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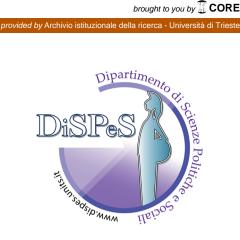
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Socio-spatial relations: an attempt to move space near society

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Socio-spatial relations: an attempt to move space near society

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Abstract

There is a great effort to include relational attributes within a space perspective. This concerns two current interpretative tendencies: the first is related to the idea of de-territorialisation due to the high mobility of people and goods; the second is centred on the idea that social relations are increasingly loose and fragmented, giving rise to the 'liquid society'. Approaches emphasising the importance of space and the strength of relations may counter such ideas by showing that many empirical cases are still interpretable by a robust combined socio-spatial perspective. The paper will take the polymorphic and structural approach of authors like Jessop, Brenner and Jones, paying special attention to the 'quality' of social relations according to a tradition that began with Simmel and Mauss, passed through Polanyi, and concluded with Godbout and Caillé. The paper illustrates the debate on the conjunction between space and relations, in particular through the view of Schatzki, elaborates on new or renewed patterns, and gives some examples of where such theoretical elaborations can be applied. The product is a typology of 'socio-spatial relations', while examples will be provided in regard to the issues of globalization, sustainability and governance.

Keywords

Space, social relations quality, familiarity, bounded solidarity, land use control at a distance

Sintesi

Nelle scienze sociali è in corso un grande sforzo per includere aspetti relazionali all'interno di una prospettiva spazialista. Ciò riguarda due recenti tendenze interpretative: la prima è legata all'idea di de-territorializzazione dovuta alla alta mobilità di persone e cose, la seconda è centrata sull'idea che le relazioni sociali siano progressivamente lasche e frammentate, dando luogo alla società liquida. Approcci che enfatizzano l'importanza dello spazio e la forza delle relazioni possono controbilanciare tali idee mostrando che molti casi empirici sono ancora interpretabili attraverso una robusta prospettiva che combina sociale e spaziale. Il testo considera l'approccio polimorfo e strutturale di autori come Jessop, Brenner and Jones, ponendo una particolare attenzione alla 'qualità' delle relazioni sociali secondo una tradizione che parte da Simmel e Mauss, passa attraverso Polanyi e giunge a Godbout e Caillé. Il testo illustra il dibattito sulla congiunzione fra spazio e relazioni, in particolare attraverso la visione di Schatzki, elabora poi un nuovo modello e descrive infine alcuni casi sui quali applicare tali spunti teorici. Il prodotto finale è una tipologia di relazioni socio-spaziali, applicate a tre questioni: globalizzazione, sostenibilità e governance.

Parole chiave

Spazio, qualità relazionali, familiarità, solidarietà limitata, controllo a distanza dell'uso del suolo

There is a great effort, mainly among geographers, to include relational attributes within a space perspective (Jones 2009; Malpas 2012). This concerns two current interpretative tendencies: the first is related to the idea of de-territorialisation due to the high mobility of people and goods; the second is centred on the idea that social relations are increasingly loose and fragmented, giving rise to the famous 'liquid society' (see Kaufmann et al. 2004). Approaches emphasising the importance of space and the strength of relations may counter such tendencies by showing that many empirical cases are still interpretable by a robust combined social and spatial perspective (Jessop, Brenner and Jones 2008). The paper will take the polymorphic and structural approach of the authors just cited, paying special attention to the 'quality' of social relations according to a tradition that began with Simmel (1908) and Mauss (1925), passed through Polanyi (1977), and concluded with Godbout (1992) and Caillé (1998).

The paper illustrates the debate on the conjunction between space and relations, elaborates on some new or renewed patterns, and gives some examples of where such theoretical elaborations can be applied. The crucial concern is 'socio-spatial relations', while examples will be provided in regard to the issues of globalization, sustainability and governance.

In very broad terms, the conjunction between space as a geometrical form, and society conceived generally as a bundle of relations, has been conceptualized in four ways:

- organized spaces affect society (ecological approaches);
- society moulds spaces which become territories or organized spaces:
- society and spaces are united in specific circumstances to form an indistinct whole (fusion or conflation approach);
- there is a circularity between space and society: they are distinct but interactive, and produce cumulative effects.

Although the preference is for the last approach, the others provide fundamental insights for understanding socio-spatial connexions. The paper will analyse them in order to obtain socio-spatial ideal types useful for the inquiry.

The autonomy of space and society

There are various traditions of thought that seek to codify the fluid and opaque space-society connection. Schatzki puts forward what in the previous section

was called the fusionist approach. The first step in his argument is definition of absolute space:

> space as a realm of forms and relations autonomous from and governed by laws making no reference to the social entities that have spatial properties. Space was viewed as a kind of substance that interacts with a second sort of substance, society, to produce concrete social life (1991: 653).

