

TERRITORIES OF CONTRIBUTORY LEARNING

MAURO MAGATTI

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Italy)
mauro.magatti@unicatt.it

Abstract: Places are just as crucial as organisations in the fabric of social life: despite all the homogenising tendencies, the social space, sculpted by the stories that constitute it, continues to prove multiform and rich in diversity. At the end of the 20th century, the radical spatial and temporal reorganisation produced by globalised technical infrastructure redesigned the map of the planet. Now, the pandemic is giving a new direction to spatial and temporal restructuring processes. The outcome is still open, but the processes have their inertial force, destined to characterize the times to come. The direction that will be followed is still largely undetermined because the models that inspire the paths of transformation are vastly different. This paper examines the idea of contributory territories as one possible outcome.

Keywords: territories, contributory learning, globalization, localization, care.

SPATIO-TEMPORAL RECONSTITUTIONS

Places are just as crucial as organisations in the fabric of social life: despite all the homogenising tendencies, the social space, sculpted by the stories that constitute it, continues to prove multiform and rich in diversity. At the end of the 20th century, the radical spatial and temporal reorganisation produced by globalised technical infrastructure redesigned the map of the planet. A series of urban nodes was established: hubs of highly qualified functions and resources such as management centres of large companies and banks, national and international government institutions, universities and research centres, stations, airports, and ports, which have become the nerve centres of global capitalism, attracting financial, cognitive, and human resources.

ISSN 2283-7949

GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION

2022, 1, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2022.1.3

Published online by "Globus et Locus" at <https://glocalismjournal.org>



Some rights reserved

Another change was registered a few years ago by the UN: for the first time in history, more than 50 per cent of the earth's population today lives within urbanised territories, characterised by profound inequalities. In addition to the more advanced centres, the suburbs grow as vulnerable populations crowd in. Alongside the wealthiest and most populous regions, rural areas annihilated by depopulation multiply. Current urban development processes are integral to our times' entropic and anthropic problems and trigger a series of problematic adjustments, such as the massive migratory phenomenon (intranational and international).

In combination with the moves toward sustainability and digitalization, the pandemic is giving a new direction to spatial and temporal restructuring processes. The outcome is still open, but the processes have their inertial force, destined to characterize the times to come. Without a doubt, one of the legacies of the last two years is the revisiting of the link between work, housing, and mobility. This nexus, forcibly remodelled during the months of lockdown, has indeed been deeply shaken. On the work side, overcoming the emergency has clarified the need to rethink forms and ways of working for both companies and workers. The situation remains very fluid because there is still a lack of contractual tools to manage work remotely. However, the answers will differ from business to business and from person to person. What certainly will not happen is a simple return to the pre-Covid situation. Today everyone understands that some activities can be done appropriately (and sometimes even better) at a distance. On the housing side, real estate demand is shifting towards more flexible and attentive solutions around the private space, like housing models with a higher rate of sociability or new sensitivity to public services, air quality or the availability of services and common goods. People think of the apartment less and less as a closed cell, detached from what surrounds it. Engaging with these new orientations, the mayor of Paris launched the "15-minute city" project, thus opening the way for a different metropolitan imagination: a more sustainable living space based on the regeneration of neighbourhoods and easy mobility.

All this reflects the growing relevance of sustainability issues. The essence of the relationship between human activities

and the ecosystem finds the first and most fundamental consequences occurring in the local dimension. It is here that real changes in people's behaviour can be determined, not just an adherence to abstract processes that leave their daily practices intact. Also, for this reason, defence and valorisation of the territory become increasingly frequently spurs to collective action. In particular, the circular economy is an opportunity to form local systems of convergent interests in the fight against entropy. Recycling, the fight against waste, km0, energy communities are practices that are spreading, involving and composing pluralistic interests and subjectivities. Therefore, sustainability and digitalisation bring into question how the social, economic, and institutional space is thought of and practised. It is thus fair to think that, in the following years, the shape and very nature of places are destined to change with the same intensity as in the industrialisation phase, when the clear separation between work and housing occurred.

