Editorial

Street Politics. Space, Identities, Memories, and Conflicts from the Sidewalk

Fabio Bertoni, Giacomo Spanu

"Sous les pavès, la plage!" (literally: "Under the pavès, the beach!") is a famous inscription that appeared on the walls of Paris in 1968. This slogan seemingly advocated for the possibility of imagining and experiencing the city beyond its tangible dimension of stone, affirming a will to express new forms of life and freedom (represented by the metaphor of the beach). Heavily influenced by the social struggles and economic and cultural changes of the late 1960s, Lefebvre's "Right to the City" (1968) questioned how to analyse the different levels of urban reality. This notable example in twentieth century continental social theory establishes a relationship, often non-linear, between conflicts as a tangible power dynamic and as the process of construction of categories attempting to interpret these social events. Additionally, from an engaged perspective, there is an endeavour to make social struggles or subtle practices of opposition more effective. The "street politics" we recall in the title of this special issue function on this dual track: actively pursued politics within social conflicts and concepts devised by those refining tools of thought. For the French scholar, studying cities means being able to link the general processes, institutions, ideologies, and social structures that characterise them with specific facts, relations of immediacy, and rhythms of life. From this perspective, there are two ways of proceeding: the first observes phenomena from the general to the specific, from the institutional to the everyday; the second, on the contrary, reconstructs the general from urban everyday relations, emphasising the spatio-temporal organisation of society.

The street can be interpreted as an analytical key for reconstructing urban reality and conflicts from the minutely observable. A Foucauldian reading of streets (see in particular Foucault 1978) allows us to examine how the circulatory function of streets renders them a target of regulatory power. Given the importance of infrastructures for the flow of people and goods in the urban space, streets are central to urban policies (and policing; see Blomley 2012), both in their material and symbolic aspects. The power of urban planners, local administrators, and other social actors who define and regulate the functions of streets is shaped by how the streets are conceived, represented, constructed, and maintained (Hanser 2016). At the same time, the way streets look, their aesthetics, and their functionalities are a political and organisational battleground.

Sociální studia / Social Studies 2/2023. S. 5–13. ISSN 1214-813X.

Video surveillance and hostile architecture exemplify how a street's elements and objects participate in the governance of spatial and social relations (Rosenberger 2020; Smith 1996). In these cases, streets (and the political interventions in their features) are part of a neoliberal securitisation rationale that links social control, urban planning, and design with subjects, affects, and representations of bodies in public (Tulumello 2017). At the same time, streets as lived spaces (Lefebvre 1974) are sites of daily activity and re-imagination at the level of everyday politics. Relations, encounters, minute interventions, and commitments are the field of public action: disputes, mutual aid, tensions, negotiations, collective actions show that public space is inherently crowded, open, and conflictual (Amin 2008). People enact the public principle of the city through the unexpected uses and reinventions of the streets, in "sidewalk politics" (Duneier 2000) as well as in intentional political acts (Ancelovici et al. 2016). The political potential of street life and street cultures (Ross 2018) has been demonstrated in ethnographic studies that focus on the situated, lived, and bodily aspects of the interaction between subjects, practices, and the layered and complex assemblage of elements that constitute the street (Ocejo 2013; Kasinitz 1995). The cultural and political field of toponymy and monuments shows how streets bear the signs of both power strategies and political acts. Street names address issues of power, space, language, and historical heritage (Berg and Vuolteenaho 2009). The construction of nation-states shows how these can be essential to the definition of national identity, the formation of citizenship and political stance of the nation, and the widespread and accurate dissemination of toponyms and monuments. On the other hand, renaming from below, semiotic guerrillas, riots and individual hacking of symbols exemplify the possibility of acting on the materiality of the streets, visualising dynamics of power and oppression and constructing counter-visualities (Mirzoeff 2011) of the city.

