if it is a fundamental dimension of social life.

The aim of the article is to sustain the necessity to adopt an 'agonistic approach' (Mouffe, 2007) to conflict in multicultural societies aimed to find in conflicts the possibility to explore new urban points of view. This perspective has not be confused with the antagonistic conception of conflict for which there is a struggle between opponents that are in firm positions that try to get the maximum in a zero-sum game (a sort of social Darwinism). The agonistic perception puts at the centre the interests and the needs instead of the (firm) positions (Sclavi, 2003). The term 'agonism' derives from the word 'agon', 'agora' and is strongly related with the words 'to act'. It entails a (place of) meeting where different subjects encounter and, in some way, can transform themselves and the urban landscape. This conception aims to go beyond the Marxist, the pathologist and the Darwinist perception of conflict, following a sort of

transformative and socio-political idea of conflict. There are an increasing number of studies (Sclavi, 2003 Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009; Woherle, 2014) that underline that the conflict can be used to bring out the needs and the knowledge deposited in the subjects' experiences and can be an opportunity for reflection, mutual adjustment, recognition of diversity and participation (Lindblom, 1990).

The conflicts question the taken for granted routinized practices and categories through which social reality is assumed to be obvious. A conflict can move or 'raise' an urban practice from 'private' or 'parochial' to 'public' and 'political' (Lehtovuori, 2005) and can transform an invisible practice in a public battlefield.

To focus the attention on conflicts means to look for the 'political' aspects of social life and the collective attempts to transform society (both in progressive than in regressive way). The sociology of conflict is, therefore, a field of sociology that allow to integrate the analysis of practices of everyday life and more structural socio-political dynamics.

Urban conflicts and migration

The paper focuses the attention on a specific kind of conflict, that is the 'urban conflict' related to the presence of migrants. The idea is to suggest a fruitful way to intersect urban studies and migration studies.

The conflicts related to the representation and/or use of urban spaces are increasingly relevant in contemporary cities where the urban experiences of new migrants, their struggle to redefine the conditions of belonging to 'their' new society are reshaping urban landscapes: "through their everyday transformation of urban spaces, migrants not only transform themselves, they also mould the social and spatial fabric of which they are a part" (Cancellieri and Ostanel, 2015).

To study migration putting the conflict on space at the centre means to insert the paper in the so called spatial turn and even in the so called 'emotional and practical turn' that have characterised humanities and social sciences since the mid-1990s (Thrift, 2004; Davidson et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2009). Moving beyond the space-as-

container ontology, the paper affirms that a full understanding of human actions requires the recognition of the spatial nature of human agency, since space is an assemblage of spatial uses, practices and representations. Migrants are 'spatial actors' who continuously attempt to satisfy their spatial needs and rights by displaying their own identity and specificity in urban spaces. This perspective also entails the necessity to recognize that the affective and emotional issues are indeed intimately bound up with patterns of urban belonging and exclusion that make individuals and groups engage with an environment (Simonsen 2010; Wetherell 2012; Cancellieri and Ostanel, 2015; Cancellieri, 2016). Last but not least, to put attention on urban conflicts does not only mean focuses on space but more precisely on the temporal dimension of space, that is the on-going social construction of it. The phenomenological perspective shows us that the space is not fixed or predetermined but is emergent and shaped by the temporal dimension as much as the spatial (Dant, 2005). The space is not dead or fixed but is a field of struggles.

Different kinds of urban conflicts in Italy

Immigration is a conflicting issue that contributed to restructure social conflicts in all Europe (Kriesi & al., 2008, Vitale 2012). In last few years in Italy, the economic crisis, the weakening of national and local welfare and the success of political entrepreneurs of fears (e.g. Northern League) fuelled an increasing number of fragmented urban conflicts related to immigration (Mantovan and Ostanel, 2015). More and more importance is played by the conflicts related to the request of more *urban security*. This kind of conflicts are indifferently targeted to criminals (e.g. drug dealers, thieves), illegal migrants and other marginalized people such as homeless or panhandlers. In Italy this urban conflict has been strongly supported by some local politics, in particular through the exclusionary mayoral ordinances allowed by the so-called national 'security package' created by the centre-right government in 2008 to give more power to mayors on the issue of urban security (Ambrosini, 2012). The 'security package' gave also mayors the possibility to use the military to support regular police control in

specific areas. An increasing number of cities' public spaces has been considered just places of violence that have to be controlled and emptied through architectural, technological and political devices that restrict or discourage certain spatial uses and appropriations (Flusty, 1994) and transformed public space in 'public order' (Davis, 1998; Atkinson, 2003).

