

Controlling spaces to control dissent: a psychosocial analysis of WTO and G8 protests

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Spaces and Places in everyday life: psychosocial considerations

When entering in a space, such as a lesson room, something happens. How it is possible, for an external observer (from now on, Y), *to say and recognize* that space as a lesson room and not just, so to say, a room? Let's imagine that Y shares Italian socio-cultural values and norms. So, he/she can observe *people* entering the class and becoming *students*. They take a seat, pull out pens, notebooks or computers and they set their minds in order to be ready to take notes. In other words, they start to perform a *role*. For Y, those empty walls, those anonymous and simple walls, like any other wall he/she has ever seen, seem to be like a stage in a theatre (Goffman, 1959). A main door, with inscriptions and symbols that signal its nature for the Italian society, is sufficient to change attitudes and behaviours of people entering in it. However, that kind of role is not imposed by some sort of metaphysical entity but is socially constructed upon others' expectations and constant comparisons. For example, when another person that is going to assume the role of the professor enters the room, the students' voice begins to lower. What happens if that professor does not start the lesson but remains in silence? A buzz would come up from the classroom. Y, which now turns out to be the Dean of the students, starts asking them to stop talking that kind of demand is effective only within those walls. In that space, people stop to be identical. Anyway, without a doubt, both the professor and students need to learn how to express their roles, which kind of behaviours are efficient and permitted, and how to interact with each other. That kind of rules come from more or less explicit social convention, which can or cannot be written and normalised in formal norms (Berger & Luckmann, 1966); afterall, one of the most important point is that such a universe of indications come from the spaces in which interaction takes form (Goffman, 1983). Some white walls are imbued with social convergence on what their meaning is, on the space they generate, on the behaviours they admit, and even on the thoughts that can take shape (for instance: the studio of a psychotherapist). So a space becomes a *context* (from Latin *contextus* "a joining together", past participle of *contexere* "to weave together"), literally a *place* filled with meanings, discourses and behaviours, both *individual* (in the mean that there is always a fringe of personal negotiation) and *social* (in the mean that there is a need of consensus, otherwise the social situation would be chaotic). Around the space, individual and social processes of attribution of meaning converge, and the appearance of the place changes. Therefore, when a socially constructed grid is applied to physical and material spaces, they turn into places. As Cresswell (2004) points it out:

«Space, then, has been seen in distinction to place a realm without meaning - as a 'fact of life' which, like time, produces the basic coordinate for human life. When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is one such way) it become a place» (p. 10).

Although sometimes the materiality of a space tends to speak by itself (an example of this are impressive monuments), it is lived by people who attribute meanings and symbolic values (a church is dissimilar for a tourist and a worshipper), which can contribute to change the structure of the place itself (Casakin & Kreitler, 2008). A bond is created, establishing specific relationships between people and places. Therefore, what permits a space to become a place is the process of attributing values and meaning: otherwise, that kind of space would be meaningless for everyone.

In that kind of discourse, a specific role is played by the public spaces. A "public space" is a space that belongs to everyone and in which are performed routines, activities and behaviours usually

normed on the behalf of the public good. Indeed, in the historical passage when Western societies founded themselves upon the notion “rights” (Luhmann, 1971), public spaces become meaningful places where situate contestation by the whole community or by part of it. From the evocative storming of the Bastille, one could assume that physical spaces have been playing an important part in the interaction between institutions and citizenships. Therefore, having the possibility to express dissent has become an important criterion through which evaluate the democratic values within a Society. The “publicness” of a space opens itself as a place containing the social narration (let’s think to streets’ name, commemorating national heroes), which can or cannot be shared by everyone. So, spaces are not neutral since they create distance filled with voices that take a location in order to reach specific aims: that’s why contestation to the mayor of a city are performed nearby his/her office. Furthermore, that’s way a commemorative march, in the memory to a specific event, is always performed within a specific and meaningful place, that helps to reconstruct the events (Erll & Nünning, 2008).

In the traditional European city, public spaces were the places to be together; they were precisely the social space for all the citizens. This kind of space, whose planning and caring are a duty of the city administration, constitutes both the physical structure of the city and the ways in which people live with.

«The squares were the outbreak of city’s organization. There the family members became citizens, community members. There they celebrated religious rites, they met there, and they shared information and feelings, they looked for or offered a job, when there was an important event they came running: an alert, a party, a judgment» (Salzano, 2010, p. 3).

Considering public space in its customs and meanings constitutes how the set of urban areas are not just opened to anyone but that also play a specific meaning within the city. The ways in which streets, squares and parks are available, offer to the citizens and to the whole community, the opportunity to share their “own” city. As well as accessibility, sense of security and sovereignty are public space constituent too.