On the Shoulders of Street Ethnographies

The enduring perspective that views streets as both a starting point and a crucial spatial framework for interpreting contemporary phenomena holds a respected place within sociology, anthropology, and human geography. This perspective is continuously reinforced and reinterpreted, underscoring the street's persistent role as a rich context for social research. This special issue aims to reaffirm and delve into this aspect. While not exclusively confined to these methods, our inclination (reflected in our selection) leans towards researchers employing ethnographic, qualitative, non-standard, and historiographic approaches. The articles here offer a valuable perspective for studying streets: they provide a close-up lens through which to analyse the influence of social phenomena on everyday urban life. At the same time, they possess their own ethnographic "poetics" – a narrative power that restores immediacy to the intricate cultural and political complexities, harmonising them within the narrative of the street.

In this introduction, our aim is to offer preliminary yet practical insights into navigating the contributions we present. Across diverse fieldwork, we discern a common thread – the identification of the "street" – a concept poised for application in burgeoning and continuing research endeavours. When we speak of the street, we mean first and foremost

a set of relations to be properly mapped in its dynamics (Rheingantz 2012), enacted in networks of objects, materialities, technologies, human and non-human beings (Farias 2010). The street, as a core facet of urban life, is not a pre-existing entity apart from its tangible, architectural form. Instead, it unfolds from this very dimension through a myriad of practices, evolving through the assembly of material elements, events, and relationships that overlap and interweave. Moreover, the street is a 'multiple object' (Rheingantz et al. 2020) and can be understood from an epistemological point of view, even before being "simply" methodological, as a stratification of enactments that respond to different social contexts, relations and "realities" over time, both in a diachronic perspective – in which historical evolution continues to have its presence – and in a synchronic perspective, in which the street changes according to daily or routine temporalities.

The street exemplifies the everyday, minute ways of living and acting in specific urban contexts, and thus has access to how dynamics, in their unique and particular configurations, have significant impacts on life (Ocejo 2013). Even at a symbolic, experiential level, the ethnography of the street comes close to Park's exhortation to go out and get "the seats of your pants dirty in real research" (quoted in McKinney 1966: 21). Moreover, such an approach forces one to break down supposed conceptual dualisms, starting with that between public and private. As well articulated by Hubbard and Lyon in an important introduction to a recent special issue on "streetlife", in a growing context of "divided and segregated cities, gated communities and 'privatopias' streets continue to provide spaces for public congregation, encounter, community-making; where senses of belonging can be developed and negotiated; where ideas of identity may be forged and where protests can be heard" (2018: 938). At the same time, the street can serve as an extension of domestic space, blurring the boundary between private intimacy and burgeoning public interaction. It is a shared realm, no longer entirely private yet not fully public.

Additionally, this is where the dichotomy of public and private converges, becoming a battleground for social conflicts and the genesis of margins, particularly amid social inequalities perpetuated by prevailing policies. The presence, often concealed or targeted for removal, of homeless individuals, the emergence of unconventional housing arrangements, and the gradual disappearance of non-commercial communal facilities (such as public toilets, shared showers, benches etc.) reveal more than just the structural violence embedded within exclusionary urban policies. They underscore the political nature underlying terms like "quality of life", "decency", "hygiene", and "safety". These instances highlight the ongoing tension and clashes between the public and the private realms. Viewed from this angle, as previously discussed, the street becomes a canvas for the formulation and implementation of mechanisms geared towards heightened surveillance, regulation, and standardisation. It embodies not just a delicate equilibrium – continuously contested and subject to politicisation and governance – between social behaviours and anti-social tendencies (Coleman and Sim 2000), but also serves as the arena where these contrasting concepts intersect, shaping and redefining each other within the shared space. This intersection, intricately tied to historical circumstances, fundamentally shapes our perceptions and interactions within the urban landscape.

