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INTRODUCTION

Sport and public space in contemporary Italian cities: processes of citizenship construction through body-related practices

Caterina Satta* and Giuseppe Scandurra

Department of Humanities, University of Ferrara, Italy

This special issue addresses ongoing transformations in several Italian cities, processes that are urban in nature, imply mobility, density and heterogeneity, and are also increasingly affecting communities that used to be considered ‘folk societies’. This is particularly true of a country such as Italy, which is characterised by scattered urbanisation. The city, long a privileged subject of international academic research, is today the subject of an even greater interest from the most diverse social scientists: sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, political scientists, but also architects, urban planners and urban historians (Cancellieri and Scandurra 2012).

It emerges clearly from the growing literature first that the city is not simply a background to social action, but rather the most complex form of human interdependence, namely an environment constituted by specific and structured processes (Hannerz 1980; Sassen 1994; Soja 2007). Second, it shows how certain re-territorialisation phenomena emphasise both the local dimension as a space of identity construction and the fact that, given the basic connection between democracy and the city (Bagnasco and Le Galès 2001), the quality of a democracy also depends on its attitude towards cities (Isin 2002; Mitchell 2003; Massey 2005).

Our aim as editors of this special issue was to engage in a debate about the social and political tensions that play a role in the construction of citizenship in public space in Italian cities. As urban scholars, we were motivated by the awareness that ‘classic’ interpretations of urban tensions, such as the centre–periphery model, are no longer adequate. Segregation and social exclusion in many Italian cities today defy oversimplifying oppositions and it is increasingly difficult even to circumscribe these phenomena just geographically: projects undertaken by famous architects like Renzo Piano, for example, are mere ameliorative operations in our suburbs, but do not take into account the above-mentioned urban tensions, which deserve a more thorough analysis and, consequently, more complex and structured interventions (Piano 2014). While the disintegration of traditional forms of government resulting from these phenomena has exacerbated social inequality, on the other hand it has prompted new forms of appropriation of the city by its inhabitants (Satta 2014a; Satta and Scandurra 2014).

Such new experiences and reappropriation practices were the starting point for and the context in which this research project on sport and public space was conceived and developed. Our intention, by choosing to focus on specific places in specific urban environments – gyms and sports fields, but also squares, parks and public spaces – is to investigate the role of sports practices and urban spaces in processes of citizenship construction in Italian cities. Our aim was

*Corresponding author. Email: sattacaterina@gmail.com

to analyse in depth the practices of social actors who share these physical and relational spaces by virtue of their engagement in the same sports (boxing, football and cricket) and in the same physical activities (e.g. people attending fitness centres and practitioners of parkour, the so-called *traceurs*). The bodily learning processes of our social actors, either within structured, formalised places, or in spatially/temporally undefined, informal urban contexts, develop into embodied corporeal knowledge that is also valuable outside the sports situation and influences the way they construct their identities as citizens.

The existence of fitness clubs, boxing gyms, football and cricket pitches, conceived as areas for recreation, physical and mental well-being and socialisation through the exercise of a ludic or sports practice, should be contextualised within a broader examination of the relationship between body and space and the role of corporeality in urban settings (Eichberg 1998). There are, for example, bodies that are considered the 'natural' occupants of specific urban spaces and others that are considered 'out of place' as soon as they become visible in contexts that were not specifically designed for them (Cresswell 1996; Puwar 2004). At the same time, the emergence of new bodily practices directly in the urban space (e.g. parkour), eschewing those places specifically devoted to physical activity, reveals new processes of appropriation of the city and new modalities of citizenship construction that offer fruitful possibilities for further in-depth investigation.

In Italy the analysis of sport and leisure activities and of formal and informal ludic places as the contexts of bodily construction in which the boundaries of a multicultural citizenship are defined has received less than systematic attention in the field of social sciences. The meaning that the 'inhabitants' of these gyms and urban contexts attribute to sport is not reducible to that of a simple physical activity. How is an embodied form of knowledge produced and reproduced in these urban places and spaces? How does bodily knowledge become a tool for the deconstruction and reconstruction of new meanings for public space?

The Italian scholars writing about sport in this issue offer an important contribution to the debate. In this respect, it is worth underlining how sport has received scant attention in sociological and anthropological research in Italy. As recently as 2001 Laura Balbo, in the pages of *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, called on the scientific community to reflect on the sociological relevance of sport, inexplicably left on the margins of the sociological debate. Only a year earlier, in the same journal, Pippo Russo (2000) had begun to outline the difficulties in defining sociological studies on sport and their place within sociology.