The term 'absolute space' is recalled by Harvey, who defines it as "the space of Netwon and Descartes and it is usually represented as a pre-existing and immoveable grid amenable to standardized measurement" (Harvey 2006: 121); it is identified by the absence of any exchange, solved (*ab solutus*) of any link. Let us consider the second step, which is to define 'relational space':

> In contrast to absolute space, relational space has no independent, substantial nature and is incapable of interacting with social entities. All there is are social entities whose interactions yield space as a pure by-product (Schatzki 1991: 653).

Space and society are in this case close to the second approach described in the introduction. Space is socially produced and has no autonomy or ontological nature. It is the fruit of symbolization, planning, and use. At best, it is a medium of relations[1]. But Schatzki's preference is for *social spaces* that express an intimate unity between life and places.

> (If) Social reality is interrelated human lives, social space is the opening and occupation of "wheres" (local setting and attunement with things) of human existence that automatically occurs along with interrelated lives (Schatzki 1991: 651).

He then reformulates the concept of social space:

> Social space is a distribution of such items (objects, places, settings, action-governing factors, and causal transactions) among places and paths, which automatically happens along with interrelated lives and which underlies both the objective dimensions of social spatiality and the construction of the built environment (Schatzki 1991: 667).

Despite Schatzki's declaration, that he is inspired by Heidegger, his terminology recalls the fusion between soil and life described by Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) when he talked of community. Soil is a source of unity among people who share values, intense non-instrumental relationships, and ways of doing. People feel they are 'part' of the land, integrated into an one and only body. They do not distinguish themselves greatly from their physical community. Tönnies view opened a

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1   Harvey (2006: 123 ff) gives a very different meaning to the relational space: it is the dimension of one space constantly related to another for affective, symbolic or material reasons. That is for example the parcel of land on which there is a rent.

long debate on the anti-modern function of community because of its tendency to neglect or constrain individuals (Portes and Sensebrenner 1993; Urry 2002). For better or worse, space as the soil on which people live used to be the unifying factor of human life. In fact, such unity was broken by the intensification of spatial mobility, which detached people from places.

But the fusion perspective has yielded unexpected results, ideologically very distant from the polemics on the constraining nature of community. The approach adopted by Schatzki brought him to *social practices*, a topic that he later developed in detail (Schatzki 1996) and which was taken up by numerous scholars.

The line of reasoning adopted in this paper is somewhat different: space and society are kept analytically and ontologically distinct so that it is possible to look for conjunctions-arrangements that respect their objective diversity. This was the approach developed by Simmel (1908), in his sociology of space (see also Lechner 1991), a combination that can be named 'socio-spatial relationships'.

Again in Schatzki (2002) one finds the expression 'spatial relations'; by which he meant physical entities, "though not merely physical entities", that "compose an objective spatial ordering embracing diverse relations, such as further from, closer to, in vicinity of, next to, between, inside, and outside" (pp. 42-43). This way of looking at spatial relations is the basis of a highly formalized approach in geography regarding the measurement of the *relative* distance of material objects (Clementini, Sharma, and Egenhofer 1994). Thus, the expression 'spatial relation' indicates the location of one physical or spatialized object *relatively* to another. Harvey (2006: 122) sustains that "space is relative in the double sense: that there are multiple geometries from which to choose and that the spatial frame depends crucially upon what it is that is being relativized and by whom". Clementini, Sharma, and Egenhofer formalize eight kinds of spatial relations between two objects: disjoint, containing, inside, equal, meeting, covering, covered by, overlapping. However, socio-spatial relations are not restricted to the relative position of one material object; the fact that objects are usually more than two and embedded in an environment greatly complicates the typology. Anyway, this formalization helps represent the social relations that overlap in different ways with the spatial relations among physical objects.

"Physical spatial relations are not, however, the only sort of inhabiting social life. The entities that compose social orders also assume positions in spatialities of nonphysical sorts" (Schatzki 2002: 43). They are of two types: one is the 'activity space' whose constituents are actions with an objective spatial support; the other is 'activity-place space', that is, "a matrix of places and paths where activities are performed" (p. 43) and which is also anchored in physical space. The example with which Schatzki illustrates these notions is striking: a laboratory in which a liquor is extracted from herbs. This laboratory is made of interconnected, sequenced, nested localities where the different phases of preparation take place. Thus, "to the objective spatial relations of physical entities must be added activity-place spatial relations of objects of use" (Schatzki, 2002: 44).

The idea of a space made up of places and paths recalls the image of the *network*, where instead of persons/organizations representing the nodes there are places, while the paths are the links among places. The reference to the popular image of the network makes it possible to specify three general positions on space and relations: a) "thinking space relationally", which neglects borders and highlights only flows (Malpas 2012); b) the "overterritorialized concept of embeddedness" resulting in excessive importance being given to borders for every kind of social activity (Hess 2004: 174); c) the ambivalence of the overlapping space and relations, according to Simmel's theory.

