SOCIO-SPATIAL PATTERNS OF TERRITORIAL IDENTITY

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1. Introduction

One very common element of sociological theories was, up to recent years, the idea of social change as a an evolutionary process (of modernization, development, growth, etc.) in which the more restricted socio-territorial systems are doomed to merge into larger ones, in a process of steady expansion of social networks and of mental horizons.

This process is fed mainly by communication technologies, which allow the overcoming of the "friction of space" and its disappearance as an important dimension of the social structure.

In this conception, space, localism and territoriality have been considered relevant only in small social systems (communities, towns and regions) while large systems have been considered a-spatial, systems in which space is not an important dimension, at least in a sociological perspective.

For a couple of centuries, and at least since the French revolution, Western society has been subjected to processes of rationalization, centralization, secularization, bureaucratization, rationalization, economic development, urbanization, etc. which together have been labelled modernization.

Theorists and observers predicted the progressive withering away of traditional divisions and social formations and the coming of something called, although with different names, mass society.

The diffusion of development, and in particular of production and communication technologies, the spread of well-being and material comfort
would bring about societies in which "achieved" and "universalistic" standards would replace "ascriptive" and "particularistic" ones; not only within Western societies, but gradually all over the world.

Since the seventies, but with special intensity in the eighties, this paradigm of modernization has crumbled. One of the most obvious features of recent sociological theories is the rejection of macro-theories of linear evolutionism in favor of more articulated and complex views.

This overhauling of sociological theories passes also through the revaluation of the spatial dimension. A closer observation shows that space (in its different specifications) remains one of the main aspects of social reality, as condition,constraint, means and goal of most social behavior; and that the growth of larger socio-spatial patterns does not displace, but is superimposed to smaller ones, and may also dialectically strengthen them. Far from disappearing, territorial tiles multiply, struch into various directions, get more vivid in awareness. Society stays "a system of spaces" (Agnew, 1987).

The concepts of centre and periphery, border, urban-rural settlement, town, village etc. refer not only to different social organization processes, but also to their spatial basis.

On the other hand they reflect the way social, political, cultural, ethnic etc. factors organize space.

In Italy spatial-oriented sociology has an important and long standing tradition, though different labels (and approaches) are attributed to the study of links between space and society (Dainelli, 1969; Scarsoldo, 1987).

Proceeding from spatial-oriented sociology in recent years empirical research has been directed towards the study of territorial identity (Pollini, 1987; Gubert, 1987). "To be member of", "The sense of belonging" is one of the key concepts to understand the behavior of social actor, his identity, his position inside society etc.

The social actor is not only a member of a group, of an organization, a nation etc. but also a member of a territorial community. Under what conditions the space, the environment where people live, become a relevant element for the development of individual identity? What kind of relations exist between social and spatial belonging?

2. The research

Starting from this basic questions we present here the results of a survey on socio-spatial patterns of community attachment.

The data analyzed are derived from a questionnaire survey carried out in 1986 on a large area sample of residents (1300) in four regions in the North-Eastern Italy. For each region the sample include residents of mountain, rural, urban and coast settlements.
We present here some results of the sub-sample of Friuli, a region placed in the uppermost corner of Italy, at the border with Austria and Yugoslavia. The statistically random sample (N=400), stratified by age and sex in each of the four communes, was administered a complex questionnaire of about 200 items. In addition, "official" data on the social-economic-demographic-territorial circumstance were added, for a total of 317 variables handled in the analysis.

The dimensions (variables) and the hypothetical relations between them are shown in fig. 1.

The central dependent dimension explored in the study is the socio-spatial attachment to community. This refers to the subjective sense of attachment to a place, a space, that are characterized by: a) the existence or not of a sense of attachment to some place; b) if yes: 1) geographical extension (from local community through middle levels to higher levels: the whole world; localization-universalism); 2) strength of tie; 3) type of attachment (motivations expressed by the subject and recognized as important for his/her tie with place). The independent dimensions analyzed are: socio-cultural characteristics of settlements, level of residential mobility/stability of the sample; social integration; psychocultural features of individuals.

3. Patterns of community attachment

a) Residential mobility/stability

One of the main cluster of variables has been constructed to obtain a measure of objective mobility of the the subject during his/her lifetime.
The average distance between "strong places" (the distance between birthplace of the subject and his relatives, residence of relatives etc) is from 17.5 kilometers (the distance between the mother and the subject birthplace) to the 63.5 kilometers between the present residential place of the subject and his/her husband/wife lifeplace before married.

