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Editores:

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Re-imagining the urban experience in the global era

Anna Lazzarini
(University of Bergamo)

Resumen

Explorando la relación entre los espacios urbanos y la construcción de fronteras, el texto entiende indagar la compleja estrategia de producción de fronteras que tiene lugar al interior de la ciudad contemporánea. La vida urbana y los espacios urbanos están involucrados en un proceso incesante de construcción de fronteras: los límites materiales e inmateriales, físicos y simbólicos se multiplican, se mueven y se diferencian sobre la superficie de la ciudad y en su imaginario. Desacuerdo con un enfoque crítico de los estudios de frontera, el texto intenta conceptualizar la importancia de los límites y las fronteras para volver a imaginar lo social y lo político en la era de la globalización, dentro de los espacios urbanos. La transformación de los límites urbanos consiste en un proceso de multiplicación gradual que involucra formas, funciones, representaciones y prácticas, dislocaciones y reubicaciones determinadas por cambios políticos, económicos, históricos, socioculturales. En su complejidad espacial, empírica y teórica, los límites urbanos se están convirtiendo en espacios móviles, fluidos y relacionales, atravesados por cuerpos, prácticas, discursos, narrativas, imágenes. Tales transposiciones intercaladas redefinen continuamente la identidad y la alteridad, dinámica de la inclusión y la exclusión. Las fronteras materiales o simbólicas reproducidas, multiplicadas y movidas dentro de los espacios urbanos de la ciudad son los lugares emblemáticos en los que se concretan diferentes prácticas, actividades y experiencias creativas, produciendo al mismo tiempo una nueva imagen de la ciudad. Estas experiencias fronterizas pueden ser consideradas como nuevas posibilidades para articular narraciones e interpretaciones sobre las diferencias, culturas, ciudadanía, identidades individuales y colectivas y formas de comunidad. Pueden ser vista como potenciales elementos de innovación social y política.

Abstract

Exploring the relationship between the urban spaces and the construction of borders, the text intends to investigate the complex strategy of bordering taking place within the contemporary city. Urban life and urban spaces are involved in a ceaseless process of bordering: material and immaterial, physical and symbolic borders are multiplying, shifting and differentiating on the city's surface as well as in its imagery. According to a critical border studies approach, the text aims to conceptualize the importance of borders and bordering practices for re-imagining the social and the political in the era of globalization within the urban spaces. The transformation of urban borders consists of a gradual multiplying process involving forms, functions, representations and practices, dislocations and consequent relocations, determined by political, economic, historical, socio-cultural changes. In their spatial, empirical and theoretical complexity, urban borders and bordering are becoming mobile, fluid and relational spaces, crossed by bodies, practices, discourses, narratives, images. Such crossings and transpositions are continually redefining identity and otherness, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. The material or symbolic borders reproduced, multiplied and displaced within contemporary urban spaces are the emblematic places in which creative different practices, activities and experiences are shaped, producing at the same time a new image of the city. These border experiences can be considered as new possibilities of articulating narrations and interpretations on differences, cultures, citizenship, individual and collective identities

and forms of communities. They can be seen as potential elements of social and political innovation.

Palabras clave: Ciudad; globalización; fronteras urbanas; ciudadanías; imaginarios.

Keywords: City; globalization; urban borders; citizenships; imageries.

Things have no limits now.
DON DELILLO

Despina can be reached in two ways, by ship or by camel. The city displays one face to the traveller arriving overland and a different one to him who arrives by sea. [...] Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes; and so the camel driver and the sailor see Despina, a border city between two deserts.

ITALO CALVINO

Globalization inside the city

The city's form, culture and image have changed radically over a few years' time. Today, the city provides a privileged observation point from which to view the ongoing metamorphosis process and understand the trends that, in a whirlwind of new directions, are re-defining the political, economical, social and cultural order.

In fact, in the cities global processes take up concrete, localized forms. Inside the cities, globalization occurs locally (Lazzarini, 2013).

Today the city is swept by quick and unexpected changes. The current urban model is web-like, a network of networks; it is characterized by functional and structural overlappings; it is an entwining of different principles, organizational forms, morphologies as well as deeply diverse spaces and times. Politics itself, its languages and practices are challenged by the coexistence in the city of administration and jurisdiction spaces organized at different scales, by the management of global mobilities, the great impact of problems arising from the encounter between cultures and by the development and spreading of communication technologies. The weakening of the modern political paradigm based on the connection between political space, jurisdiction and territory, neoliberalism as theory and practice in the reorganization of power systems as well as the financialization of capitalism re-define the spaces and institutions of politics causing a gradual erosion of the representative mechanism of democracy (Brown, 2005). This complex urban context generates disorder and increasingly evident social distress: the urban texture is lacerated, torn, wounded. Contemporary cities show unforeseen contamination of spaces, times, functions. The borders between places and cultures in the city are no longer fixed: they become unstable, permeable, penetrable. Degradation mingles with hi-tech, arcaicity with innovation, local with global.