These specifications bring us closer to the concept of socio-spatial relations. Places ('*luoghi*' in Italian) are spaces replete with activities related to other places, as well as with actions. Of course, activities are not relations, and paths can only be the mere physical supports of social links. This raises a crucial question: what is the connection between spaces and human interaction? The main tradition in this sense is cultural: a space becomes a place because of a group symbolization process. Gieryn (2000) states that when a unique delimited space receives a name, it becomes a place. Giving a name is an act of recognition, usually shared with others; in that one recovers the social dimension of space.

According to Augé (1992), *common recognition* is the criterion with which to distinguish places from non-places; but in his well-known work there is an ambivalence between the symbolic meaning given to an organized space, for example an airport, and the kind of relations possible in it. There may be divergent or incompatible meanings given to a delimited space, and this creates ambiguity and difficulties for the people interacting in that place. But places of this kind are very rare or very special; they seem to resemble Foucault's heterotopias: "the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted".[2] More common are places with different but 'compatible' meanings, where relations are relatively brief, cold, and superficial, at least among the majority of the people who pass through them (Mela 2006). An airport exemplifies this social situation (see Codourey 2008). Nevertheless, warm and lasting relations are possible in it. Such non-places are socially embedded despite the strict or loose convergence of meanings (Martinotti 2007).

It therefore seems advisable to keep the capacity or possibility for people to give sense to spaces distinct from the relations that they enact in them. This separation of symbolization and relationship, however, moves away from the social practices approach. This approach assumes an unity of space and action within routines, which happen almost automatically, without a clear predefinition of the site and of the exchange among people frequenting a place. In the practices approach, the importance given to *things* directs especial attention to space because material objects always have a geometrical form (absolute space), a spatial location (relative space) and a reference to other things (relational space). Clear is

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2   http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html.

the resemblance with the basic typology of Harvey (2006). Nevertheless, the appeal for inclusion of so many different aspects of a sequence of actions may create empirical problems when a practice has to be spatially and temporally delimited. Moreover, the theoretical risk is of lapsing into a *fusion approach* in which human agency is seriously undermined and confused with things.

The path towards socio-spatial relations

A more promising approach respects the autonomy of society and space, and considers the recursive reciprocal influence of one on the other. Original spatial forms – for example, a mountain or a valley – affect the social organization, while the established social organization modifies the spatial forms by changing the course of a river or reclaiming marshland. The pattern assumes a circular form, or better a spiral one, as cases of local development and underdevelopment often demonstrate (Myrdal 1957).

According to this framework (autonomy of space and society, reciprocal cumulative influence), socio-spatial relationships are the original products of specific spatial forms and social relations. The combination is contingent, historical, even random. The aim in what follows is to show some combinations that seem significant in modern societies and able to shed light on important phenomena (notably globalization, environmental crisis, and governance). There are three types of combination of space and society (fig. 1), but the number may change according to historical contingencies. The possible combinations are defined as *structural homologies* in accordance with Max Weber's (1905) conceptualization of the link between religion and capitalism: it is not a causal relation, but an affinity of structure, ways of thinking, and attitudes (see Boucock 2000).

A spatial form with a high degree of abstraction is distance: the quantity of space that divides at least two persons/objects/buildings. Distance in specular terms is defined as proximity, the degree of nearness. The counterpart in social terms is the face-to-face relation: a dense, direct, emotional relation in which non-verbal communication is very important. Historically, it has been considered the basis for a normal affective life, for the formation of durable ties among people. Friendship, trust and loyalty are usually based on face-to-face relations. The development of information and communication technologies is supposed not to have weakened this sort of interaction (Boden and Molotch 1994; Urry 2002; Licoppe 2004). And the Giddens trust on expert systems has not completely replaced the face-to-face or personal source (of trust), to the contrary it has shown its renewed role.

The product of proximity and face-to-face interaction is a stable relation of *familiarity* with people and things. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2009) gives a concise definition of familiarity as "reasonable knowledge or acquaintance, as with a subject or place".

Relations with people and things – also because of familiarity with the spaces in which they occur – are considered understandable, even taken for granted (Tuan 1977:184). In a spatial setting it is possible to frame the situation: in other words, to put almost everything in an ordered space that provides a map which is mental and physical at the same time. One sustains the other: the spatial frame helps the mental one, and vice versa. Moreover, familiarity needs a stringent nexus of perception and distance; beyond a certain distance, face-to-face relations are no longer possible. Non-verbal communication is impossible, even if video-cameras and online meetings can partially take its place.

