



Buskers' Uses of Public Spaces: Emergency as By-Products of Administrative Strategies

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Introduction

How urban spaces are shaped in public controversies? This paper explores how cities get organized through the relation between news, public policies and everyday uses of spaces, as embodied in practices and artefacts. It presents current and provisional results of a project named “Penelope – the emerging pattern of urban texture”. Penelope’s challenge is to tackle this theme adopting a practice based approach (Schatzki *et. al.*, 2001; Gherardi, 2005). Penelope consists in a qualitative research of the repertory of practices embedded in the city of Trento, a medium sized Italian city characterized by a high quality of life and a pervasive presence of the Public Administration. In this paper we focus particularly on the discipline of public spaces beginning from the controversy about street musicians’ performances in the city centre.

The practices of street artists and musicians in public places involve several figures in the discussion: residents and workers complaining about noise, public administration in charge of regulating street performances, urban police involved in the discipline of spaces: all raise their own voice about what urban spaces have been made for and should be used for, and about the very sense of art and quality of life. As a result, different versions of what a space could be are enacted and interfere.

Since news is the place where different positions converge in the form of a controversy, we consider them as a starting point to trace the connections between different ways of organizing urban spaces. In this respect, collecting and assembling news is both a door to have access to the *entangled nature* of public discourse (Lippmann, 1920) and a mean to orient its own course (Park, 1940). We make a distinction between conflict and controversy: whereas conflicts involve well-established and negotiating parties, controversies take place around *matters of concern*, (Latour, 2005) namely the machinery around which entities are assembled, that allows to observe public policies in action, and that makes visible and put to the test positions at stake.

Among the controversies reported by local newspapers, we focus on the 'emerging' ones, namely on those that have not found yet a collocation in routines and offices of public administration. For this reason they are generally managed with police measures, thus enforcing their character of exceptionality. In this sense, we consider the issue of street performances in Trento as an emerging controversy. The investigation involved also institutional documents, such as the strategic plan of the city (2001-2010)¹, city police regulations, as well as interviews with street artists, urban manager and police.

The street artists' controversy in local news²

We analysed newspapers articles within a period of three months. Buskers controversy went on 20 days between February and March 2008. It developed after complains of people working and living in old town centre. As a consequence, public administration proposed a revision of the previous regulation with more restrictive norms in order to organize street music performances within the city. Even though the proposal referred specifically to musicians, it mobilized protests by all the community of street artists.

The 19th February 2008 at the bottom of page 19 Trentino titles "Clamp-down on street art". In the following days, local newspapers reported several reaction of street performers. The national federation of street artist (Fnas) itself took part in the discussion to move this subject from public security regulations and to locate it within activities having cultural and social relevance. Interviewed by journalists, buskers who were demonstrating outside the town hall defined themselves as having a peculiar, playful and innocuous style of manifestation: "No uproar, it's not our style. Just some of our games" they said. According to an appeal subscribed by a group of town councillors "their presence fills streets with vitality and joy". The petition signed by street artists opens with this sentence: "Music and theatre and even poetry are arts born in the street: then they entered royal palaces and courts, but the street was not only the original place of every form of art, but also the suited space to its full and free expression". Their action is presented according to the modality of innocuity: playful and not conflictual. Despite the approval of the new regulation, some city councillors complained about "the excessive kindness" that does not take into consideration the interests of people working and living in old town centre. In other words, buskers and street musicians should not disturb the normal existence of old town centre.

What is it meant with 'normal'? Are there exclusive functions for the city centre of Trento? Do sleep, shopping and professional work have the priority over music and entertainment? Should art be innocuous? Is it in the nature of art being "disturbing"? Are street musicians *artists*? Do they play music or make repeated noise? Are they entertaining or bothering people?

'Innocuity' and 'disturb' are the terms around which newspapers orient the public discourse about art and quality of life, to set a standard of adequacy between practice and spaces. They operate a specific emplotment of street art practice, complains, protests, which produce a specific imagery and arrange a narrative setting for public regulation. This way, buskers' controversy becomes the starting point to address wider issues, namely the definition of adequacy and the related discipline of public space in the city centre. Following the development of this controversy we could see how the focus of public discussion drifts from the events themselves to the public issues they evokes: positions are enacted around the terms of "innocuity" and "disturb" and the controversy takes place and is fostered both in informal and in institutional discourse. As Park says "news performs somewhat the same functions for the public that perceptions does for the individual man; that is to say, it does not so much inform as orient the public" (Park, 1940, 677). The performative action of news lays in the echo effect that turns news into 'discussion about news'. Corvellec and Risberg (2007) define this operation of setting up the stage and providing direction for discussion as a *mise-en-sens*. *Mise en sens* acts in a prospective way, "offering cues to the various audiences". In this sense, setting up the stage for different accounts newspapers act as regulator of diverging position, and offer a device of image construction through practices of differentiation and identification (Czarniawska, 2008):

Journalist: "In the town council resolution it is stated that 'most of times the so-called artists are beggars'".