More specifically, public space is a kind of space marked by the peculiar definition of “permanence” (Purini, 2007) which create in those who use it, a double and deep impression to both belong to the city and that the city belong to its inhabitants. Indeed “*citizenship*” (considering it as a “*social and political dimension of being citizen*” and not just a matter of legally belonging) is founded right on the existence of public space. That’s why the “*agora*” (the square, the ultimate public space) was located in the centre of the “*polis*”, more symbolically than physically. It was the place where principales human activities were developed; it was the space for democracy, where citizens gathered to discuss about community issues. The matter about the public space is not just about equity or accessibility but also a matter of political opportunities. When this kind of space is interdicted, that’s not just a threat for democracy, but an attempt to the nature of the city (Salzano, 2010). Therefore, with the removal of the political power from the public space, it also happens a negation of the idea of citizenship (Cremonesini, 2014).

In this work we consider specifically two international events where the public space has been physically (and so politically) interdicted in order to control the population dissent: the World Trade Organization (WTO) summit in Seattle (1999) and the G8 summit in Genova (2001), in which we will observe two different kinds of emergency monitoring arrangements: *ex post* and *a priori*.

Finally, we will conclude by pointing out a new form of spatial control, implemented through the legislative criminalization of certain conduct within the public space.

Consequently, a new and more structural form of psychopolitical trauma emerges, one contemplated in daily civil norms and embedded deeply in what can be called the “paradox of modern democracies”.

WTO in Seattle and G8 in Genova: the controversy about public spaces

The roots of the G8 meeting are traceable in January 1967 when 5 ministers for economic affairs from the principal industrial powers in the world (Great Britain, France, United States, Japan and Germany), decided to meet in order to discuss monetary policies issues. The meeting experience continued across the years and in November 1975, the French president Giscard d’Estaigne, summoned the first summit of G6, composed by above-mentioned countries and Italy. Subsequently also Canada and Russian Federation started to participate to the summits, so since 1998 it would be possible to talk about G8. Summits take place every year in one of the member’s country who has the duty to take care of the agenda. In this annual meeting the heads of states discuss about the main economic and political issues and shall submit the solutions drawn up in a final report. While in the beginning of G8 summit the agenda included just economic and political issues, as times went on, it enlarged including new topics such as health care, nuclear energy, politics intervention, international relationships and developing countries.

At the same time an “anti-globalization” movement came to life, in opposition to G8, during the Millennium Round held in Seattle in 1999, where the WTO arranged for a round of negotiations about the liberalisation of the international trade. Among the most notable participants to the movement there were national and international nongovernmental organizations, labour unions, student groups, religion-based groups, and anarchist. The demonstrators in Seattle, most of them peaceful, were able to postpone the summit opening ceremony by preventing the representatives to reach the meeting building. There also were acts of vandalism and destruction; Seattle is where the figure of the “black block” began by. Due to the spontaneous and varied shape of the protest, the police were caught off guard, founding a lot of difficulties to stem the black block’s action and starting to fire pepper spray, tear gas canisters and stun grenades at protesters, in order to reopen the blocked streets. But the violence escalated bringing on genuine scenes of urban guerrilla warfare. Consequently, Seattle mayor declared a state of emergency, imposed a curfew and a “**no protest zone**” (NPZ).

The legitimacy and the constitutionality of this measure were strongly disputed but successive court decisions decreed it as legitimate, considering it functional to the maintenance of public order. Seattle’s demonstration was crucial both in shaping social and tactical behaviours among the “anti-globalization movement” and in directing the government answers toward the subsequent protests (Herbert, 2007). In fact, while in Seattle NPZ were established in response to a spontaneous demonstration and got out of hand of the demonstrations leaders (who had agreed on an established pattern with the police), during the demonstrations in the following events (Washington, Bologna, Prague, Nice in 2000 and Davos, Naples, Goteborg, Genova in 2001) the NPZ were decided in advance (Mitchell, 2003). The will of confining the protesters away from the summit location, shows how it is not meant for them to influence any decision by the heads of the state (Zamperini & Menegatto, 2011).

The interdiction from a space which is public, and therefore opened to anyone, is used as an imposition of power: the power of shutting up protesters’ voice by preventing it to be heard physically confining it. The effectiveness of the protest does not just depend on the protest’s content but also on where and when this content is shown (Mitchell, 2003). This interdiction of the public space is accepted in the name of the national security and the public order, but as soon as physical boundaries are designed, *a psychological boundary is also created*: the division between “we” and “they”, between the “good ones” and the “bad ones”. In *Asylum*, Goffman wrote that who has the power to

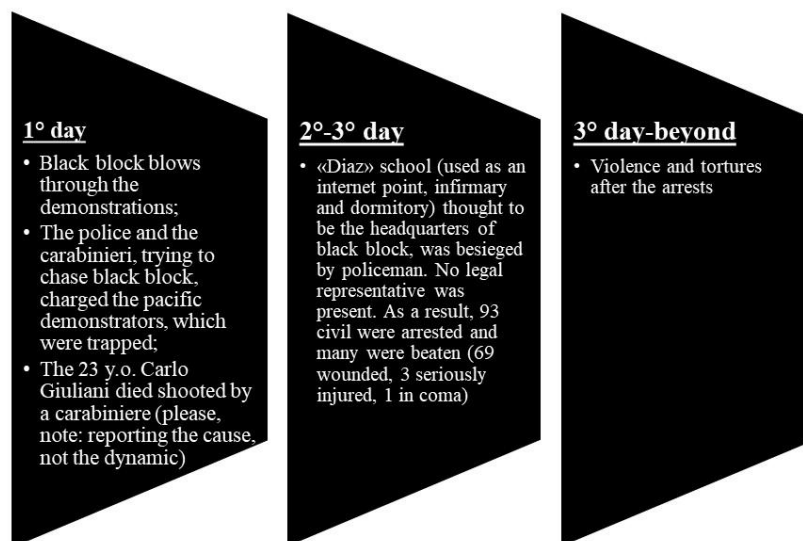
impose an activity, has also the power to impose a certain identity. In this case those outside the NPZ become the violent from whose defend himself.