To be stressed is that familiarity has not only a cognitive dimension but also an emotional one. The reasonable knowledge of a placed or embedded person provides a sense of security, while a feeling of sympathy with him/her aids mutual comprehension (Freudenburg 1986). Of course, according to ethological theories, proximity may also be a threat: the so-called 'escape distance' is a safeguarding measure for many animals. This introduces a further aspect of familiarity: its intrinsic ambivalence. Simmel (1908) inspired this point when he argued that proximity sometimes creates sympathy, sometimes contempt. Neighbourhood relations are a case in point. Proximity ambivalence is kept under control by means of cognitive instruments: the 'other' is codified and counted, as Simmel (1903) put it when discussing the intellectualism of metropolitan life. The exact distance is a way to *measure* the other and the kind of relationship that one wants to establish with him/her. In fact, there is the expression 'to keep your distance'.

Familiarity may disjoin knowledge from sympathy, so that a person understands the situation but does not like it. Reasonable knowledge comprises people and spatial arrangements that are only partially accepted. In this sense, familiarity is a typical relation of modernity: a way to displace 'understanding of' from 'identification with'. It gives foundation to individuality, as well *categorical relationships* that is, relations that are almost entirely mediated by a role (see Hannerz 1990).

STRUCTURAL HOMOLOGIES OF SPATIAL FORMS WITH SOCIAL RELATIONS

SPATIAL FORM	SOCIAL RELATION	SOCIO-SPATIAL RELATIONSHIP
Distance	Face-to-face	Familiarity
Border	Exchange of gifts	Bounded Solidarity
Density	Dominance	Land Use Control (at a distance)

The second spatial form to be considered is 'border'. This is such a meaningful concept that it can only be synthesised by returning to its origin: it is in fact an archetype, a primordial instrument used to impose order on reality. Its metaphorical meanings are always closely linked with its physical form: rivers, mountain

chains, walls, barbed wire, barriers are all signs of division, not always hostile but certainly marking a difference in space and in the mind. The homologue in terms of social relations is exchange, particularly social exchange, or reciprocity to differentiate it from market or economic exchange (see Polanyi 1977).

Their combination produces *bounded solidarity*, a well-known concept in the sociology of migration and ethnic relations (Portes 1998; Montgomery 2011). 'Border' is included in the etymology of 'bounded' solidarity. It is a bond limited to a group of people, very often living in a circumscribed space. The ghetto is the ideal-typical case; but many milder examples are to be found everywhere. Corporatist groups, family clans, industrial and consumer clusters, even chess clubs manifest a bounded solidarity. The spatial form is rarely that of, for example, the economic-ethnic enclave of Cubans in Miami; rather, the forms are more reticular, amoeba-like, even linear in some special along the coast cases. Furthermore, solidarity of this kind can be spatially discontinuous, as the literature on transmigration and diasporas very convincingly shows (Cohen 1997; Vertovec 1999). Even if bounded solidarity is among geographically dispersed people, there is always a reference to a spatial form. We are very far from the liquid society or boundless (universal) solidarity: the majority of human aggregations have a strong spatial reference. Sometimes this reference is emotional, as in the case of fatherland longing. Sometimes, it is stratified and tangled, as in the case of tourists and artists.

Density is the third spatial dimension; it is not really a form of space, but a quality of matter. The thickness of matter per volume or surface is, nonetheless, a very important feature of space. The fertility of land is highly variable: for instance, two fields of the same extension provide different yields; two mountains may have the same volume but contain metals of very different value for human needs. Two soils can be identical in terms of their bio-capacity, but there may or may not be an oil deposit beneath them. The density attribute is somewhat generic, but it well illustrates the great variety of space qualities; in this sense it is a spatial form. It is not by chance that population density is still a rough but frequently used indicator of residential settings (*ecological analysis*; in critical terms see Elden, 2007).

The parallel of spatial density with social relation in this case concerns 'power'. The capacity to control land with different densities or resources enables the creation of asymmetry in society. The legal and military control of oilfields has been a huge source of power. However, as said, there is not always a causal relation between spatial form and social relation. Landed wealth is not always a sufficient condition for achieving a position of power. What is certain is the relational nature of power as described by Weber. Power, or better dominance, is 'the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons'. The relational dimension is evident when we consider legitimate forms of power: in this case, there is recognition by Ego of Alter's exercise of power.

In terms of socio-spatial relations, the combination of density and power produces what has been just mentioned as an example: *land use management*, which is a specific source of power over others based on control of the ground and underground products (primary goods) and over surface positions (land rent-seeking). Socio-spatial relations concern the asymmetries caused by the control of land. The feudal serf was kept in a state of semi-slavery precisely because of the lord's right on the land, as synthesised by the word 'landlord'. The right on the land entailed a right on the persons who worked and lived on it.