More than half of the sample (58.8%) lives in the same place where they were born; 18.8% of respondents live within about 30 kilometers from birthplace; 11% about 100 kilometers; 11.4% more than 1000 kilometers from birthplace.

b) Levels of attachment and belonging.

A rather often used reactive in these field of research was submitted to our sample, who were asked to state their attachment to a number of "levels of socio-territorial organization", from one's own village or neighborhood to the whole world.

The resulting overall picture is one of strong localism; most respondents indicate the first three levels (neighborhood/village, commune, supra-communal local area), while far weaker are the feelings of attachment to the upper levels (province, region, nation, Europe, whole world). The situation, by reactive and area, is illustrated in fig.2.

Fig.2: Levels of attachment and belonging

urban

- World
- Europe
- Italy
- N.Europe
- region
- province
- s.communal
- commune
- neigh.village
It can be noted that the amplitude of the area of attachment is very
different in each of the four communities studied: from the mountain villages
strong small-scale localism to a wider one in the plains villages and especially
in the urban sample and to the rather cosmopolitan attitude of the coastal, tourist-
oriented community.

c) Strength of local ties.

To the direct question on the strength of attachment to an area, 38.3% of
the respondents declare themselves "very attached", 43.4% "rather attached", 18.3
% "little or not at all attached". However, it must be noticed that the indirect
question, posed in the negative ("What do you think of leaving one’s home
place?") turned out to be much more discriminant (in this as in other previous
studies in this field). The distribution of this variable is better balanced ("it is
something bad", 22.3%; "it is rather bad," 29.4%; "it is positive", 30.7%; it
is wholly positive", 17.5%).

d) Motivations and types of belonging

From multivariate analysis (factor analysis and multiple regression) it has
been possible to put together a synthetic description of the psycho-social
dimensions that characterize the sense of belonging in the Friulian sample.

The first result concerns the already noted dominance of the localistic
pattern. The feeling of belonging is directed towards small spaces, falling into
the subject's visual field and in the physical field of daily social relations.
Nevertheless, localism and globalization are not diametrically opposed; several
attachment patterns emerge, suggesting an incongruity between the "spatial" and
the "cultural". Patterns that do not necessarily proceed along the small-large
spatial scale, but along the twisted and asymmetrical paths of the individual's life
histories, of cultural, social and economic changes.

The second finding concerns the strong relation between spatial and social
ties. The perception of community as a bundle of relations, symbols, values,
fusing in the concrete solidarity between its members, specifies the socio-spatial
"unity" of the object of attachment feelings. This finding, by the way,
correlates already rather well-established theories in this field (Kasarda and
Janowitz, 1974; Sampson, 1988).

The feeling of belonging, however, is not only described in terms of
breadth and strength, but also by the combination of motives (motivations,
"reasons"), recognized by the subject as essential to his own sense of "being a
member" of a community, of a group that is located in certain area.

The following dimensions outline the different relational, environmental,
phenomenological, and existential spheres that make up the symbolic referents of
territorial identity.
Belonging (attachment, membership) by rootedness. We have defined the first type of belonging as “belonging by rootedness”. Herein are synthesized the experiences, symbols, and the deepest traditional values that bind an individual to his community: the time spent and lived in the community, the memories, the blood ties to past and future generations, birth, and finally the language. This type of belonging derives from the intertwining of past and present, between individual and collective memory; to which the sense (or longing for) continuity is to be added (“this is the place were my parents were born and where I wish my children to be born”), and the sharing of the symbolic universe expressed by language.

Belonging by social integration. This second type of tie is made up of a different set of motives: the feeling of being useful to other people, the fact that friends live there, the awareness of being known and recognized by other people, the fact of having there one’s job. This set emphasizes the importance of social relations in structuring the feeling of attachment, specially when they are realized and integrated in the same physical and community space.

Belonging by the quality of the environment. The beauty of the landscape and of natural surroundings, together with climate and the architectural and historical heritage, characterize the third type of attachment, focused on the appreciation of the physical features of the lived space.