Visibility and Affective Atmospheres in/of the Street Politics

The social and political processes that constitute the street call into question and at the same time redefine other analytical and empirical categories. In other words, the attempt we make is not "simply" to consider the street as a mere spatial setting where social processes unfold and theoretical frameworks find their interpretive ground. Rather, we assert that the street, functioning both as a political entity and a subject of politics, introduces perspectives that inherently enhance other conceptualisations. In this special issue, we aim to briefly centre the discussion on two particular conceptualisations: visibility and affective atmosphere. Together they provide a broad overview of the different meanings of street politics, both in their reproduction of power relations and in the surplus that emerges from their rupture and resistance.

The street serves as a convergence point for diverse social relations and interactions, collectively shaping visibility across its three dimensions. Visibility, as a social product defined at the intersection of vision, lived experience and power, is configured in social practices under the forms of visibility of recognition, visibility of control and visibility of spectacle (Brighenti 2010). The street embodies recognition not only in its symbolic significance but also evolves to encompass a substantive, organisational, and material role. It becomes the "public space par excellence" from which all politics of recognition emanate (Honneth 1995). Moreover, it houses a spectrum of repertoires – ranging from established to contested and institutionalised – serving as the foundational ground for individual and collective struggles for recognition. The street, as a framework for control, consistently generates visibility, yet it excessively emphasises the subjects within it. It does not grant recognisability; rather, it accentuates their presence, marking their emergence, placing them on public display, and identifying them. This occurs through social surveillance mechanisms or through a shared societal perception of "jumping to the eye", as a break with a scopic regime (Jay 1996), wherein bodies subjected to social control appear as unsettling, unwelcome, or "out of place" (Cresswell 1996). The third perspective is visibility as spectacle, as a space of rupture with the everyday and representation. Here, the street becomes the canvas for the public display of various facets of public life, reflected in its facades – whether portraying common beliefs, bourgeois lifestyles, destitution, or collective outrage. The street is not only the stage of individual performance but also the "material" of urban performance (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2013). It embodies the spectacle of urban transformation, branding, aesthetic enhancement, and collective displays that cities compete to embody – attributes such as dynamism, activity, vibrancy, nocturnal allure, safety, style, and trendiness.

If visibility has been particularly fortunate, the same reasoning can be extended more generally to sensoriality. The street experience is intricately shaped by our senses, epitomised primarily as a "sensescape" (Adams and Guy 2007). This term captures the amalgamation of social, spatial, and architectural elements seamlessly woven into our sensory perception of space – encompassing how we visually perceive, hear, touch, taste, and smell the surrounding environment. It encompasses our interpretations and internal perceptions, defining our profound connection with the spatial realm. The geographies of fear (Pain 2010; Tulumello 2017) highlight how the relationship between the senses, perception, emotions and interpretations is a central element of everyday urban living and urban policies. At times, it can notably

define the entirety of the neoliberal cityscape, particularly concerning the intertwining of fear and security dynamics and the aesthetic transformation of space. Carlin (2017) presents an intriguing perspective through the concept of "pavement culture". It encapsulates the ongoing, albeit temporary and partial, endeavour to harmonise visibility – shaping the political and cultural narrative of what is perceptible – with the "everyday" social dynamics. This involves continually adjusting and rearranging relationships within public spaces.

