Geography Notes on Critical Toponymy

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1. *Introduction*

Commemorative odonymy has (and gives) the power to transform time into space: the policies and practices of naming and renaming streets create «places of memory» (Nora, 1986) and enable a concrete «public use of history» (Gallerano, 1995). This is a crucial issue in an era characterized by multiple and differing demands for socio-spatial justice and identity assertion (racial, ethno-nationalist, decolonial, gender, etc.) advanced with determination by movements and organized groups that are not necessarily institutionalized.

This was discussed in the session *Critical toponymy: practices of (re)naming and the power of transforming time into space* hosted by the IGU-UGI World Geographical Congress of Paris in 2022 and devoted to «the time of geography»[1]. The panel hosted eleven scholarly contributions from Europe, Africa and Latin America, dialogued with the UGI Toponyms Commission and stimulated the reflections and debates that find space in this thematic issue of the Semester of Studies and Research in Geography.

Building on the methodological preamble that presented the session, this introduction aims to establish the field of inquiry, identify the conceptual tools offered by geography, and share a common vocabulary and bibliography.

2. *Geography notes: conceptual tools, vocabulary and bibliography to share and discuss*

The notes offer a compass in reading the contributions by addressing the following scholarly nodes: 1) the social production of space; 2) the process of

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[1] The session was held on Thursday, July 21, 2022 from 10h30 to 17h30 in the Petit Anphitheatre of the Institut de Géographie.

territorialization; 3) memory as a spatial fact; 4) the places of memory (and territory as media); 5) the power of transforming time into space; and 6) critical toponymy as a geographical research perspective.

2.1. *The Social Production of Space* – We take as our starting point the relational nature of geographic space and the concepts of place and territory. Every human being and every society locate and acts in space, modifying it and being influenced back in an incessant dynamic.

Social space is the result of a set of past actions, which today allows, suggests or prohibits other actions (Lefebvre, 1974) while according to Fremont (1976) lived space has administrative, historical, ecological, economic, and especially psychological components.

Not differently, the concept of place is understood not as a geometric category but as a custodian and mediator of the values, meanings and aspirations of human beings and societies (Tuan, 1977). Massey (1995, 2005) instead explains that places are revealed as open and discontinuous interweavings of spatial relations: they are interpretive categories constructed and reconstructed to give meaning to space.
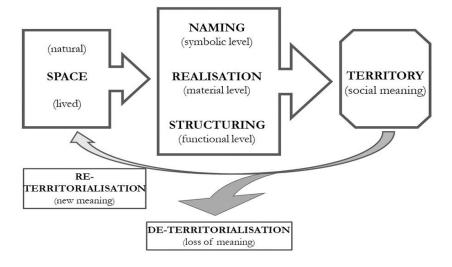
Just as place is not the context or backdrop of actions, identities and belongings, but is an integral part of them, so the territory is not the theater or container of social relations but is the result of them, capable of influencing by referral the spatial relations that produce them (Turco, 1984; Dematteis, 1985).

2.2. *Territorialization* – Space, Raffestin (1980) explains, is in a condition of anteriority with respect to territory. By appropriating a space concretely or abstractly, the actor "territorializes" it. Territorialization represents the incessant process by which territory is produced over time through social action and unravels in three simultaneous dimensions (fig. 1):

a) naming identifies social appropriation and symbolic control, through the production of representations, images and discourses; *b*) reification identifies material transformations: structures and infrastructures produced to adapt space to the needs of society; *c*) structuring expresses the organizational and functional control of the territory aimed at the realization of specific social objectives (Turco, 1984).

Structuring and reification are fundamental but cannot be separated from the production of meanings and discourses, which orient the public imagination toward a particular meaning. Every process of territorialization involves conflicting dimensions between actors acting at different scales with different purposes.

The concept of "deterritorialization" represents the crises of the system; that of "reterritorialization" indicates its reorganization (Raffestin, 1984). Each cycle of territorialization deposits and stratifies settlement and cultural structures, some of which persist in the long run such as toponyms.

THE PROCESS OF TERRITORIALISATION

Fig. 1 – The process of territorialisation.
Fonte: Turco, 1984.