The direction that will be followed is still largely undetermined because the models that inspire the paths of transformation are vastly different. At one extreme, the smart city is the all-digital, interconnected, fast, data-driven technological city with the dream of a transparent and efficient environment, which, however, risks being sucked into the imagination of the factory, the super machine. At the other extreme, there is the city of sociability, social relations, short mobility, active citizenship, and the recovery of the relationship with others and nature. However, the risk lies in imagining this to be a refuge from the ubiquity of modern technologies, which remain essential. Between these two poles, the path chosen will depend on the actors' choices and their ability to form alliances around new ideas of territory.

ASSOCIATED MILIEUX

Historians argue that the development of civilisation underwent a powerful boost when it passed from nomadic to sedentary forms of life. It is, in fact, with the development of agriculture that territory became a "place", an organised social

space characterised by a “culture”, which is the accumulation of local knowledge, the memory of a population, with its vicissitudes, ways of working, daily practices, beliefs, and laws. Since the late 19th century, the radical technical transformation associated with industrialisation has brought with it the affirmation of the great modern city that, within a few decades, has become the centre of the individualist life model.

At the end of the 20th century, in the decades of expansive globalisation – when life became increasingly nomadic thanks to enhanced mobility (tourist, professional, migratory) – the processes of dissipation and homologation became so powerful that many territories lost their connotation of “place”. In this last phase, the increasing lack of distinction associated with a growth model based on quantity and standardisation strengthened an instrumental and abstract approach. In this approach, territories become simply platforms for the extraction of resources, as shown by real estate speculation, dormitory districts, degraded suburbs, tourist cities, and wild deforestation.

The result is the progressive destruction of local popular cultures, which produces severe effects in anthropological terms: accustomed to living in neglect, groups less endowed with economic, cultural, and relational resources find themselves “suspended”, without any cultural roots (cultures “dissolve in the air”). Disoriented and angry, they become easy prey of political entrepreneurs who, profiting from widespread resentment, fan the flames of localism or racial hatred; or they fall victim to unscrupulous religious leaders who offer the reassuring argument of fundamentalism.

In a world where everything goes fast, both in time (innovation) and in space (circulation), there is a deep need to make the place known again. Counteracting entropy depends on a localized and differentiated knowledge that is capable of taking care of a territory, its history, specificity, and its vitality, in order to make it, to all intents and purposes, a place – that is, a set of cognitive and symbolic coherencies capable of opening new possibilities of identification and co-identification – the centre of new relational ecology.



However, within the framework of super society, this cannot happen in a romantic way, like an escape into an uncontaminated world or a return to a golden age, far from technological development. Helpful in this regard is the concept of an “associated milieu”, which Gilbert Simondon defined as a hybrid environment (with both natural and artificial elements) such that the technical object “combines” structurally and functionally the energies and natural elements that make it up so as to influence its evolution. Only in such an environment can technical mediation, as a condition for the same relational dynamic, make it possible to identify and co-identify. On the contrary, in a dissociated environment, identifying the technical-symbolic environment is to the detriment of the psychic individual, who will find themselves disaggregated.

Behind us, we have a history of dissociation: symbolic exchange reduced to trade and mass production has separated and opposed producers and consumers, homogenizing and dissipating knowledge of how to live, work, and think. With the advent of digital technology, the challenge is to understand under what conditions this new technological environment allows the creation of new associated milieux that are capable of forming in negative entropic ecosystems, beneficial to identifying psychic and collective individuals.

In its recent report *Accounting for planetary survival*, the P2P Foundation highlighted how the techno-social capabilities of a given local community are essential to embedding the innovations required by the context in which we live. In this regard, a leading role is played by platforms that, by allowing the exchange of objects and services, value the interaction between people on a local and supra-local basis. By interconnecting individuals and groups in information ecosystems, open-source communities can nurture new social dynamics based on open and transparent forms of coordination. Developing such opportunities makes it possible to foster the emergence of new urban communities able to organize access to resources in a more equitable and environmentally responsible way¹.