In Magnusson's *The Politics of Urbanism* (2011), he prompts us to move from politics through the city towards a politicalness of the city as a form of epistemological shift consisting of "seeing like a city". Conversely, the perspectives presented in this issue suggest "seeing like a street". Yet, they aim in their endeavour to move beyond visual-centric knowledge structures, to encourage a "feeling like a city" (Closs Stephens 2015). In essence, the politics of the street encompasses exploring and understanding the perceptions and sensations that drive public actions within it. This includes the subtle, ingrained, and seemingly instinctive dynamics that shape relationships among individuals and between people, architecture, and the spaces they inhabit. Ahmed (2004) suggests that political and historical processes influence how bodies respond to sensory experiences, rhythms, sounds, and material aspects, leading some individuals to align with certain groups while opposing others. These alignments form the basis for constructing "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977), fostering alliances, oppositions, domination, violence, solidarity, and recognition. Such structures are dynamic and can change yet they retain a sense of constancy in their interplay, shaping and reshaping the street as a dynamic field of forces – a notion introduced by the phenomenological tradition through the concept of atmosphere. Despite the significant variations in the interpretations of affective atmosphere (Adey et al. 2013), we find this concept exceptionally valuable. It transcends socio-reductionism by permeating aesthetic, psychological, and epistemological codes with political significance. It lends substance to these codes within a relational and intercorporeal space, facilitating the spatialisation and collaborative construction of subjectivities (Anderson 2014; McCormack 2018). The affective atmosphere of the street is simultaneously "emergent and engineered": it emerges from the coming together of bodies, but is also shaped by wider forces, structures and power relations. From a governance and governmentality standpoint, the street as an urban entity envisions specific affective atmospheres that resonate and impact bodies (Pavoni and Tulumello 2023). These atmospheres are not only envisioned but also meticulously planned by a deliberate political intent, directing individuals to occupy these spaces. Moreover, this political will orchestrates a hierarchy among streets based on the types of bodies that frequent them. At the same time, the streets, or rather the relationships experienced between streets, bodies, materiality and sensoriality can always generate new, unforeseen atmospheres.

An Overview of the Contributions to the Issue

With this special issue, we have tried to take a step towards understanding how the street can be an analytical as well as an ethnographic concept. Specifically, we have challenged the authors to show in what ways the perspective of the street can contribute to a focus on the urban, both in terms of research practice and conceptualisation of social phenomena.

In this sense, Ferino provides ethnographic insights into the role of systemic, institutional and colonial violence in the policies of the street. Set in the context of Yatta (south-eastern West Bank, Palestine), the research explores how urbanisation in Palestine, far from being of "free will", is a process strongly driven by occupation practices. By considering dispossession and its multifaceted implications – spatial, identity-based, and political – politics emerges as a practice from below, as a struggle of resistance and as an aspiration of existence, in a necropolitical regime – events at the end of 2023, as we write, are an enormous confirmation of this – in which the distance between sacrifice and existence is very small. Theoretically, Ferino's exploration represents an "extreme" case due to the starkness of the political dynamics. However, it provokes a reflection that extends beyond this context to "peaceful" social environments. It delves into the connection between streets and the law, examining how lawscapes manifest spatially and how power dynamics normalise institutional violence and inequalities.

Firouzi Tabar reads the street as a device of visibility in relation to asylum seekers in the city of Padua (in north-eastern Italy). In this regard, the street embodies a dual role: firstly, as an active facilitator of individual and collective agency, providing avenues for organising life – such as access to economic resources, spaces for informal living, and material support. It also supports the choice to step away from reception circuits, enabling autonomous living while awaiting recognition of refugee status. Secondly, the street operates as a mechanism for control and surveillance. It accentuates and brings to the forefront of public awareness the migrant presence, often obscured or unseen, triggering moral anxieties about migration and security. Simultaneously, it serves as a stark manifestation – by merely existing – of the social constraints inherent in reception centres and, more broadly, in racist border policies. The article introduces the concept of "spatial disobedience" to present an ethnographic perspective, framing the street not just as a backdrop for understanding social conflicts but as an active catalyst in their creation. It highlights how the street streets do not merely reflect these conflicts but actively facilitates them, fostering resistance and opportunities for agency.

The politicisation of the street, its signs and the monumentalisation of works of art, architecture and places, is addressed by Kinkead, Mahmoudi and Campo. Social movements have historically brought attention to these issues by employing direct action tactics, often using streets and symbolic spaces for impactful street politics. However, the contributors take a broader approach. Drawing on research from the National Register of Historic Places in Ouachita Parish (Louisiana), they introduce the concept of the "racial landscape". This concept unveils not just how specific contexts – such as street names, events, or statues – retain the imprints of colonialism, segregation, and institutional racism. It also reveals how the urban and toponymic cultural framework perpetuates the marginalisation of historically subordinated subjectivities. These histories are excluded from the collective social memory and the celebratory narrative of the city.