2.3. *Memory as a (unstable)spatial fact* – Since the second half of the 1990s, the study of toponymy has been the subject of a critical geographic reformulation aimed at addressing the topic from a political and cultural perspective (Azaryahu, 1996; Berg, Vuolteenaho, 2009; Rose-Redwood *et alii*, 2018). Central to this perspective is the issue of social memory, an interdisciplinary issue on which geography has much to say. Indeed, social memory is eminently spatial, since space is its main medium of transmission. The social production of space generates images and ties that activate memory and, often unconsciously, allow it to crystallize as a spatialized image (Halbwachs, 2001)

Collective memory is a "cultural system" that rationalizes a certain past experience by adapting it to the present for the organization of a certain type of society. Memory is a model of society (and its problems) and a model for society, to which it provides guidance (Schwartz, 1996). Given the composite nature of society, collective memory functions as a plural and unstable system, since it is in constant renegotiation, determined by conflicts and compromises between different memories. The public sphere is the arena in which different groups compete for hegemony over plausible and relevant discourses within society (Jedlowski, 2001).

Places of memory are relational, physical and symbolic spaces created to legitimize a particular historical representation in society, such as: archives, anniversaries, museums, monuments, ceremonies, and of course toponyms and odonyms (Nora, 1986).

They promote a "public use of history"[2], that is, they produce history outside scientific historiography and can promote a reading of the past that conforms to or is alternative to common sense. In this sense, places of memory are "agents of history" (Gallerano, 1995).

The spatial and relational key is crucial: the study of social memory and memory places tells us much more about the societies that produce them than about the societies and pasts that are commemorated. (Milo, 1986; Till, 2009)

Territory is a media, and toponymy is one of its most visible but least obvious languages. Having acquired the understanding that all semantics is political (the linguistic environment in which we grow up has incalculable ideological effects and moreover is manipulable), the French Revolution transformed commemorative odonomastics into a political and pedagogical tool (Milo, 1986).

2.4. *The power of transforming time into space* – When used in a commemorative capacity, odonyms inscribe an official version of history in urban space, embedding it in all relations of social communication involving everyday practices decoupled, at least on the surface, from symbolism and power (Azaryahu, 1996).

In this sense, odonomastics is enrolled among the "low-voltage communication networks"[3], capable of introducing political messages into ordinary contexts of human experience, thanks in part to the little attention users pay to the ideological content of communication (Azaryahu, 1996).

By spatializing social memory, place names and street names in particular transform time into space. Naming is not a simple "semantic implementation", but «a threshold effect by virtue of which the designator changes referential status» (Turco, 2006). The shift from history to geography disconnects the odonym from the original referent and geographic naming takes over.

In the urban context, the new semiotic reality is integrated into the spatial narratives of the city. Naming can spread to indicate addresses, public places, stations, businesses, stores, and place can become a metaphor for the social environments and cultural phenomena that characterize it in a true «semantic wandering» (Azaryahu, 1996; De Certeau, 1985).

2.5. *Critical toponymy as a geographical research perspective* – Urban toponymy can be understood as a memorial arena of competition, debate, and public negotiation over which memory should be remembered in the urban landscape, and thus which memories represent the dominant discourse and which its alternative narratives (Alderman, 2002).

Naming a street is an expression of power that perpetuates in the urban landscape the memory of people, dates and events judged worthy of public honor. Judged by whom? When? And Why?

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[2] The expression is used with the meaning conferred on it by Nicola Gallerano (1995) as opposed to the meaning restricted to German historiography attributed to it by Jurgen Habermas (1977).

[3] This includes, for example, banknotes and stamps.

The act of naming, argues Rose-Redwood (2008), is an act of propagating a worldview and history, traceable as much to an elite project aimed at reproducing the system as to a practice of a fringe movement gaining recognition.

In this perspective, several avenues of study open up for geographic research, both in terms of the relations between actors and social spaces and in terms of the practices and production of social spaces. Urgent but often neglected issues are, on the one hand, the institutional choices vis-à-vis colonialist and fascist odonymy, gender odonymy, and memorial odonymy for victims of political and criminal violence. On the other, practices of naming and renaming from below that reshape urban landscapes and rewrite maps through new symbolic content.