So, under certain conditions, the local dimension can be the most suitable ground for original interpretations of digital grammaticalization. It can transform the territory into an associated



environment to counteract dissociative trends and encourage the dynamics of co-identification. This change is possible, writes Daniel Ross, when territories become “deposits of knowledge capable of producing tastes, differences, nuances, abilities, points of view. Places within which improbable possibilities – which we could call surreal possibilities – are transformed into concrete possibilities”. As empirically shown by Yochai Benkler, cooperation and synergy make temporal and spatial exceptions to entropy possible, creating domains in which differentiation and social pluralism increase over time, also thanks to digital technologies.

The fight against entropy is therefore also a local issue. It is impossible to counteract the entropic dynamics of the last decades. The only way to do that would be by creating local contributive research laboratories capable of generating capacity building sites that experiment with harmful entropy practices through which people take care of their milieu, thus promoting collective identification. This is the same direction suggested by Michael Porter when he speaks of “shared value”. It means a value arising from the redefinition of the relationship between economy and society is defined according to the ability to stabilize and share common objectives. The shared value makes it possible to bring out the uniqueness of a place, that is, differentiation from the increasing homologation along the axes of global flows, so long as the territory is not just a simple geographical dimension, a mere functional assembly within the infrastructure networks.

The aim is to make the local area a concrete space of co-identification. It is possible to develop transducer practices within the new framework designed by the two drivers of sustainability and digitalisation in this space. In this way it is possible to counteract the dynamics of proletarianisation linked to the reduction of citizens to consumers and the ebbs of localism, the expression of a visceral reaction to homologous globalisation that short-circuits territories, depriving them of value. The challenge today is that of a non-localistic valorisation of territories. By freeing itself from the alternative of homogenisation/marginalisation, this enhancement would allow territories to become contributors and bearers of symbolic resources in the world arena, thanks to modern technologies (thus assuming a positive pharmacological value). It is



precisely in the interplay between memory and protension that this uniqueness can be expressed. Enhancing local history is an essential resource to enable a territory to reorganise within completely renewed conditions.

An interesting example is the so-called Motorvalley in the province of Modena², where a leading company in the automotive sector has involved local actors in redesigning school and training pathways. It is a solution developed over several years that, proceeding step by step without a rigid plan already configured in all aspects from the beginning, has traced an original local development path. It owes its success to its ability to establish a new and effective bridge between the economic and social dimensions. Investment in the quality of the training courses took place in a framework that was not only functional but also created alliances between different subjects (companies, associations, schools, the third sector, public administration) and shared a horizon of meaning. The result is greater competitiveness of the territory and a social model with higher integration.

CONTRIBUTING

Contributory territories are social spaces where air, water, environment, health, education, and even waste management come to be rethought as common goods around which to reweave the fabric of local relations. It is the work of care in its complete epimeletic sense: the way to overcome the distance and degradation caused by carelessness, side effects and inevitable relief produced by technical systems, with their trade-off between power and environmental costs. Because it is concrete and marked by a thorough history and network of unique relationships, the contributory territory can produce new meanings – in the form of shared value – capable of fostering institutional practices and renewed economic and social organizations. These would be capable of making citizens protagonists of an authentic and original path of sustainable development on a local basis.

ISSN 2283-7949

GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION

2022, 1, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2022.1.3

Published online by "Globus et Locus" at <https://glocalismjournal.org>



Some rights reserved

The time is right to go in this direction. In fact, after the pandemic, companies are wondering whether and how much work patterns can change. Moreover, even without being pessimistic, we must consider that the impact of digital on employment will still be significant. As in the past, the answer will be found in the birth of new ways of working. However, this does not mean that these are jobs that are “paid” according to the contractual scheme of industrial society. A contribution economy values paid employment and, more generally, the contribution that people can make in different ways to the quality of local development. In essence, there is the idea that everyone is a contributor, not because they pay taxes but because they are an active member of a society to which they offer their contribution in a plurality of ways. According to Stiegler, “the contribution is more than participation or collaboration (even essential) insofar as it establishes a co-identification relationship between the participants in a project, which passes through the production of knowledge (such as know-how, knowing how to live, theoretical, aesthetic, and practical knowledge)”. Their personal and collective commitment thus acquires a new value beyond paid employment³.