Belonging by “modernity and progress”. The fourth type of belonging brings together a series of motives which refer to the image of modernity and progress radiated by the area. This type of ties is not based on the concrete family, community or social relations, nor to concrete features of physical space, but to the appreciation and sharing of values like accessibility to goods and services, the availability of services for leisure, etc. This dimension means typical of urban culture, where the values of “urbanity”, progress, comfort, recreation and consumption are a motive of attachment to the place.

4. Local community and belonging: one or more models of local attachment?

In spite of all homogenizing forces, psycho-social-cultural differences among different areas still obtain, and such differences are related, to some extent, to the different historical experiences and geographical (“ecological” or “morphological” in sociological parlance) circumstances. The complex of “ecological” (socio-territorial) variables, synthesized in an index of urbanism-natural (or 'degree of development' or 'modernity'), came out to be the first and most important discriminator of the variance in our data. The results of the analysis confirm the strong differences among the four local sub-samples, not only in the types of belonging prevalent in each of them but also in the variety of dimensions found.
In the urban and in the rural area there is in fact a larger variety of types of belonging, while in the coast and the mountain area attachment is defined by a smaller number of dimensions.

a) Mountain community. A first difference or discontinuity can be noted between belonging "by rootedness" and the other types of belonging. This can be defined as the "traditional" type of local attachment, as the motives, relations, feelings and values that tie the individual to the community are those that Toennies identified as typical of the Gemeinschaft, the tradition-based community, or the "mechanical" type of solidarity, according to Durkheim. These complete overlapping of the social and ecological community; they share the same space. In our study, the clearest case is that of the mountain sub-sample (but also, to some extent, in the plains-rural one), where the scope of the attachment area does not exceed, essentially, the boundaries of the ecological community. In the mountain area, belonging-by-rootedness stands as the only type of belonging, while in the rural-plain area it is merely the strongest type, among others.

b) Rural community. Of particular interest is the configuration of belonging types emerging in the rural-plain subsample. We find here a transitional situation, between the traditional type of local attachment ("by rootedness") and wider and more articulated types. The social system towards which the attachment feeling is projected, though strongly connected to the village-community base, shows also indications of widening horizons, towards the commune and provincial levels.

In this area, strongly agricultural but with modernising features, we find neither a complete "homogenization" of values nor a complete rootlessness; what happens is a growth in the complexity of attachment motives. The widening of the social membership systems entails the multiplication and complexification of the attachment motives. The co-presence of tradition and modernity produces new, more diversified forms of local ties. Far from impoverishing the feeling of belonging, this enriches it with the recognition of more components of the community connective tissue. Among these, undoubtedly the more generic one is "belonging by modernity and progress"; but there are others, like "belonging by social integration", i.e. the appreciation of the concrete, effective social relations within the community, and "belonging by socio-cultural integration", i.e. the appreciation of the values, mentalité and symbols of the group, including language. These symbolic ties can linger on, also when concrete relations are being lost.

c) Urban community. Here too the picture of attachment types is complex. In contrast to the rural sample, the urban one exhibits neither the traditional, small-scale local attachment type, nor the social-integration one. The dominant type of attachment is by socio-cultural integration (sharing of values), followed by more "functional" ones, like the ownership of the home and the location of the workplace, but also by length of stay and appreciation of "modernity" (however, in a weak form). The town then does not supply a social
and physical basis, shared and small enough as to allow for the development of the "community" type of relations, characterized by strong interpenetration of the individual and the collectivity. But the town seems incapable also - at least in our sample - to breed generic and universalistic forms of attachment. Another element becomes central in the feeling of belonging: the sharing of culture and language (local "dialect"). In contrast to the "belonging by rootedness" model, belonging by cultural and linguistic homogeneity favors a wider and more general level of integration. This is supported also by the fact that the urban sample identifies with a wider socio-spatial horizon reaching, in the average, the provincial. It has to be recalled that the town studied regards itself as the "moral capital" of a regional community, Friuli, which claims recognition as one of Italy's "ethnic minorities".

d) Coastal community. This community is peculiar, as we have already mentioned, by its very young "age" (is started to develop essentially in the fifties) and its economic specialization in tourism. Community life is strongly focused on and projected towards an international type of tourism. The prevailing model of belonging is "by modernity", together with the one based on a strong appreciation of physical-environmental features.