Anthropologist Fabio Dei drew attention to this lack of interest in the journal *Ossimori* (1992), as did Enrico Giorgis who, in *La ricerca folklorica*, remarked on 'the scant and intermittent attention that social sciences have devoted to sport in Italy' (2009, 3). The phenomenon seems to be limited to Italy, as evidenced by comparison with the literature produced on the same subject in the English-speaking world and in Scandinavia (among many, Donnelly 2000; Dyck 2000; Dyck and Archetti 2003; Giulianotti 2005; Eichberg 2010) and by the mere existence of a number of international journals dedicated to this area of study, such as, to name a few, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* and *Sociology of Sport Journal*.

It would be unfair to the Italian scientific community to disregard the vast proliferation of studies on sport, especially in the field of education sciences (Farné 2008; Bortolotti and Farné 2011; and, for sport in the urban environment, Zoletto 2015) or in the academically younger area called *scienze motorie* (physical education science). But education is a discipline that maintains a certain attitude towards sport, regarding it as instrumental to the achievement of educational goals, while the *scienze motorie* are struggling to carve out an autonomous space, 'caught in the

difficult balance between anatomy and physiology and psychosocial and psychocultural analysis' (Simonicca 2008, 10). The challenge therefore remains to say something sociological about sport, not in order to multiply disciplinary boundaries, but because sport is already a social fact itself, rich in implications that can be read within a sociological frame (Dunning and Elias 1986).

With the exception of the work of Dal Lago (1990) and Roversi (1992) on football stadiums and fandom as ritual expression of social conflict (see also Roversi and Triani 1995; De Biasi 1998), of Porro's analysis of social sport cultures (2001, 2013) and of Lo Verde's work on leisure studies (2014), sport, seen within a Manichean division between work and free time, is commonly considered as a minor activity, at best a 'safety valve' for a society increasingly pressurised by a hyper-productive conception of life.

The fact that sport, Italian football especially, is a popular cultural phenomenon, in the most common meaning of the term and not in the culturalist one, can begin to explain this 'oversight': this has probably encouraged an elitist attitude by those social sciences concerned with everyday life, which have neglected sport. Whether this happens for extra-scientific reasons or because of 'academic mechanisms that organize subject areas and knowledge, with their more or less implicit hierarchy of relevance and scientific respectability' (Balbo 2001, 485), the exclusion of sport is a matter of fact.

Among the various fields of specialisation and the various sociological analytical perspectives and interpretations in which sports can be framed (cultural studies, gender studies, studies on deviance, media and communication of sports events), what still remains to be focused on is precisely the relationship with urban studies and therefore with the city. The spatial dimension is essential in sport, whether it happens in a public or private place, in a free regime or for a fee; social actors do not move in a space-time vacuum but are in a constant dialectical relationship with space. In defining the blurred boundaries between sport and geography and in highlighting the centrality of two fundamental concepts such as 'place' and 'space', John Bale (2001) defines sport as 'a space science'.

The connections between urban space and sports have been addressed in that international area of studies on youth subcultures, more or less ethicised, that refers to all those bodily practices that are conducted in an urban setting and are referred to as urban sports (Borden 2001). Skateboarding or roller inline or the more recent discipline of parkour constitute 'new forms of sportsmanship' (Ferrero Camoletto 2008) in which, as distinct from traditional sports, learning is not mediated and imparted by an expert, but is transmitted by improvisation and an autonomous exploration of space through body and of body through space. These experiences have usually been read through the lens of lifestyle, or the contrast between a dominant urban culture and a subordinate one (often young, male and of foreign origin) trying to regain citizenship through their specific codes and to give new meanings to space (Queirolo Palmas 2009). At the same time, to the almost total indifference of the social sciences, traditional forms of sport continue to take place on soccer fields, in gyms or dance schools, while renewed modes of body care, from the 'fitness' of the 1980s to contemporary 'wellness' (a new frontier of physical practice in the pursuit of health and beauty), are practised in the relevant urban spaces (Sassatelli 2010).

What seems to be missing, particularly in an Italian context, is an ethnographic attention to these places dedicated to physical activity, which constitute areas of learning, production and reproduction of a new 'urbanity', of new knowledge about the body through which the body can become the means of belonging to a 'community' (Satta and Scandurra 2015). No attention at all has been given to how the 'inhabitants' of these urban gyms (differentiated by sex, age, national origin, social class, biographical paths etc.) give a sense to sport that is not reducible to a 'simple' physical activity. It is therefore necessary to gain a better understanding of the meaning

of these places within the urban map. Exceptions to this lack of attention are Zoletto's studies (2010) on cricket and football practised by young children of migrants in the north-east; Antonelli and Scandurra (2010) on the boxing gym in the Bolognina neighbourhood of Bologna; and, albeit with a view closer to consumption studies, Roberta Sassatelli's research (2000) on fitness gyms.