Street performer: "This is the worst thing. Mistaking street artists for beggars is insulting. Beggars don't give nothing. (...) there is a more or less evident artistic expression behind (street artists) phenomenon. Moreover who perform don't claim anything"

- 1 Strategic plan is a document of the municipality of Trento acting as standard for public policies: it aims at defining the administrative orientation about the future (2001-2010) development of the city.
- 2 Quotations, here translated by the authors, come from the analysis of 19 articles collected from the three local newspapers *Trentino*, *L'Adige*, *Corriere del Trentino*.

Also, the petition prepared by local associations of street performers and musicians of Trento states: “we are neither traders nor beggars”. Here the differentiation involves not only beggars’ lack of artistic value, but also the fact that street artists do not perform to make money.

In Czarniawska's terms, buskers build their image through *allomorphy*, namely they make themselves different in opposition to an undesirable entity (the beggars³). On the other side, residents and professionals present themselves according to an *automorphic* mode of organizing identity, based on the priority image of work and sleep related to the use of old town centre. This strategy occurs in the same way at a conceptual level, where the differentiation concerns art on the one hand and disturb on the other.

The arena does not provide a shared vision on how to face the issue, because the connotation of the actors involved and the matter of the controversy are fluid, and thus the discourse of street performance drifts alternatively towards categories of art and security. Nevertheless, while the newspapers accounts tend to excerpt buskers' issues from “the generic collector of public policies” labelled 'security' (Bricocoli, 2005), innocuity becomes the price buskers pay to perform and the only way they can be taken into consideration in the process of defining the regulation: the issue of (un)safety in public policies seems to include everything that is not innocuous.

The regulation of music performances: the urban police department as a “centre of calculation”

Newspapers date back the beginning of the controversy to March 2007, when the municipality for the first time considered the necessity a new regulation about street performances. To better understand how the new regulation developed, we interviewed the vice-captain of the City Police of Trento, who described his role in the drafting of the new discipline:

Researcher: Did you have a say in the matter as urban police? At least in the drafting of the regulation?

Vice-captain: Since it is a city police regulation, we have been the first concerned .

Researcher: Also in the process of elaboration?

Vice-captain: Yes, we made the proposal, we prepared it. Then the committee discussed it. But the proposal has been prepared by the Urban Police

The new discipline of street art, effective since the 29th March 2008, identifies 27 areas out of the old town center recognizable by specific signs. In these areas, musicians are allowed to play their music without restrictions in the numbers of days and hours and without previous communication. Most of the areas are already defined, while others are still under experimentation.

In all the other places, such as streets and squares of old town center, the new city police regulation establishes that musicians can perform for at most 40 days a year and for a maximum of four hours a day. Street musicians can choose where to play by giving communication to the urban police in the three days before the performance. Each place can be occupied by musicians for at most four hours a day: two between 9-12 a.m. and the other two between 3-8 p.m. (in winter time), 3-10 p.m. (during summer time) in order to guarantee a pause early in the afternoon. This limitation affects musicians' choice regarding the place where to play because each place is available for four hours. The other limitation of this regulation, according to one of the buskers who organized the street demonstration, is the loss of improvisations which is the main feature of their performances, the so called exhibition "a cappello". On the other hand, the notification is the device that enable city police to get the control of urban space, because in this way they know in advance where the music performances will take place and they can verify on the notification the time assigned for the performance. Buskers who do not observe the regulation have to pay a fine.

3 In newspapers beggars didn't take part in the controversy but *in absentia*. On the subject, we refer to Vighi (2003), in his article about poetics and politics of movie “Accattone” (“The Beggar”), by Pasolini. Drawing on Zizek and Agamben, Vighi considers beggars as the very kernel of politics and public issues because of their own resistance to every attempt of hegemonic symbolization: “the closest Pasolinian version of *homo sacer* as ‘the pure human’ who is ‘doomed to death’ for the simple reason of not belonging to the civilized congregation is *Accattone*, the quintessential beggar (‘beggar’ is what *accattone* means in Italian) of his eponymous film. This is of course by no means the only Pasolinian *homo sacer*, as his entire production is marked by the unignorable presence of an utterly displaced, abject humanity”.