Serfdom has been abolished in most of the world. But, the control of land is still highly socially and economically unbalanced, as the literature on political economy testifies (Feiock 2004). Two variables are crucial: on the one hand, control over the means for exploiting the land; on the other, the capacity of public authorities to moderate private rights on the land. The former factor concerns the extraordinary industrialization of every kind of land use. Agriculture – the same applies to forestry and mining – is so mechanized and globalized that its practices are more deeply affected by the ownership of cultivation means (tractors, fertilizers, pesticides, market channels, etc) than the mere landed property. The latter factor pertains to the authority's capacity to impose social and equal uses of land: for example, by imperatively allocating plots to public services or to social housing. Hence, land control is still a source of power relations, with an increased variety of forms.

This last statement introduces a new argument, which concerns the spatial mediation of the forms of control. The perspective of socio-spatial relations thus extends to embrace the entire tradition of studies inspired by Foucault. Urbanization and building forms are subtle means with which to exercise closer control on bodies. The control takes place at two levels: city organization and building structure. The former level concerns the ways in which towns are designed and planned. Specific attention is paid to wide and long avenues, designed not only to ease the traffic flow but also to accelerate control of manifestations of dissent. The latter level concerns the internal design of buildings, providing special custodial functions. Beside the famous panopticon prison – the acme of centralized control – there are other, softer architectures whose intrinsic function is the standardization (or normalization) of behaviours. They concern schools (Piro 2008), hospitals, sports facilities, or memory buildings.

On this view, socio-spatial relations have a sinister meaning: they are not really asymmetrical in the traditional sense; there is no clear *dominus* (dominant actor) but rather a *dominance*. Power is personified in the material structures of institutions as buildings; it is embodied in certain settings: for example, in the balance between filled and empty spaces. Open spaces, gardens, parks, and wide squares are – paradoxically – instruments that induce a more stringent form of control: the visibility of bodies provokes more penetrating self-control. This is another of Foucault's (1975) main points: the slow slide to an internalization of power through discipline of the body.

The absence of a dominant actor in the architectures of control probably makes the relational approach rather weak, or even contradictory. Self-discipline of the body is by definition without an interlocutor. The theoretical problem is explaining how a relation between a (dominated) subject and an impersonal power comes about. Empirically, relations of this kind are very frequent: people constantly deal with many kinds of service which are highly impersonal. The challenge is determining how this categorical, and supposedly asymmetrical, relationship is mediated by spatial forms.

Density of matter or other attribute of space, e.g. verticality (Moeller, Robinson, Zabelina 2008), seems unable to provide a proper ground; 'border' works better, even if not as a barrier, as in the previous socio-spatial ideal type, but as a *filter*. It lets something enter and retains it like a hydraulic valve: the water can enter but cannot return. Foucault's reasoning is the same: in a particular historical period, social order moved from physical exterior control to an emphasis on self-control. Power exercises its strength through the freedom of people. Bodies became permeable to external fluid without returning it, but on the contrary making it their own matter. The traditional input-output scheme is profoundly changed because of the valve's operation. Influence, power, dominance happen, and they are embodied; they do not create a violent reaction or mere adaptation, but an identification with or a self-assumption of that dominance.

So far as this interpretation is hasty, the socio-spatial consequence seems clear: borders identifying countries, villages, sites and bodies work like valves, as unidirectional filters from outside to inside. Border regulation – the valve – is essentially a *spatial dispositive* (Pløger 2008). Another important issue is what happens inside: how is such an embodiment used. There are two possible outcomes: spatial organizations that develop their own knowledge and became more autonomous, and spatial organizations that export the same logic to other entities, increasing the complexity of the dominance theatre. There is, in other words, a multiplication and stratification of asymmetry among spatialised bodies.

Testing socio-spatial relations:
globalization, environmental crisis, governance

The challenge for the socio-spatial relations argument is to determine whether the combinations of space and society identified are able to shed light on important phenomena of our time. There are three examples – globalization, environmental crisis and governance – one for each ideal type. Globalization is a well-known spatial trope: borders and distances have been compressed (Harvey 1990); flows of people, matter, information and money have increased. The development of networks and the flattening of hierarchies match the process. According to Giddens (1984), spatial-temporal coordinates are stretched so that there is more room for meeting people. Urry (2003) well describes the world of

meetingness: the development of cheap and easy transport lets people meet each other more frequently.

Globalisation is then a process which increases the total amount of relations among people. Distance does not limit encounters as it did in the past. The same situation on a larger scale was noted in Simmel's metropolis. As in the Berlin of one hundred years ago, the attention moves to the quality of relations. Familiarity is seen as the capacity to handle a large number of relations without the people encountered losing qualities. With globalisation this kind of socio-spatial relation gains momentum. Broader knowledge of people and places enables the better selection of our relations: they are more focused according to Goffman's (1971) definition of *encountering*. Moreover, meetings of that kind are more agonistic;[3] that is, they touch not only economic or professional completion but also the strategic use of affects and intimacy.