It is going to take time. Nevertheless, in the future, in the age of sustainability and digitalization, work is destined to become a much more transversal activity than the one we know. Something that does not concern only the directly productive dimension, nor is solely reducible to the economic dimension. However, the reinterpretation of work cannot be an individual or residual fact, as in the painful experience of community service. On the contrary, the challenge is to find a more advanced mediation between the flowering of personal abilities and a broad idea of value, capable of including quantitative, qualitative, short-term, and long-term dimensions in the perspective of integral sustainability.

In France, the IRI in Paris proposes to extend the model of the intermittent work of artists and cultural workers. At the heart of the proposal is the remodelling of the relationship between training and work, between formal work and informal activity. In Canada, J. Nedelsky suggests rearranging the balance of personal time, assuming that value derives from both

production and care – within the family (towards minors or the elderly) or in the many contexts of life together (environmental, social, cultural voluntary work or artistic production). His proposal is for a society where no one works more than 30 hours a week, and no one devotes fewer than 12 hours a week to care.

The theme of contributory territories is then closely intertwined with epimeletic education and noetic organisations. The local space is precisely the platform on which the reconstruction of social life can take place, also exploiting the thrust of the circular economy. What will make the difference will be the data, their access, and the possibility of using them to define the strategies of private and public actors. There are already several experiments that work on these dimensions, using the availability of information to guide the behaviours of the actors in the territories, to reduce joint damage. What emerges is that the difference comes from identifying common goals and using the information made available by the digital environment to encourage widespread mobilization – the opposite of the verticalized model that asserts itself when the action's size and scale become too large. To do this, we need to invest in creating collaborative ecosystems, which, taking advantage of the technical development associated with “blockchain”⁴, allow the creation of digital infrastructures. It means “Open and shared distributed registers”⁵ – to make possible the mutualisation of common goods in the logic of a circular economy (such as water, environment, mobility, education). In this (ambitious) perspective, to arrive at the construction of a new contributory accounting that sees the transactions as part of an ecosystem of collaboration. A “flow accounting” rather than a vision based on the accumulation of individual goods can also evaluate the quantities of matter and energy used, thus making explicit for local ecosystems the implications and limits of the use of resources.

The contributory territories reconstruct what is unraveling, linking digital resources and communication with local stories and interests. From this perspective, the environment becomes the place where sustainability and digitalisation can converge, redesigning the conditions for a widespread engagement around goods that have a collective meaning and the pur-



suit of which can have, under certain conditions, a positive impact both on the economic and social dynamics and on the processes of identification. The aim is to make more recognisable – and therefore more practicable – the personal engagement in creating value for the individual and their community. Not opposing technology and people, global and local, profit and non-profit, sustainability and digitalisation within the local dimension can counteract the spread of dissociated environments and strengthen associated ones. By overcoming the separation between producers and consumers, it becomes possible to create new forms of association between different subjects for renewed social relations in a different libidinal economy framework.

An example of concrete translation of the perspective of the contributory territories is developing in the transformative path initiated by 10 Italian cities⁶. In super society, welfare is a strategic infrastructure that has a function not only and not so much reparative and redistributive as enabling connection and security, at both a personal and community level, as a crucial element for the generation of sustainability and shared value. Today's welfare system is undergoing a sustainability and meaning crisis, primarily because, over time, it has been structured and organized by rigid and non-communicative silos, where the practices and devices that distinguish it are subject to remarkably elevated levels of division. Furthermore, they cannot find effective ways of integration because of multiple bureaucratic, cultural, informational, and instrumental obstacles.