In the globalization era, the city has become the world and the world one single boundless city. However, it is difficult both for researchers and for citizens to "define" the city, to grasp its main features and encapsulate the urban experience.

A sign of our times is the great increase of mobility (Urry, 2000; Sheller & Urry, 2006). People, things, goods, capitals, information, images, cultures, everything moves around the world. Specific, transnational spaces are produced which tend to go beyond the political geography of nation-states. The nation-state is forced to renegotiate its power with subjects and sources of law on a subnational, transnational, international and global level (Brenner, 2004). Although it still holds key geopolitical functions, it fails to represent the "container" of the economical, social, political and cultural processes and also to mediate between local and global. Other spatial, social and political orders, in fact, overlap with the state-centric system in a confused, shifting, unstable way.

Movements and flows break off the correspondence among individuals, social contexts, territories and political entities (de-territorialization) but at the same time lead to the reconstruction of new relations by connecting dislocated places (re-territorialization).

In the city, the constant movement of flows outlines “new scapes” (Appadurai 1990). The social, political and cultural life is deeply transformed: globalization thus consists of a new constellation of mutually related economical, social, political, cultural and symbolical forms.

The most interesting metamorphosis concerns the forms of imagery: an unprecedented multitude and variety of skills, knowledge, systems of meanings and symbols that the new communication media disseminate every day are spreading not only in the industrialized countries but in every corner of the planet. Through technology, mass education, entertainment, sports, advertising, fashion, tourism, consumption, this extraordinary circulation of knowledge, images and symbols overwhelms daily life, production, trade, customs and cultures (Appadurai, 1996).

In particular, the urban experience is changing in an irreversible way: social relationships, ways of living, moving, using space, communicating and carrying out daily functions; but also the city's body, its surface, its communication strategies, its ability to recognize itself in an identity, to reorganize its image (Lazzarini, 2011).

The result is an extraordinary social, cultural and political complexity. This is the cosmopolis in which we live in, a multiform, kaleidoscopic and plural reality which requires new paradigms in order to be understood and governed (Le Galès, 2002).

Within the city, mobilities, flows and places interweave dynamically in web-like forms. These forms involve not only the articulation of space, but also political and social relations as well as cultural production. Transits, passages and flows necessarily transform the places they cross.

However, a world where global mobility and interconnection constantly grow is at the same time paradoxically marked by an unprecedented proliferation and differentiation of borders, whether material or immaterial, physical or symbolical.

Borders break up and multiply, become heterogeneous and fluid, and reassemble anywhere: these processes underlie the construction of the global space, intended not as a world without borders but rather as a place marked by their extraordinary proliferation and dissemination.

Beside the rhetoric celebrating the disappearance of frontiers, spatial boundaries, barriers and enclosures, the global era is marked by the paradox of the appearance of new kinds of borders.

Urban borders are the ones that have undergone a deep change and have re-designed forms, functions and meanings of the urban experience and the city itself. Urban borders are, today, a key space for interpreting the urban experience in its material and symbolical dimension.

The spatial, social and historical dimensions of the human existence are essentially interconnected. In this view, spatiality appears as a true language with its own semantic, iconical, historical, axiological dimension: it evokes images and meanings, inspires passions, possibilities of recognition, fears and action.

Cities are the result of the social production of the urban space, intended as the material and symbolical context in which human life manifests itself; social relations take up specific spatial configurations while human practices and activities shape specific structures and articulations of space within the city.

In particular, in border areas, along urban limits, the symbolical dimension enables the renewal of the expressive power, the capacity to multiply and expand the specific

experience of each place thus generating new processes of identity construction, both individual and collective.

Therefore, on a social point of view spatiality is not a neutral container: it is rather an element activating change in social relations, both on a material and symbolical level.

Mobile urban borders

According to a systemic-processual reading (Paasi, 1996; van Houtum, 2005; Newman, 2006), we move away from the classic assumption that borders are static demarcation lines of nation-states territories and naturalized delimitations of sovereignty. The critical border studies approach, instead, conceives borders as mobile, processual, dynamic social and cultural practices: they can be considered as the results of a social and political negotiation of space, even if they contribute, at the same time and on different levels, to construct individual and collective identities.

In this perspective, borders, investigated in their multiple dimensions, emerge as creative in-betweens (Bhabha, 1994): we can, therefore, rethink the borders as human constructions, both material and immaterial.

In the global world, borders are continuously reproduced, dispersed and multiplied: their forms, functions and practices create different socio-political arenas. Thus the constant displacement of flows causes a proliferation and diffusion of borders. The seeming deconstruction of borders corresponds to their reconstruction. The global age has not led to a borderless world (Rumford, 2010). Borders do not disappear: they are reshaped and reallocated not only between countries but also within the cities.