Globalization as a spatial process is inherently linked to a new kind of relationship based on familiarity, and on the capacity to identify, select, and manipulate the other's feelings in an agonistic relationship. This makes it possible to counter caricatures of modernity as the age of anomic, impersonal, categorical relationships. There are many relations of that kind, but the number of opposite situations – value-laden, highly personalized, elective relationships – have increased as well. Modernity and globalization as the triumph of an individualistic atomized society is wrong as misunderstood is Castells's (1996) contraposition between the *space of place* and the *space of flow* (Montgomery 2011: 661). People living always in one place or in the world flows form a small minority: the great majority experience a mix of attachment to places and to movement. Furthermore, facilitated mobility creates Beck's polygamy of places. More mobile people, for example tourists, manifest a stronger belonging to places (Gubert, Pollini 2002). The places of attachment are represented as a network rather than as an area, bearing in mind, however, that the web's nodes are, in any case, micro-areas.

The example of globalization helps better to specify the concept of familiarity: the beginning is a cognitive process, the intellectualization described by Simmel; the next step is greater knowledge of others, a more selective attitude which does not decrease the absolute number of people encountered, and the outcome is an *agonistic gift*, a ritual much more widespread than the ancient potlach of tribal chiefs. Familiarity of spaces and people prepares the terrain for meetings – a mix of place and relations that emerges as a symbol of modernity and globalization.

Globalization is then a multiplication of encounters. These are face to face and they need proximity; the intensity of relations is variable, but they are visually, thematically and spatially focused (Goffman 1971). In modernity, this focus

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3   There are three traditions of study on agonistic relationships: one is ethological and has developed in continuity with hierarchy in the animal world (Flack, de Waal 2004). The second is linked to Foucault's (1988: 30) already-mentioned approach: agonism is a "domination of the self by the self" (Mahon 1992: 171). The third tradition centres on agonistic gift-giving in anthropological studies (Mauss 1925).

is competition, even at the affective and emotional level. The familiarity-selectivity-encountering sequence is a paradigmatic case of space and relations incoming. This sequence seems to be spreading throughout the world as a sign of modernity.

The environmental crisis is a worldwide issue which can receive some explanation from the idea of *bounded solidarity*. What is seen in the real world is the persistence or new formation of limited solidarities among people restricted in space and time. Some communities charge others with environmental *bads* or move those *bads* to future generations. 'Not in my backyard' is an oft-mentioned syndrome of our time: people reject a high-impact infrastructure on their territory with no consideration of its general utility. Nimbyism is a syndrome of *place egoism*, the other way to say bounded solidarity.

Thus, the special type of socio-spatial relationship called 'environmental' bounded solidarity has two faces: one is the limited capacity to see the external impacts of a residential community – negative externalities as they are called in economics; the other is the refusal to accept in its own place a quota of the other communities impacts. In both cases there is a problem of justice or the equal distribution of environmental bads and goods among places. The ecological crisis can be seen as the sum of all these uneven distributions. Some residential communities may be better able to displace the bads to less equipped communities, or to places where environmental control is weaker. The disposal of waste is a typical example. The richest communities produce a great deal of waste, which is often externalized to very distant disposal infrastructures, as exemplified by the old ships dismantled in the precarious shipbreaking yards of Bangladesh.

'Bounded solidarity' refers not only to a spatially limited cohesion but also to a systematic capacity to organize people in order to displace or postpone the environmental issue. The externalization of pollutants is possible because the 'other' places are sparsely populated or populated by people with a lower degree of bounded solidarity. In other words, they are unable to organize themselves with the same determination to oppose the relocation of environmental bads to their own area. Thus, a community's limited internalization of bads and externalization of goods provide an interpretation of the environmental crisis according to a justice paradigm.

Bounded solidarity as a cause of environmental crisis can be extended to the relationship between human and ecological systems. The high porosity of ecosystem borders contrast with the human capacity to create strong and enduring borders for their communities and infrastructures. Even a very large and inclusive social system like the state manifests limited solidarity toward ecosystems, especially when they are global like ocean waters and the troposphere.