Based on the case study of the Swing Park in Milwaukee, McCarthy delves into the realm of guerrilla urbanism, encompassing grassroots initiatives driven by citizens. This form of urbanism – often transient but not necessarily fleeting or confined to performance – transcends conventional planning methods. These initiatives, through the creation and redefinition of spaces, initiate clashes with local institutions. These conflicts revolve

not only around technical aspects but also raise pertinent social inquiries, such as redefining accessibility, fostering participation, and enhancing the safety of a place. Within this context, the street's political essence emerges through a radical re-imagination of the city, its neighbourhoods, and its spaces. Simultaneously, the crux lies in dismantling – or at least challenging – the established frameworks governing the city's governance, maintenance, and design. This occurs by fostering new social relations and infrastructures, enabling the emergence of fresh interactions, meanings, and functionalities within the urban landscape.

Spataro explores the relationship between mutualist practices and street politics, bringing Social Reproduction Theory into dialogue with literature on direct social action to examine the role of grassroots social movement activities during the Berkeley riots of the late 1960s. Focusing on the archives of the Berkley Free Church (a symbolic site of mutual aid activities during the People's Park riots), the author highlights how the street demonstrations of those years were accompanied and sustained by numerous parallel social activities – especially medical ones – aimed at providing support and solidarity to the rioters. In this sense, the street acquires a double meaning, on the one hand as a place of struggle and claim, and on the other hand as a place of social reproduction of struggles through forms of mutual aid that favour interaction between different groups and networks.

The themes of urban regeneration and transformation are offered by De Michele through an ethnography of a single street in Rome. The in-depth study delves into the symbolic perspectives, urban aesthetics and cultural frameworks of a political economy of the city. Starting from the concept of gentrification and going beyond its (ab)uses, the article on the one hand reveals the systemic inequalities of these processes, between the securitisation of cities and processes of exclusion. On the other hand, with a view to everyday life, it substantiates concepts – such as creativity, proximity, innovation – that are central both to the rhetoric of gentrification and to the counter-discourse of various groups that animate the street with artistic, solidarity and community activities.

Finally, Gob applies an ethnomethodological approach to the street in order to empirically and theoretically enter inside its "banality", the everyday that characterises it when apparently nothing happens to break the daily flow of life. Through research conducted in suburban areas of Hanover, Gob's attentive look at the minute, the everyday, the taken-for-granted allows one to enter inside the construction of the processes of domestication of public space. Furthermore, this analysis offers the possibility to problematise the idea of urban comfort as characterised by the absence of conflict and constructed through a continuous reproduction of community which, like all communities, is also made up of the marking of boundaries of inclusion/exclusion and practices of mutual identification and control.

References

Adams, Mags and Simon Guy. 2007. "Senses and the City." *Senses & Society* 2: 133–136.

Adey, Peter, Laure Brayer, Darmien Masson, Patrick Murphy, Paul Simpson, and Nicolas Tixier. 2013. "'Pour votre tranquillité': Ambiance, atmosphere, and surveillance." *Geoforum* 49: 299–309.

Ahmed, Sara. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge.