The metamorphosis of urban borders is a gradual multiplying process involving forms, functions, representations and practices, dislocations and consequent relocations, determined by political, economic, historical, socio-cultural changes.

In adopting this perspective, we will focus on the critical shift from the notion of border to the practice of bordering: also within the city borders can be defined as socially dynamic spaces, as socio-cultural and political practices.

Nowadays, contemporary cities are involved in a double movement: beside a persistent border-crossing process, they are also engaged in multiple internal strategies of enclosure. On the one hand, previously defined urban borders become undefined and tend to disappear into an endless city. On the other hand, urban life is subjected to a ceaseless process of bordering: material and immaterial, physical and symbolic borders are multiplying, shifting and differentiating on the city's surface as well as in its imagery.

In this regard, borders express the need for activating practices of territorial ordering, for regulating the use of space. So borders can set up an order, a hierarchy, and separate people who are “inside” from those who are “outside”, structuring the real world through the inclusion/exclusion dialectics.

Through this separation borders make up identity and otherness, they set up their own space by creating, at the same time, the space of the other. In this respect, the complex bordering processes can be interpreted as ordering and othering processes: the border emerges as a relational practice for producing order and otherness (van Houtum and van Nearsen, 2002).

In the contemporary city, while external borders become increasingly thinner, inside the city borders constantly proliferate, move and strengthen. The organization of space, actions to combat deviant behaviour and social disadvantage, security measures for single individuals and the community, actions for urban renewal are all examples of a growing will of imposing control, order, regulation and surveillance on everyday life and urban practices: groups that are homogeneous (sharing culture, ethnic identity,

lifestyle and income) and distinguished at the same time are forming within the city. Closed communities and uniform spaces are created and protected by physical and electronic barriers with the aim of preserving identities and avoiding any kind of blend or contamination with the “other” (Esposito, 2011).

On a spatial level, the response to danger, whether real or perceived as such, is the strengthening of barriers, of the right to build fences and to confine. The city-planning and the social organization of spaces create manifold models of segregation, concerning both territorial and social isolation (Amin & Thrift, 2002). These models range from the urban ghettos of US cities – neglected areas where exclusion is based on ethnicity – to the various European versions of French *banlieues* – virtually “places of ban”, of exile, of marginalization; *gated communities* or *walled communities*, residential areas monitored by guards and video cameras and physically delimited by enclosures; closed-off *enclaves* built for the purpose of hosting “technical staff” on work missions (in various African or Middle-East countries, for example), where all activities or functions of everyday life are carried out, as if these were completely isolated places, removed from cities or from surrounding territories.

The space surveillance and the ordering projects, the displacement of barriers that characterize today's urban life are transforming contemporary cities in “cities of panic” (Virilio, 2005). These various forms of segregation are cause and consequence of exclusion and escalations of violence. These cities, fragmented and reshaped by fear, may become purified spaces where all those who differ from standards are excluded from society through a strategy of control affecting space, time, bodies.

This representation of the cities, governed by fear, surveillance and control, organized by the “microphysics of power” (Foucault, 1995; 2008), inspires narrators and film-makers who, in their turn, nourish postmodern imagery as it is found in stories, languages, symbols.

But, at the same time, there are other images and other imageries of contemporary cities, generated in particular in border areas.

Within this framework, borders are not regarded as neutral lines of separation: they are perceived as mobile and relational spaces of mediation: an area of multiple representations and perceptions, a zone of cultural production and meaning-making.

Intensive transits of meanings, symbols, representations, narratives generate along these same borders, real and imaginary: the border thus takes shape as an intermediate space, a creative interstice.

Borders, originally meant to separate and draw distinctions, end up being constantly crossed and become a means for uniting through passage and trasposition.

Urban practices – the ways in which people move, interact, fill up urban space with signs, actions and representations – make cities into lived spaces. According to Michel de Certeau (1980), practices are possibilities of resistance, a proliferation of creative, though temporary, activities and attitudes.

Through the lens of urban practices, dispersed and dislocated along the borders, the critical concept of *borderscapes* can be introduced: this term indicates the specific local configurations of bordering processes in different communities, the productions of borders through discourses, political institutions, cultural negotiations and representations of identities in a particular social context. Urban borders and borderscapes emerge as a fluid area of various political, economic, social and cultural negotiations, claims, counterclaims, alternative uses and strategies (Brambilla, 2014; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012).

The material or symbolic borders produced, reproduced, multiplied and displaced within contemporary urban spaces are precisely the emblematic places in which these

practices and experiences are shaped, creating at the same time a new image of the city. In this sense, as a city must be experienced and practiced, in order to understand urban space, people must experience it, live it, creating the “image of the city” (Lynch, 1960). The sense of places and the cityscapes are produced by people and their activities, their practices, their discourses, their representations. People have a creative role in producing these images and imageries.