Does the environmental issue help clarify a concept, that of bounded solidarity, which was initially developed in multiethnic studies? It makes evident a place solidarity to be added to and combined with other types of solidarity: class, ethnic, religious, gender, etc. It highlights not only the issue of its strength relative

to other forms of cohesion but also the issue of its origin, that passion for places which is codified in the world of feelings.[4]

With the mediation of emotions it is possible to uncover a deep-lying connection between space and social relations. Affection for land is not, as in the modernity caricature, an obscure and ominous sentiment. On the contrary, a strong love for land is often associated with a universal appreciation for humankind (Gubert, Pollini 2002). Hence, solidarity may be more or less bounded according to its emotional bases: a certain mix of land love and human relations can sustain rather than threaten worldwide environmental solidarities. For example, a certain continuity can be identified among attachment to land, green care, and pro-environment attitudes (Bonaiuto et al. 2002; Lai, Kreuter 2012). Accordingly, contact with the land for farming, tourism, rural residence can be a crucial test for verifying bounded solidarities with human and ecological systems.

Governance is the third field of inquiry in which to test the heuristic capacity of socio-spatial relationships. In particular, governance seems helpful for the third kind of combination between space and society: land use control, in the particular form of *steering at a distance*. Governance is a fortunate topic of research and practices that inspired a wide movement towards more flexible forms of government (Rhodes 1996). Governance has two aspects: one is the inclusion of non-public bodies like firms and NGOs in decision-making on public issues; the other is the externalization of activities traditionally reserved to the public, again to non-public bodies. Governance can thus be represented by two arrows in opposite directions: one moves new agents towards the decision-making centre; the other moves the control or implementation of sets of activities away from the centre. The final result should be a more pluralistic as well as inclusive government of public issues.

At administrative level, the new formula is based on the simultaneous increase of interdependence among territorial levels of government and the centrifugation of functions (Cammelli 2004). More functions are given to the local level of administration (subsidiarity); but because of the increasing complexity of issues, each public body is included in thicker networks. More leeway is provided for local manoeuvring, but there are more tasks and duties to comply with. In legal terms, matters of 'concurrent' nature between centre and periphery become prevalent.

Steering at a distance seems a good way to illustrate all these processes, which usually fall under the umbrella concept of governance. Government bodies can be controlled at a certain distance by heterogeneous populations no longer will-

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4   "Meanings of a specific geographic location may be distinguished into a cognitive and affective dimension (.....). Meanings that describe the biophysical and spatial features of the place as well as the activities and functions it supports can be categorized as the cognitive aspect of place identity. Affective place-identity is expressed through one's feelings related to scenic beauty, connection to nature, pride, self-esteem, spirituality, attachment, and belongingness deriving from the place" (Lai and Kreuter 2008: 3).

ing to restrict their opinion to generic individual pluri-annual political vote. At the same time, the authorities charged with the task of common goods/services provision can control what a plurality of actors are doing in the assigned field at a certain distance.

Reprising an idea of Simmel, some authors see the city as a device able to regulate people and land uses in the absence of co-presence (Bagnasco 2003; De Simone 2007). A spatial form like the metropolis has the ability to impose a special kind of relationship with distant places. The prescriptions issued by the centre can be obeyed without constant and immediate physical contact. The abstract knowledge embodied in the city gives it the authority to control a wider area. The battle for the assignment of EU authority headquarters to one town or another is not only a mere problem of facilities; it is also one of the learning prestige of the town hosting them. That city can claim to inspire framework rules for all the EU countries. Examples range from the old city imposing itself on the '*contado*' (serf-peasant space) to the use of city rank as a way to organize administrative units.

Steering at distance is adopted as a model of regulation for sophisticated institutions like universities (Kickert 1995; Marginson 1997; Rebora and Turri 2008). These are pedagogically autonomous, but the frames imposed by the national bureaucracy are so detailed that the choices for each institution are severely restricted. In other fields, the definition of frameworks is delegated to *ad hoc* independent authorities whose task is to assure the freedom of each agent. They are situations compatible with the Foucaultian perspective according to which the new forms of dominance are, paradoxically, based on conceding freedom to actors. This is, for example, the critical analysis made of neoliberal policies (Pellizzoni 2011).

Whatever the theoretical background, it is easy to verify the great development of agencies and authorities in many fields, and whose objective is to ensure soft rules for arenas where private, public and non-profit organizations can compete freely without creating cartels that would damage the final consumers. With *steering at a distance* "the government does not intervene directly in interests and power relationships, but it works indirectly by creating relationships among a multiplicity of more or less independent organizations in order to drive the outcomes of individual and collective conducts. Thus, steering at distance builds flexible relationships among existing subjects separated in space and time, as well as distinct and autonomous formal spheres. In this sense, *governance* is a device able to use new techniques of driving and direction" (Ciccarelli 2008: 9).

According to Ciccarelli (2008), in order to steer at a distance, political forces use particular forms of authority that are constitutionally and spatially at a distance; constitutionally, because they do not operate with the typical administrative means of the state; spatially, because governance techniques connect a multitude of experts located far from the political-administrative centre.