Although internationally there appears to be a repositioning of 'sports studies', which is leading to the emergence of the field of Physical Cultural Studies (Friedman and Van Ingen 2011), we believe that in Italy a reflection anchored to ethnography on the intersections between bodies, sports and urban areas would be of great benefit: not only for purely academic purposes, but to enrich a reflection on public space which arises from those places (gyms, sports fields, but also squares and parks) where canons of corporeality/subjectivity are built and rebuilt, defining which bodies may legitimately occupy public space and which are to be excluded or marginalised.

This special issue explores these processes in the framework of the complex urban Italian network, which mostly consists of small and medium-sized cities and to which the social sciences have rarely paid attention. Opening the issue is an essay by Roberta Sassatelli introducing themes that will be developed on an empirical basis by the monographic essays. Sassatelli explores fitness culture as an urban phenomenon. Using data from Italy and the UK, the author develops a micro-sociology of the spatiality of the gym that helps to approach this institution from within, deconstructing those claims that contribute to its cultural location as a key element in contemporary urban lifestyles. The article looks first at how fitness culture is negotiated through the marshalling of structured variety within the spatiality and temporality of gyms. It then explores the specificity of fitness as urban, instrumental leisure as compared with other forms of active recreation or sports available in urban contexts and the kind of subjectivity and embodiment which fitness culture normatively sustains. The conclusion proposes the adoption of a critical perspective on both urban living and fitness activities and the overcoming of a functionalist view that, by posing fitness as a healthy answer to an unhealthy lifestyle, actually feeds the city-gym dualism. As suggested by Sassatelli: 'Other ways of organising fitness activities – in gyms or outside them – as well as other ways of moving, training, exercising, using the urban space and working through its spatiality and temporality might provide for quite fertile terrains for empowering our bodies and souls'.

Subsequently, the focus is shifted to three specific urban environments: Bologna, certain neighbourhoods of central and north-eastern Italian cities, and Cagliari. Employing interpretative keys such as generation and national belonging, the essays describe sporting practices by groups of young people, mainly males, and children, engaged in activities such as boxing, cricket and football. In the environments discussed, the boxing gym and the places where cricket is played – in formal and informal settings – represent areas for building a sense of citizenship, especially for 'second generation' immigrants, who every day experience these physical contexts as situational shelters in comparison with the reality outside. On the other hand the football school appears as a context where children's rights are rhetorically promoted while their substantive citizenship within public space is spatially restricted.

Giuseppe Scandurra's essay describes the social organisation of the boxing gym Tranvieri, located in Bolognina – a working-class neighbourhood of Bologna that has been rapidly changing over the last 20 years due to the closure of factories and the arrival of immigrants – and attended by young men of foreign origin. Studying their practices of everyday life, the author investigates the problems, needs and hopes of second-generation immigrants, born in Italy but without formal citizenship. In this scenario the boxing gym is for them 'not a solution to the

frustration inflicted by a social world they perceive as indifferent if not hostile towards them, rather the possibility of not being represented within it as excluded persons’.

Taking an educational point of view, Davide Zoletto’s essay proposes an empirically founded analysis of the ways in which public playgrounds can be power-laden and could in this way affect the opportunities of post-migrant youth to share everyday practices and to build up a community of practices in ‘non-formal and informal’ learning environments. Zoletto’s research found that playing cricket in public resulted in a growth of visibility for migrant and post-migrant players in north-east Italian neighbourhoods. And this ‘growth of visibility led to the allocation of cricket and cricket players to specific areas which can be seen as something positive for playing cricket, but not so positive to promote communities of practice in which migrant, post-migrant and native players can interact with each other’.

Caterina Satta’s article, recognising the importance of the body in children’s identity construction and in their space within society, chooses a football academy as a means of observing the ambiguous construction of children’s citizenship through spatial borders and body training. Children are, in fact, more than any other group, subjected to a set of spatial bans and prohibitions that confine them within specifically targeted places during their free time. The article investigates the internal organisation of the academy, the adult–child relations within it, and the role played by organised sport contexts in the urban generational order. The conclusions stress the contradiction detectable in a structured football club academy as a site that, on the one hand, promotes children’s rights to play and, on the other, restricts their substantive citizenship within public space.