In this respect, the border – far beyond the geo-political and juridical sphere it originates from – affects the anthropological dimension by creating differentiations (like sex, ethnic group, age, social class, wealth, skills...) which structure the process of identity formation, both synchronically and diachronically. The border (like the city itself) appears as the place of construction and narration of individual and collective identities.

If, on the one hand, borders are the result of social, political and economical processes, on the other they contribute to shape reality, to model social relations, thus becoming identity markers. This function appears to be far more complex and manifold than the simple inclusion/exclusion, in/out opposition underlying the dynamics of segregation and its spatial and urban-planning models. Within urban spaces, people shape and modify borders, erase and reconstruct them, elude or reinforce them, use them or surrender to them. If considered in this way, borders also become practices and discourses focused precisely on the ways of living, inhabiting, narrating that mechanism of inclusion/exclusion which generates new representation of identity and difference related to the self or the other.

In urban contexts, the interweaving of local configurations, local histories and global processes, the articulation of transnational flows transforms the cities into complex patchworks of cultures, identities, codes and languages, not only due to transnational migrations but also to the intensive flow of images, information, symbols producing new borders, new interesting overlap areas, new urban thresholds. In the urban space, everybody daily happens to live in borderlands in between cultures, identities and differences. In this perspective, urban contexts have a crucial role in transnational processes: the way in which these flows of people, images and representations take form in local configurations demonstrate the importance of the local dimension in globalization.

Border experiences can be seen as contact-zones where new possibilities of articulating narrations and interpretations on differences, cultures, citizenship and forms of communal life are continuously generated. Moreover, it is this same system of representations and meanings, these practices and these social and cultural discourses on borders that construct the borders themselves and fully express, in this way, their performative nature. Thus, borders appear as practices performed by the people who inhabit them for living, transforming and narrating the border itself.

Re-imagining urban borders as creative in-betweens can offer new opportunities for civic participation or political engagement: these narratives and practices of resistance are expressions of the ways in which inhabitants experience places, of their multiple identities and sense of belonging.

In this context, we can understand the distinction between the formal status or institutional frame of citizenship and its ever-moving nature, that has become important today. This inherent movement also includes the struggle of individuals who are excluded, or included only in a differentiated, incomplete or subordinate way (Bosniak, 2006).

Migrants, citizens who are not formally recognized as such or individuals marked by a manifold sense of belonging and identification, represent a challenge to the idea of stability through their mere existence: the city's invisibles – men and women with no

name or no documents – undermine the traditional figure of the citizen. Today, this figure is only apparently characterized by one single solid (nation-based) sense of belonging.

Citizenship is acted not only as sense of belonging but also as claiming of rights, as “right to have rights” (Arendt, 1998). The acts and claims of the excluded – the “acts of citizenship” (Isin, 2002; Isin & Nielsen, 2008) – burst on the scene and end by changing the very borders of citizenship for everybody.

The acts of citizenship generate new spaces of protest, belonging, identity and struggle. These spaces are not the ones in which citizenship is traditionally shaped: not only borders and frontiers, streets, law courts but also networks, media and bodies. These spaces are crossed by new protest practices and languages. Moreover, senses of belonging, identifications and conflicts move through the urban, regional, national, transnational and international levels and create complex combinations of rooting and transit, recognition and refutation.

Every day, individuals who are not formally recognized as citizens act on the public scene as such. These “*acts of citizenship*” are acts through which individuals become, make themselves citizens.

The fixed categories underlying the concept of citizenship and its distinguishing features in the modern era are not suited to conceive the acts making up the forms of citizenships (Lazzarini, 2017). When considered as a process of political subjectivation, citizenship is a dynamic, ever-changing institution (Balibar, 2015). The figure of the citizen activist challenges the static nature of a political body by continuously breaking its boundaries.

Conclusion

From this perspective, borders considered in their geo-political and anthropological, material and immaterial aspects are a heuristic space, an analysis tool that provides insight on the construction and expression of identity by people who live in border areas. Within these areas, a re-structuring of cultural, ethnic and nation-based identities takes place: migrant citizens are the ones who perfectly embody this condition.

The multiple bordering practices and processes are relevant lens to illustrate changing configurations of the social and the political in the globalized world. The concept of borderscapes indicates the complexity and vitality of the border, that is perceived as a space of mediation, mobile, creative, and relational.

Urban borders are “lived spaces”, animated by multiple perceptions, representations, and narratives, areas of plural cultural production and meaning-making.

Urban borders are “intermediate places”, “in-between spaces”, both physical and relational, where new urban images and imageries are generated.

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