Thus, governance becomes *governmentality* to be adopted in the spaces planning (Merry 2001). Environmental issues, like green energy and eco-building, are

also affected by this new form of government. In the former case, broad privatization and liberalization processes, called 'unbundling', widely happened (Pollitt 2007); in the latter, traditionally dominated by private firms, a jumble of certification and standardization protocols arises (Smith 2006). In both cases the ingredients of steering at a distance seem to be present. The state relinquishes direct control or the establishment of norms. Internal organisations must devise systems of self conduct; the state restricts its action, facilitating the advent of super agencies or general frameworks assuring respect for self-organization of firms and consumers. The recently-established EU Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators seems to be a paradigmatic case in this respect (Pototschnig 2011).

Conclusions and further issues

The attempt to draw up space and social relations has stimulated new ideas and research projects. One idea is the possibility to escape from the traditional dichotomies of space-society studies: space as a mere container of social relationships or space as an external factor compelling human behaviour. The *structural homologies* between space and society seem a good way to avoid such fixity or determinism. But the combination of spatial forms and social relations is flexible too, by showing that 'distance' corresponds to face-to-face relations and to a product of density and dominance (steering at a distance). At the same time, borders matter either in terms of bounded solidarity or in terms of filters for self-contained bodies (the metaphor of the valve). That confirms the Jessop, Brenner and Jones (2008) idea that, in their reciprocal autonomy, space and society can then be combined in a plurality of forms.

A difference with respect to these authors approach is probably that sociospatial relations are not seen as epiphenomena of a *political economy* based on "new geographies of accumulation" (Jessop, Brenner and Jones 2008: 395). In that account, relations are synonymous with strategies of entities and forces governed by interests, rather than being a foundation for an original or pristine perspective (Emirbayer 1997). A relational-strategic approach has its essential categories in "spatialised accumulation, hegemony, state projects" which create asymmetries that can be included in the third category of socio-spatial relations: those having a traditional version in land use control, and a more modern one in the mechanism of steering at a distance.

But the problems of compatibility or inclusion with similar approaches are not finished. An authentic relational approach to space must still deal with two basic problems, which will be only outlined here. One concerns *external solidarities*: in other words, how and when reciprocal relationships arise with people who do not belong to the same organized space. There are functional or pragmatic explanations based on the idea of strategic links established with outsiders in order to exclusively exchange useful goods. The *bridge ties* of Granovetter

(1982) and the *black holes* of Burt (1992) are cases in point. Cases of external non-instrumental solidarities are rare, and the realistic view of the just-mentioned strategic relationships prevails; but they do exist, for example, the international cooperation promoted by local authorities (Nidesjö 2011) or the transnational environmental movements (Della Porta and Tarrow 2004) or the more classic workers' solidarity (Johns 1998; Bieler and Lindberg, 2011). If bounded solidarity is the rule, unlimited solidarity is the exception. How do they coexist according to a socio-spatial relational approach? Hints are provided by 'cultures' investing in relations as well in linear spaces. Some kinds of tourists, missionaries, roamers, nomads, linked to pathways (Chatwin 1988), can interpret a specific type of social relation, which includes not only areas but also lines of conjunction between worlds (R. Williams's *Border Country* quoted by Urry 2002).

The other theoretical problem concerns the *institutionalization of spatialised relationships*. In their pure form, relations are self-regulating through internal and informal codes established by the people in interaction. But pure forms exist for short periods. Relations are usually made to order, an order that rapidly becomes external to the relation's participants. One source of institutionalization is certainly to establish borders. To be inside such borders means accepting and adopting a set of rules of interaction. As said, relations can modify such bounded space. This is clear, but it does not clarify the process by which socio-spatial relations are fixed in rules (institutionalization). Again, we can use hints to find a more abstract answer.

First hint: the family is a social relation highly institutionalized through marriage. Today, in many countries less formalized civil partnerships arise. Is there a mismatch between looser social bonds and the fixity of housing? Common living spaces are probably more easily institutionalized than social ties. It is easier to codify, tax and count houses than feelings; territories more than population (Elden 2007). Then, inside a typical socio-spatial relation, as the household, there are different speeds of setting rules.

Second hint: tacit knowledge, which is a special case of acquaintance with local practices, remains conceptually and *de facto* uncodified. However, because tacit knowledge is highly important in development processes, finding a way to institutionalize it would be of great help for many economically weak areas. Understanding how to reproduce, and possibly export, tacit knowledge concerns its components: relations and atmosphere. If we reproduce only relations, without the special atmosphere wherein they arise, the formalization of this special kind of knowledge does not happen.

In both cases – family and tacit knowledge – it is evident that institutionalization depends on the relative speed of change of socio-spatial components. All these hints show how rich with implications this perspective is. Matching space and relations has provided new middle-range ideal types and some insights for the research. However, they are still few and fragile in front of the variety of social forms, Simmel *docet*.

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