The closing three essays relate to the emerging phenomenon of parkour. Those by Sebastiano Benasso and Luisa Stagi each examine the meaning given by groups of *traceurs* in Genoa, male and female, to a physical discipline designed to reappropriate urban spaces in a playful and recreational manner; the essay by Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto, Davide Sterchele and Carlo Genova offers a view of the internal pressures between experimentation and formalisation within this practice, describing the current policies of the association for the promotion of sport, UISP (Unione Italiana Sport per Tutti).

Benasso, while describing some routine use of public spaces in the city from the specific point of view of *traceurs*, offers a view of the internal tensions of the city of Genoa, outlining something we may call ‘genoesity’. In terms of values, Genoese *traceurs* share some of their orientation with other parkour groups in Europe and North America: their narratives and their practices represent an attempt to define new ways of moving and new meanings that challenge orthodox uses of the city’s spaces. But, at the same time, in the urban environment of Genoa, *traceurs* have to face several forms of resistance, in terms of both the actual possibility of drawing pathways through the ordinary flow of the city, and the disciplinary gaze of the citizens.

By analysing the gendered implications of female practices of parkour, Stagi discusses the potential of parkour to cross the gendered division of space, of sport and of other symbolic territories that are brought into play by ‘risk-taking sports’. Investigating the concept of ‘gender manoeuvring’, she discusses how female parkour can be considered a subversive action, showing how in Genoa – a city with strong boundaries between public and private spaces – it resulted in a ‘performance of aggression on boundaries’. In this sense she asserts that Genoa is ‘the ideal territory because the symbolic and political value of a performance truly becomes effective and therefore makes the final result of gender manoeuvring feasible’.

Finally, the article by Camoletto, Sterchele and Genova investigates the relationship between parkour as an unstructured and culturally innovative practice and the UISP as a sports promotion body open to organisational and cultural experimentation. The authors look at the role played by

the UISP in the diffusion and legitimisation of parkour within the Italian context. The results demonstrate that parkour's incorporation in a sport-for-all organisation like the UISP 'provides *traceurs* with a safe and legitimised space, which is however "loose" enough to maintain the fluidity of the practice. Nonetheless, by enabling the coexistence of different and competing definitions and uses of parkour, this fluid organisational space reproduces tensions among *traceurs* and weakens their voice in the UISP's decision-making processes.'

While working on this special issue, one fact emerged clearly: its investigations are based on young and often very young subjects. Indeed, organised or informal sports activities, according to the most recent statistics on Italian everyday life (Istat 2014), are practised mostly by children and young people. This is not simply a collection of essays about inclusion or exclusion from the public space, but about young people and citizenship more generally.

Ludic and physical activities in urban space are undergoing a progressive restriction through prohibitions, penalties, fences, installation of street furniture or flooring to prevent any physical practice contrary to an adult definition of appropriate behaviour (Németh 2006). Consider for example the urban security measures (Law 125/98) adopted by many municipalities in Italy to deal with the problems of coexistence brought about by sporting activities in public spaces, measures that mostly end up restricting the freedoms of children and young people (Satta 2014b).

Therefore, we may conclude that this monographic issue captures a dialectic existing in Italian cities between generational demands for sport and play, which aim to break the socio-spatial urban order and test new bodily spatial patterns, and local government and micro-government measures aimed at control and normalisation.

Notes on contributors

Caterina Satta is currently Senior Fellow at the University of Ferrara. She works in the field of the sociology of childhood and everyday life. Her main research interests are: children's spatialities and socio-spatial processes of exclusion/inclusion; children's culture and everyday life; play, sport and urban space. Among her publications are: *Bambini e adulti. La nuova sociologia dell'infanzia* (Carocci 2012); 'Una città giusta è una città a misura di bambini? Note critiche su un immaginario urbano', *Mondi Migranti* 1 (2014); and *A Proper Place for a Proper Childhood? Children's Spatiality in a Play Centre* (Palgrave, forthcoming).

Giuseppe Scandurra is Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Ferrara. He has published numerous essays and books on the subject of urban anthropology. Among his most recent publications are: *Tranvieri. Etnografia di una palestra di pugilato* (with F. Antonelli, Aracne, 2010), *Memorie di uno spazio pubblico. Piazza Verdi a Bologna* (with E. Castelli, L. Tancredi and A. Tolomelli, Clueb, 2011), *Tracce Urbane* (with A. Cancellieri, Franco Angeli, 2012) and *Antropologia e Studi Urbani* (Este Edition, 2013). He is currently conducting research on a group of football 'ultras' in Bologna and an ethnographic study on the relationship between the 'Arab Spring' and the art world in Tunisia.

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