5. The determinants of localism

Through a sequence of factor analyses and multiple regressions we have pinpointed a rather small number of "independent" variables with a relatively high explanatory power or power to "predict" the variance of our dependent variable "localism". They are partly diverse, depending if the whole regional sample or the four local subsamples are considered.

For the whole sample, they are: 1) the degree of familiarity with the rest of Italy (of other Italian regions): the more one has travelled in the national territory, the less localistic he is; 2) residential stability: the longer the time spent in one's own place, the stronger the localism; 3) spatial extent of friendship network: the larger the area in which friends are scattered, the weaker the localism; 4) systemic features of the membership community: localism grows weaker as we go from the mountains, to the plains, the town and the coast, in that order; 5) the degree of residential satisfaction: the more satisfied, the more localist are people; 6) the type of attachment feeling: the "rootedness" one tends to refer to smaller communities, and hence to localism. Other types do not show this correlation.

As each of the studied area is "a world apart", in each of them we find a different configuration of variables explaining localism:

a) in the urban area, the two main variables are the personality type and the level of education. "Inward-directed", "authoritarian", "conformist"
personalities tend to be localist; higher education levels tend to broaden spatial horizons;

b) in the coastal area, the main explanatory variables are four: 1) propensity to residential mobility (the higher the mobility, the weaker the localism); 2) participation to social life (the higher the participation, the weaker the localism); 3) mobility, measured both in number of years spent elsewhere and by the dispersion of the birth and residence places of parents and relatives; the higher the mobility, the lower the localism; 4) participation to associations: the higher the participation, the lower the localism. The counterintuitive nature of the results on participation can be explained in the light of the very specific features of the coastal community, already mentioned.

c) in the rural area, the four most important variables are: 1) land ownership (owners, i.e. farmers, are more localist) 2) inclination to residential mobility (as above); 3) the spatial extent of the primary relations network: the broader the extent, the smaller the localism; 4) degree of familiarity with other Italian regions (in the already mentioned direction).

d) in the mountain subsample, variance in localism is explained essentially by two variables: 1) amplitude of the area in which leisure time activities are carried out; and 2) open-mindedness towards immigration in one's own area. In both cases the relation is in the expected direction. Two more variables have some influence: 3) appreciation of the values of modernity ("it is important to live according to the needs of our times, regardless of the place one lives in") and "anarchism" ("Laws are to be obeyed only if they look just and right"). This last variable however works in the opposite sense than may be expected: it is correlated to localism, and is to be interpreted as the refusal of the local community (in this case, strongly characterized, isolated, etc.) to accept passively norms and values of the "external society".

6. Conclusions

Synthetically, the study yields the following main results:

1) Attachment to community and place still is important for most people, not only in rural areas (mountains and plains) but also in urban ones. The role of "locale" (Giddens), in which meaningful everyday social relations are enacted, is not dissolved and homogenised in universalistic values. It takes on special meanings, connected to individual and collective histories of the local group, to the pattern of relationships between individuals, to the sharing of values and symbols that are felt as place-specific.

2) The "ecological" features of the area clearly influence the degree and type of identification with and attachment to the local community. It is stronger in small rural communities. However, urban areas do not by themselves mean
universalism and cosmopolitanism. At least in our sample, the local bond is expressed by the acknowledgment of the "community of local values, mentality and language." In the transition from the traditional type of community to the modern one, peculiar combinations of tradition and modernity are synthesized. Far from dissolving the local bond, they confer it new contents.

3) Residential stability, understood both as duration of time lived in the community and number of moves, and as dispersion of "strong places" (birthplace of the subject and his closer relatives, residence of relatives, etc.) strongly affects socio-spatial identification. Space-time convergence of the subjects' experiences and relations favors identification with (attachment and belonging to) the place; also because it increases the chances to develop more social ties, to participate to and integrate in the community.

At the same time however the relation of mobility to the localism-universalism axis is not linear. In the coastal subsample, characterized by high mobility, the area of identification (attachment, belonging) turns out to be, not unexpectedly, much larger than in others; on the other side, the higher the dispersion of the subjects' "strong places", the more negative is the judgement on the item "leaving one's home place". It seems then that the excess of mobility, the experience of cutting one's roots, heightens the need for a place to identify with, to belong to.

This last finding, at this stage only a weak indication, will be the starting point for a further study on social groups characterized by high levels of residential mobility.

References