After Seattle meeting in 1999 all the following summits has been characterized by strong protests movements and riots (Gubitosa, 2003). When it was up to Italy to organize the Genova's 2001 summit, the level of tension was extremely high and major security clearance were taken.

Several months before the beginning of the summit, national and international press reported an escalation of worrying news: infected blood had being collected to be putted in thousands of balloons with the intention of throwing them to the police; the protesters were ready to throw fruits filled with razor blades and flaming pneumatic tyres; hundreds of trained hounds and slingshots charged with iron gears were ready for the battle; assaults by civil boats, canoes and even gliders from the sky were feared and expected by the authorities (Zamperini A. & Menegatto M., 2011). What the police was preparing to face wasn't just a demonstration, but a long siege and a civil war. The answer was coherent to the expectations: 5200 policeman, 4676 carabinieri and 1209 financiers were deployed on the street and exceptionally equipped with iron tonfas and tear gas canisters (banned in war time but allowed for the maintenance of the public order (Zamperini A. & Menegatto M., 2011). As reported by Gubitosa (2003), two NZPs were created: the red area with a high security level, that included the summit location, which was restricted to anyone but residents, accredited journalists and police, and the yellow area, a gap area between the summit location and the demonstrations (figure 1). Five meters high barriers and iron grids were placed all around the red area; the harbour, the train station and the airport were restricted as the helicopters were surveilling the armoured city and surface-to-air missiles were fitted.

All these measures were legitimate by a Genova's Court sentence in the name of the public and national interest. The chronicles of the three days of the summit are complex; here we want to highlight just the features leading to the way in which the public spaces were turned into a guerrilla zone while the control of dissent passed through a restraining of the urban places (figure 2).

Figure 2 Public space turning into a guerrilla zone



Genova's events were defined as "the worst suspension of human rights in Europe since WWII" by Amnesty International.

Psychopolitical trauma, democratical paradox and Society future challenges

October 2018. The Italian government approved the draft law about public safety¹, which included a famous paragraph about migration policies and a less known paragraph about legal consequences subsequent to the blocking of the streets. In other word, any kind of demonstration could be legally prosecuted since a demonstration needs, formally, to occupy streets and squares.

Beginning of February 2019. Sardinian shepherds have been protesting against the Italian government due to the prices of milk, which has to be too low for being competitive on the market. The shepherd tried to focus on labour's right through the following forms of protest: throw the milk away, giving back the polling card, intimidating to block the polling stations.²

As a result of such scenario, of the mix *between a new law and a usual form of protest*, 10 shepherds were investigated by the Nuoro Court for "road blocks".

What one can observe from this last example, which differentiate the shepherd protest from WTO and G8, is that a specific way of using a public space has been criminalized through legislative tool. The *escamotage* of "road blocking" becomes an ambiguous way to control dissent by restraining the use of the public space. Thus, an even deeper and paradoxical form of structural violence takes place. One that highlights a profound "democratic paradox" within modern societies:

1. Interdiction of public space becomes an obstacle to make protests and requests *public*, confining them into a private domain, which disempower the citizens;
2. A controversy arises from individual rights' requests and state laws: the rights to the public space (and so the right to be the part of the political life of the country - which should be the aim of democracy) and this specific Italian law which criminalize any kind of dissent.

When the bond between citizens and institutions, the implicit or explicit agreement, is broken, a wound opens in the democratic participation. That is not just a symbolic or figurative wound, but it has pragmatic implications in everyday life. Collective experiences have a strong influence on the individual experience, and they generate psychological and social issues. This kind of trauma has a double aspect, as its consequences are both in terms of individual impact and in terms of political-institutional repercussions.

¹ "Disposizioni urgenti in materia di protezione internazionale e immigrazione, sicurezza pubblica, nonché misure per la funzionalità del Ministero dell'interno e l'organizzazione e il funzionamento dell'Agenzia nazionale per l'amministrazione e la destinazione dei beni sequestrati e confiscati alla criminalità organizzata".

http://www.senato.it/japp/bgt/showdoc/18/DDLPRES/0/1076594/index.html?part=ddlpres_ddlpres1-decretolegge_decretolegge1

² https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/02/10/news/pastori_sardi_scattano_le_prime_denunce_per_lo_sversamento_del_latte-218783832/?refresh_ce

Figure 1 Red, yellow and green zones in Genova



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