Welfare, to be reformed, must transform into an infrastructure suitable for development and its overall sustainability, a tool for supplementary reorganization, multi-level and multi-stakeholder. For example, we can achieve this goal by developing, around a common good, new and more agile administrative operations and significant opportunities for well-being and inclusion for individuals and families. This common good would be based on digital platforms that allow a more effective evaluation and use of the available resources. All this would start from the most fragile people, their interdependence and knowing how to be a community in new forms, also digital but always associated. Welfare is established and regenerated “from below” not because national devices and uniform social and



healthcare guarantees (which can only be provided by the central State) are not needed throughout the country. The reason is that such monetary transfers and the national organization of the services connected to them assume sense, concreteness and transformative substance only if they identify with the local contexts in an acceptable and enabling way. There are no adequate or efficient services without a concrete community, nor can there be a concrete community that does not know how to express itself in mutual care, including through social and healthcare services.

The first step is to construct a public and open digital platform, a unified strategic infrastructure for all providers of public, private and community welfare services at a national and local level, to address and overcome the limitations of the current organization. This way, we can think of reorganizing the system of services on a national basis, not from the centre but through municipalities, though in the framework of a digital organization that guarantees universalism and fairness. The benefits of this platform are many: *a)* integration and advanced analysis of all the information and data available on welfare; *b)* better control over social expenditure; *c)* the reconstruction of all resources available to each beneficiary; *d)* easier access to welfare services; *e)* the creation of a space of interaction and connection between the digital environment and local physical environments to mobilize and activate community resources in a logic of the common good.

The platform to achieve these goals should have a multi-level nature, operation and governance and multi-stakeholders, overcoming the traditional separation between national and local public welfare, the community, occupational/corporate, and private welfare. The perspective for such reconstruction considers welfare, especially the “care budget” available to every person according to their need and risks, as a “common good”. It is neither entirely public nor private. Along with this, we have governance addressed and guaranteed by the public system where everyone contributes according to their abilities, and the contribution of third-sector associations and civil society. All this is in a perspective that rethinks welfare as a promo-



tional system of aggregation processes and social group reconstruction and, therefore, community building – a fundamental element in the direction of new sustainable and contributory territories.

NOTES

¹ For example, we can mention a project realized in Como based on a digital platform and a communicative action to create a supportive city starting from the pooling of needs and resources. See www.cittàfratellitutti.it.

² The story of this experience is on the website Generatività <http://generativita.it/storie/collaborare-per-competere>.

³ Stiegler distinguishes between work, fundamental for identification and capable of nourishing the trans-individual symbolic dimension, and employment, aimed at individual and often alienated subsistence.

⁴ However, avoiding the problems associated with the first generation of blockchain technologies, such as problems of downsizing or exponential use of energy.

⁵ The P2P Foundation speaks of Holochain (“holographic storage for distributed applications”) as a framework for developing and hosting distributed applications. Holochain can be described as an alternative to a distributed registry that includes a significantly “lighter” architecture. Technically it is not a blockchain but simply a way to allow separate registers to cooperate and become interoperable. Thus, Holochain is infinitely adaptable at a marginal cost.

⁶ This paragraph is based on the work done in recent years by Paolo Pezzana, Director of *On impresa sociale*, in the framework of the Will project in which IFEL-Anci, On, Università Cattolica, Bocconi University and the University of Milan participate.

REFERENCES

- Y. Benkler (2011), *The Penguin and the Leviathan: How Cooperation Triumphs over Self-Interest* (New York: Crown Business).
- J. Nedelski, T. Malleson (2021), *A Care Manifesto: (Part) Time for All* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- H. Rosa (2015), *Accelerazione e alienazione. Per una teoria critica nella tarda modernità* (Torino: Einaudi).
- D. Ross (2021), *Psychopolitical Anaphylaxis. Steps Towards a Metacosmics* (London: Open Humanity Press, London).
- G. Simondon (2011), *L'individuazione alla luce delle nozioni di forma e di informazione* (Milano: Mimesis).
- G. Simondon (2014), *Sur la technique* (Paris: Press Universitaire de France).
- B. Stiegler (2014), *Amare, amarsi, amarsi* (Milano: Mimesis).
- B. Stiegler (2015), *Uscire dall'antropocene*, in “Kaia. A Philosophical Journey”, 2, pp. 1-11.