“we coordinate the use of street. We have a precise control. We can know from the office which are the streets already busy and which artists are occupying them. On the plan arranged by our secretary's office we can immediately determine whether a street is already busy or if it is available partially because, for example, an artist occupies it in the morning but in the afternoon it is still available. It is the artist that chooses” (Vice-captain)

Therefore, urban police department acts as a “centre of calculation” (Latour, 1999): “Any site where inscriptions are combined and make possible a type of calculation”. The notification acts as inscription that make an equivalence between practices, space and time.

Strategic Plan and street music as unplanned exception

Once we realized that the matter of street performers was related to wider issues about the use of public spaces, we looked how the new discipline was related to long term vision of public policies, as embodied in the Strategic Plan of the municipality.

The Strategic Plan contains a couple of measures concerning an orientation toward the music entertainment in the city of Trento: the measure n. 63, “The system of the cultural boxes” and the n. 64 “*Charta Musicae* – a collaboration agreement between the institutions and the music association of Trento and Trentino”. The purpose of the first measure is “to bring back the programming of cultural boxes to a specialization and system logic”. The system of boxes is meant to establish criteria of specialization and characterization of the single spaces, defining the vocations of each space in relation to its characteristics and functional limits.

Which music in which place? The spaces mentioned in the measure refers to traditional places of entertainment, such as theatres, music centres, sport arenas. Nothing is said about the possibility of playing music in public spaces and outdoors. In other words, the measure .63 does not mention street performers and does not include this kind of performance within a discussion about music entertainment. Music at this strategic level should be played only within the cultural boxes listed in the strategic plan..

The measure n.64 contains some aspects dealing with the whole music system of the city thus proving more interesting clues for our study in relation with the traces provided by local news, buskers' and police accounts. According to the measure, Trento is described as a place crossed by several new artistic trends and its cultural scene is characterized by growing complexity. According to the strategic plan, public policies aim at *tidying up* the music life in Trento without imposing hierarchical criteria. For this reason the public administration wants to support a creative development of the music system, open towards innovation, experimentation and dialogue. It also intends to introduce a tool to foster knowledge integration and exchange in the form of an agreement.

The measure aims at being an informal agreement, as an attempt of supporting governance among music actors, in order to manage without regulating: “the music system is not summarized through prescriptive mechanisms, but through an informal and spontaneous network”. The *Charta Musicae* defines itself as an exemplar case of the new role of the public actor, where the definition of a system will be more operative than rhetoric.

The frame portrayed by the Strategic Plan in order to organize music entertainment shows which is the leading idea of public administration about the use of spaces for entertainment: everything has his own place, whether physical or conceptual. It is quite curious how the two measures are conceptually antithetic: whereas the first one tries to ordinate the spaces dedicated to the music, the second one tries to manage the possible disorder created by what does not fit with cultural boxes. Hence, if music events escape the prescriptions of measure n.63, the risk of conflict should be averted with the possibility of a deliberative way of “ordering” the music, so taking back the issue under the umbrella of public administration.

Buskers' controversy produces a sort of breakdown of the framework provided by strategic plans, somehow contradicting its own principles. Since street musicians' practices are not recognised neither as cultural activities, it is treated by public administration as an emergency, and faced by means of urban police.

Comparing this controversy with exceptional events taking place in city centre and promoted by strategic plan (i.e. Bob Dylan concert, the “All Nighter”, and the “Festival of Economics”) we can see how street musicians' emergency configures itself as an unplanned exception, so far out of control of public policies.

Discussion

In the paper, we explored how spaces and policies are conceptualized through narratives and practices, stemming from the controversy of street musicians. We gave an account of how the identity of actor at stake is shaped in

newspapers, and how the discourse is oriented and connoted in terms of “innocuity” and “disturb”. In our fieldwork, the issues of street artists shows the existence of a normative gap, which is filled by the action of urban police. Strategic policies don't seem to take into account the fact that practices continuously overcome their disciplinary framework (Amin & Thrift, 2001). The normative gap is the place of emergency, and emergency arises as by-product of a strategically represented reality and its norms: since street music is not classified as cultural activity and produces complains, it is tackled by means of urban police. The dynamics of mutual adjustment between the strategy and the emergency take place through the mediating and disciplinary action of newspapers and urban police. The main concern for urban police is to make practices of street musicians innocuous. On the other side, to be recognised and taken into account street artists insist in being harmless, not conflictual.

The second issue enlightened by the controversy deals with the adequacy of practices and spaces. The new regulation disciplines street musicians' practices, either giving the possibility to play music in specific areas, or allowing street musicians to use the places in the old town centre for a maximum of four hours a day. Thus the public character of space is normalized becoming a residual dimension from residential and professional needs, being exceptional noise reserved to great event such as “white night” and big concerts.

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