3. *Critical toponymy: practices of (re)naming and the power to transform time into space*

Building on the reflections shared at the Paris 2022 Congress, the eleven papers that follow, all work in the research direction outlined in this introduction.

The first contribution, by Michel Ben Arrous, raises relevant methodological issues related to the process of territorialization and offers a critical look at the meaning and implications of popular, non-institutional toponymy in African cities and their urban history.

The second and third articles are inscribed in a political dimension of historical and cartographic imprint. Arturo Gallia studies the dynamics of island naming and domination from voyages of exploration. While, through the travel account of Ibn Gubayr (1145-1217) Giovanna Zavettieri, Lisa Scafa, and Monica Morazzoni demonstrate instead how the Arab presence contributed to resemantizing Sicily by spatializing meanings of Islamic culture and perceptions in the past.

The next three papers, on the other hand, denote a contemporary political perspective and study in the field the relationships between street renaming and nation-state building processes. From Spain, where Samuel Esteban Rodríguez analyzes the 2007 Law on Historical Memory and its effects on the Francoist toponymic legacy and in the independence regions. To Syria, where Jack Keilo studies toponymic reconfigurations imposed by the regime and postwar perspectives. To the Caucasus Republics (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) where Ariane Bachelet illustrates how new interests and atavistic ethnic and political rivalries are expressed through toponymy.

The four articles that conclude the review, pay critical attention to informal designations and the naming power of more or less institutionalized association movements. Ivaldo Lima analyzes the names of Rio de Janeiro's favelas, the value judgments inherent in the designations, and the relationships to the dynamics of urban violence. Cyriaque Hattemar, on the other hand, studies the hierarchy of urban powers through the popular naming of streets, places, and particularly markets in Lima. Giuseppe Muti illustrates the street names of anti-mafia memories in Italy and the role of civic movements in proposing a new national memory. Then, Valeria Pecorelli analyzes in the critical gender perspective, the practices of urban "guerrilla odonomastics" implemented by the transfeminist movement in Milan.

Finally, in the specific cartographic section called *Geoframe*, the work by Gianluigi Salvucci, Stefania Lucchetti and Damiano Abbatini discusses a new cartographic technique for the administrative identification of odonyms and addresses in Italy, igniting the discussion on the dual nature of the practice, at once a tool for controlling citizenship and a device for accessing citizenship rights.

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Geography Notes on Critical Toponymy

The methodological introduction to the critical toponymy session of the IGU-UGI World Geographical Congress Paris 2022 proposed actual geography notes aimed at delimiting the field of inquiry, identifying the conceptual tools offered by the discipline, and sharing a vocabulary and bibliography. The concise reflections offered again here focus on (1) the social production of space; (2) the process of territorialization; (3) memory as a spatial fact; (4) the places of memory; (5) the power of transforming time into space; and (6) critical toponymy as a geographical research perspective.

Appunti di geografia sulla toponomastica critica

L'introduzione metodologica alla sessione di toponomastica critica del Congresso geografico mondiale IGU-UGI di Parigi 2022 ha proposto dei veri e propri appunti di geografia finalizzati a delimitare il campo di indagine, individuare gli strumenti concettuali offerti dalla disciplina e condividere un vocabolario e una bibliografia. La sintetica riflessione che si ripropone in questa sede verte su: 1) la produzione sociale dello spazio; 2) il processo di territorializzazione; 3) la memoria come fatto spaziale; 4) i luoghi della memoria; 5) il potere di trasformare il tempo in spazio; 6) la toponomastica critica come prospettiva di ricerca geografica.

Notes de géographie sur la toponymie critique

L'introduction méthodologique à la session sur la toponymie critique du Congrès mondial de géographie IGU-UGI de Paris 2022 proposait des notes de géographie réelle visant à délimiter le champ d'investigation, à identifier les outils conceptuels offerts par la discipline et à partager un vocabulaire et une bibliographie. Les réflexions synthétiques proposées ici portent sur : 1) la production sociale de l'espace ; 2) le processus de territorialisation ; 3) la mémoire comme fait spatial ; 4) les lieux de mémoire ; 5) le pouvoir de transformation du temps en espace ; 6) la toponymie critique comme perspective de recherche géographique.