A second kind of urban conflict could be called *cultural conflict*. In this case the conflict is generated to support the (ontological) certainty (Bauman, 2000), against the 'symbolic pollution' that affects the traditional and taken for granted urban landscape. The protests against the opening of mosques (Saint-Blancat, Schmidt di Friedberg, 2005) are the paradigmatic example; others are the conflicts against the migrants' use of streets and footpaths in front of 'ethnic' shops and services as spaces of conviviality (Cancellieri, 2013) and the exhibition of veiled bodies (Gökarıksel, 2009). In many cases this kind of conflicts is more a struggle among established and outsiders than a conflict originated by class, race, ethnicity (Elias, 1965). The outsiders try to find and produce resources in the new society while the established feel threatened and attempt to marginalize the outsiders. Both the established and the outsiders behave in the 'natural' way but their taken for granted idea of 'natural' is different (Wimmer, 2007). As Schütz underlined, the outsider (or the stranger for using its word) cannot 'think as usual' and deploy the commonly applied schemes and recipes for understanding social life, and he therefore has to navigate uneasily. The new settlement for the stranger is not "a protecting shelter at all but as a labyrinth in which he has lost all sense of his bearings" (Schutz 1944: 507).

Another kind of urban conflicts are *pro-migrants political conflicts* that are struggled by migrants or pro-migrant Italian citizens. In in the last years this conflict emerged and gained media attention. For example, in January 2010 Rosarno, a Southern Italy city, hundreds of African seasonal workers, already exasperated by their living conditions and exploitation, protested with a two day riots. In November 2010, four migrants climbed in a 25 meters high crane situated in the city center of Brescia and stay there for sixteen days. In other cases Italians and migrants residents of marginalized neighborhood, such as Via Padova in Milano (Alietti, 2012; Briata, 2014) or the Hotel

House in Porto Recanati (Cancellieri, 2013), joined together to fight against their stigmatization and political isolation.

Migrants are now, more than in the last decades, possible conflicting subjects. Nevertheless, this kind of conflicts seems to have a low, or even inexistent, capability to influence the political agenda.

This trilogy of urban conflicts (urban security conflicts, cultural conflicts, pro-migrant conflicts) is just a first path to present the richness of this field of studies. The paper's aim is to look for the specific dimensions that could be used to analyze the resources and risks that are related in every conflict. Starting from an incipient research on urban conflicts in the city of Padua (Italy), the paper intends to show some possibilities for research and politics.

The case study of Padua: the main analytical dimensions of urban conflicts

The case study is a multi-ethnic neighbourhood of the city of Padua in the Veneto Region¹, called Arcella. This is a neighbourhood with a strong identity and clear geographical and historical boundaries. In last fifteen years Arcella has experienced a rapid increase in the number of migrant residents, making it the city's area with the highest percentage of foreign residents (22.7%), (Municipal Statistical Yearbook, 2012) and the highest percentage of commercial activities managed by migrants (mainly coming from China, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Morocco and Romania). This new residential and commercial presence is often considered by Italian inhabitants and local mass-media as a sign of the increasing neighbourhood's decay. These are some local newspapers titles:

"The 29th kebab opens and Arcella cry: stop it!" (Il Mattino, 25th July 2007)

'Arcella. Security emergency.'(Il Mattino, 2nd April 2012)

'Far-west Arcella. At night here fear rules.'(Il Mattino, 3rd April 2012)

¹ The Veneto region is the second Italian region as concern the presence of migrants after Lombardia.

The incipient research is based on qualitative methods, such as participatory observation of public spaces and in-depth interviews to key informants and inhabitants using snowball sampling; moreover, a press release of local newspapers and the analysis of the main municipality's projects and resolutions have been put in place.

What the research highlights is that presence of migrants in the main roads of the neighbourhood questions the taken-for-granted sensory landscapes of everyday life (Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1971). The visibility of difference in public spaces seems to question the Arcella's identity, mobilising a nostalgic vision of a homogenous place that never existed. The public discourse describing a sort of 'occupation' and the local media discourse depicts the urban unit as the *bête noire* of city's neighborhoods. This strong stigmatization is supported by some criminal events, above all among people involved in drugs dealing. But as underlined by the local deputy police superintendent in Arcella there are not so many thefts or assaults than in other parts of the city. There is a 'criminalization of the presence of difference' which becomes synonymous with fear. As underlined by the words of the vice police commissioner, the result is the creation of a topophobia (Tuan, 1974):

"The opening of these many kebabs and minimarkets are considered and are perceived as an alarm and as a source of insecurity. The neighborhood is strongly transformed after the opening of these meeting places for migrant people. The perceived insecurity in Arcella is linked to this process. It is the proliferation of kebabs or minimarkets in the same street, which entails a huge concentration of non-EU nationals to your door. They substantially do nothing but anyway they create a state of anxiety!"