Amin, Ash. 2008. “Collective Culture and Urban Public Space.” *City* 12(1): 5–24.
Ancelovici, Marcos, Pascale Dufour, and Heloise Nez, eds. 2016. *Street Politics in the Age of Austerity: From the Indignados to Occupy*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
Anderson, Ben. 2014. *Encountering Affect. Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions*. Farnham: Ashgate.
Berg, Lawrence D. and Jani Vuolteenaho. 2009. *Critical Toponymies: The Contested Politics of Place Naming*. London: Routledge.
Bloomley, Nicholas. 2012. “Colored Rabbits, Dangerous Trees, and Public Sitting: Sidewalks, Police, and the City.” *Urban Geography* 33(7): 917–935.
Brighenti, Andrea Mubi. 2010. *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
Carlin, Andrew P. 2017. “Visibility and Street Ethnography. A Lesson in Pavement Culture.” *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa* 2: 287–302
Closs Stephens, Angharad. 2015. “Urban Atmospheres: Feeling Like a City?” *International Political Sociology* 9(1): 99–101.
Coleman, Roy and Joe Sim. 2000. “‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’: CCTV Surveillance, Order and Neo-liberal Rule in Liverpool City Centre.” *The British Journal of Sociology* 51: 623–639.
Cresswell, Tim. 1996. *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Duneier, Mitchell. 2000. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Gireaux.
Farías, Ignacio. 2010. “Introduction: Decentring the Object of Urban Studies.” Pp. 1–24 in *Urban Assemblages. How Actor–Network Theory Changes Urban Studies*, edited by Ignacio Farías and Thomas Bender. London: Routledge.
Foucault, Michel. 1978. *Sécurité, Territoire, Population*. Paris: Gallimard.
Hanser, Amy. 2016. “Street Politics: Street Vendors and Urban Governance in China.” *China Quarterly* 226: 363–382.
Honneth, Axel. 1995. *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. London: Polity Press.
Hubbard, Phil and Dawn Lyon. 2018. “Introduction: Streetlife – The Shifting Sociologies of the Street.” *The Sociological Review* 66(5): 937–951.
Jay, Martin. 1993. *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Kasinitz, Philip. 1995. *Metropolis: Center and Symbol of Our Times*. New York: New York University Press.
Lefebvre, Henri. 1968. *Le droit à la ville*. Paris: Anthropos.
Lefebvre, Henri. 1974. *La production de l’espace.* Paris: Anthropos.
Lipovetsky, Gilles and Jean Serroy. 2013. *L’esthetisation du monde: vivre à l’age du capitalisme artiste*. Paris: Gallimard.
Magnusson, Warren. 2011. *Politics of Urbanism. Seeing Lie a City*. New York: Routledge.
McCormack, Derek P. 2018. *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment*.
Durham: Duke University Press.
McKinney, John C., eds. 1966. *Constructive Topology and Social Theory*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
Mirzoeff, Nicholas. 2011. *The Right to Look. A Counter-History of Visuality*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Ocejo, Richard E., ed. 2013. *Ethnography and the City. Readings on Doing Urban Fieldwork*. London: Routledge.
Pain, Rachel. 2010. “Gender, Race, Age and Fear in the City.” *Urban Studies* 38: 899–913.

Pavoni, Andrea and Simone Tulumello. 2023. *Urban Violence. Security, Imaginary, Atmosphere*. Lanham: Lexington.

Rheingantz, Paulo A. 2012. "Narrativas ou Traduções de Urbanidade." Pp. 135–162 in *Urbanidades*, edited by Douglas Aguiar, Frederico de Holanda, Lucas Figueiredo, Luciana Andrade, Lucinae Trigueiro, Paulo Rheingantz, Romulo Krafta, and Vinicius Netto. Rio de Janeiro: Folio Digital.

Rheingantz, Paulo A., Rosa M.L.R. Pedro, Fabiola B. Angotti, Marcelo H. Sbarra, and Juliana M. Guerra. 2020. "Contributions of Science–Technology Studies and Actor–Network Theory to Urban Studies." *Area Development and Policy* 5(1): 50–74.

Rosenberger, Robert. 2019. "On Hostile Design: Theoretical and Empirical Design." *Urban Studies* 57(4): 883–893.

Ross, Jeffrey I. 2018. "Reframing Urban Street Culture: Towards a Dynamic and Heuristic Process Model." *City, Culture and Society* 15(4): 7–13.

Smith, Neil. 1996. *The New Urban Frontier. Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. London: Routledge.

Tulumello, Simone. 2017. *Fear, Space, and Urban Planning*. Berlin: Springer.

Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.