The native population have not yet acknowledged the plurality of the neighborhood's landscape as well as not recognized the right of migrants to use and manipulate public spaces. The mass media representations of the urban space are active social actors in this process. Their powerful narratives articulate 'a tangle of desires, resentments and grievances' (Back, 2009, p. 206), supporting the so-called subaltern integration model of migrants: 'wanted but not welcome' (Zolberg, 1987). That is migrants are wanted to

fill 'dirty, dangerous and demanding' (3D) jobs, but they are not welcome in urban public spaces.

Starting from the main literature on conflict studies, the paper develop the following six main dimensions that can be used as heuristic tools to understand which are the risks and resources present in the conflict.

1) *Actors involved*. To analyse an urban conflict mean firstly to recognize the configuration of actors and alliances involved and the relationships between different actors. In the case of Padua the main actors are small groups of Italian inhabitants (often organized in small committees) that fuel the mobilisation and, often, have the contacts with local newspapers, the local politicians (mainly of right or extreme-right) and local mass-media. In this case, the migrants have not voice and are passive actors. Considered that they do not have the right to vote, the local municipality needs to 'answer' only to a part (the active one) of the conflict. This lack of recognition, as well as being a potential source of new conflicts (Honneth, 1996), in fact ignores the ongoing conflict, precluding the possibility to understand it and to learn from it. Anyway, to look analytically to actors involved in a conflict means recognize that there is not a struggle between 'good' and 'bad' but that need to adopt an intersectional perspective focusing on the relationships among several differentiating factors: gender, race, class and other axes of identity which interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels (Valentine, 2007).

2) *Urban stakes/urban needs*. Every conflict has specific urban stakes. The stake can be material or symbolic such as visibility, recognition, the sense of place, the desire to exclude a minority, the necessity to have spaces of encounter, mobility or rest. In the case study of Padua, the urban stake for the autochthonous seems to be first how to face a deep urban and social change transformation of their neighborhood and secondly they express the desire to exclude a minority and to reinforce a community (according to the principle of 'hating together') using the classical scapegoat mechanism (a part of the autochthonous people tend to generate internal solidarity through moral rituals such those analysed by Durkheim and Goffman). Behind this

conception there is a nostalgic, idealized vision of a homogeneous place that actually never existed. Notwithstanding, it is not fruitful to limit the analysis to this moralistic consideration. This conflict, indeed, reveals the lacking of a sense of 'community' and sense of home, and, in many cases, the scarcity of places of encounter for the autochthonous and the necessity to reconstruct familiar and identity places. Going further, this could entail the necessity to go from an inward-looking sense of place to an outward-looking and progressive one more based on multiple identities that are on the flux (Massey, 1991).

For migrants, indeed, the urban stake is the strengthening of their 'socio-spatial capital' (Cancellieri, 2013). Their re-territorialization processes produce 'third places' (Oldenburg 1989) that is places of sociability (Simmel 1949) where people can gather together outside the workplace and the home. Either free or for a low cost, they are highly accessible: nearby for many (within walking distance) and easy to reach for others (e.g. near the train station, easily accessible through public transport) (Cancellieri and Ostanel, 2015).

3) *Denomination/representation processes.* Another relevant dimension of every urban conflict is the process of denomination of the urban stakes. This puts the attention on the performative nature of representation that is particularly relevant in a society strongly based on symbolic communication. In the case of the urban conflict in Arcella, more and more frequently all urban stakes are subsumed in the concept of 'urban decay' that should be provoked by the increase of the immigrant population. There is no clear idea what 'urban decay' is: it sometimes refers to crime, some others to poverty and marginalization or to different kinds of sociability. By analysing the process of denomination, it is possible deconstruct the narrations used and to clarify and recognize the urban needs. This entails the possibility to introduce a new content, to enlarge (or to reduce) the public agenda and possibly to favour a mutual recognition.

4) *The emotional and multisensory components.* The urban conflicts are not expressed merely in a discursive register; rather they often manifest beyond the rational

discourse of argumentation through multisensory and emotional dynamics: some uses of the space, for examples, entail “a series of irrational reactions and affects that are mobilized” (Göle, 2014), which include “feelings of insecurity, invasion, fear, phobia, injury, humiliation, resentment and anger” (*ibidem*).

In Arcella migrants engaged in the process of manipulating urban spaces are accused of surpassing the ‘upper threshold of correct visibility’ (Brighenti, 2010). In other words, the level of visibility of their different bodies as well as of their unconventional uses of the urban space challenge a ‘spatial order’ which is essentially taken for granted as the ‘right way’. Migrants have entered into a realm of hypervisibility in which any action they undertake is overly visible as it is excessively noted. Media representations have pushed this process forward, continuously creating periods of ‘moral panic’ (Cohen 1973) by depicting migrants as a threat to the appropriate use of public space. In last years, the ‘moral panic’ has lost its short-lived feature for becoming a long-term atmosphere characterized by the circulation of a stereotyped image of migrants as risk factor (Lupton 1999; Hier 2011). This conflict is a natural ritual with an intensive focus of attention and a high social density, through which the emotions generated are mainly anger and hatred.

5) *Spaces and territories*. The materiality and design of places are integral aspects of the conflicts emerging or taking place in urban landscape. The spatial and material aspects configure its development, while at the same time, the action might reconfigure the spatial and material setup, generating new sense of belonging, appropriation and territorial identities (Lecourt and Faburel, 2008). However, space and materiality usually play more subtle roles in urban life. They are silent participants in everyday life, nudging people in certain directions, hiding things or exposing them; they can induce pain and uneasiness, comfort and pleasure (Frers, 2006); this is the rich issue of the spatial affordances (Cancellieri, 2015). In the case of Padua, for example, the municipality set up a railway station rehabilitation project: one of its aims was to remove any shady areas in order to control groupings of migrants and to reduce the possibility of comfortably using public spaces. For instance, the most frequently used stairways in the area were covered with spikes to prevent people from sitting on

them. In the same direction went another recent resolution affecting a green area only used by local inhabitants as a way to reach the nearby car park. In this space there were five empty benches that through time became an important meeting point for Eastern European, Bangladeshi and Nigerian people: most of them were living in the 'Care Centre' for refugees located nearby. In 2011, after a few businessmen and residents protested, the benches were removed. This resolution is part of a larger 'war on the bench' at work in Italy, and mainly in the Veneto region, waged by many municipalities who have removed public benches or installed others where it is impossible to lie down.

6) *Regulation.* The last dimension that has to be understood in order to find the resources and risks related to urban conflicts is the related process of regulation and 'mediation' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Semperebon, 2012). In the case study of Padova the local policymaking is inspired by an idea of 'containing racialization', thus inhibiting the presence of difference in public spaces. Since 2005 the municipality used different resolutions to limit the visible presence of migrants, in the name of 'urban security' and 'hygiene standards' controls. According to these resolutions, shops and services run by migrants are considered as concentrations of undocumented and potentially disturbing people and to this extent they are constantly controlled and sometimes temporarily closed. On 2012 the municipality approved a specific resolution, in accordance with a regional decree, to urge local police to control 'ethnic' shops, vaguely considered as a problem of 'hygiene and urban decency', especially in some peculiar parts of the city such as the railway station area. These policies are part of a vision that considers "the stranger as dangerous and that warn against interacting with persons unknown" (Cooper, 2007: 227). As already underlined, we can say that in Padua we see an overall revanchist political repertoire against migrants' uses of urban spaces (Smith 1996; Semperebon 2012).

Conclusion. Urban conflict as a heuristic tool for social innovation

The paper aims to focus the attention on urban conflicts. It invites to use the conflicts as prisms of analysis to see karst movements, latent resources and urban needs. An analysis of a social conflict can reveal hidden actors, question the list of subjects (individual and collective) that have to be included in policies (Vitale, 2012), explore new frames and new classification and mobilising territorial experiences and resources. Obviously, the conflict can also reveal risks and dangerous trends.

The paper, in particular, suggests to adopt an agonistic conception of conflicts that starts from the recognition that in every conflict there is a) a complex system of actors and alliances (not 'good' versus 'bad'), b) specific urban stakes and needs that are usually not recognized because are represented and 'denominated' in other ways; c) a contextual struggle of narratives that frame the urban conflict and play a performative role; d) an emotional and multisensory component of the conflict that strongly influence the social dynamics of it; e) a material and spatial component that contribute to configure the paths and the outcomes of the struggle; f) the mechanisms of regulation and mediation that strongly influence the consequences of the conflicts in terms of empowerment, inclusion/exclusion of the different subjects involved.

A conflict has disruptive effects on the social order and at the same time could be the occasion for reinforcing the quality of the interaction (Bush and Folger, 2005) and to pursue the objective to reinforce the capacity of the different parts to address future conflicts.

In conclusion the paper suggests the need to be sensitive towards signals of conflict because urban conflicts can be valuable 'assets' and fundamental heuristic tools for social innovation (Moulaert and Vicari, 2009).

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