Special Issue Distances

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory, Tourism, Technology

Guest Editors

Anna Maria Zaccaria
Maria Camilla Fraudatario

Editor in chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Editorial manager: Carmine Urciuoli

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Anna Maria Zaccaria, Maria Camilla Fraudatario[1]

Distances
Places, Practices, Knowledges

The Environmental and Territorial Sociologists' conference held in Naples on 8-9 July 2021 was among the first to break the lengthy lockdown imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst persisting uncertainties about the advisability of re-establishing physical proximity without incurring significant risks of contagion, the conference was conducted in a hybrid manner (in-person and online), with many attendees participating physically.

In a pervasive climate of pandemic tension, which would require at least another year to subside, the topic of "Distances" emerged as an inevitable subject to address. While central to social sciences in general and territorial sociology in particular, during the pandemic the theme of distances also became paramount in public, political, and scientific discourse, often leading to rhetorical and semantic digressions. The preventive logic based on physical distancing indeed influenced governmental and health countermeasures against the pandemic for at least two years. Epidemiologists were the primary advocates for the concept of social distancing; and according to the more pessimistic among them, lifestyles characteristic of the pre-COVID-19 era would no longer be possible.

Amid the pandemic's ripple, the concept of distance has been progressively integrated into associative life' practices and discourses, defining new forms of cooperation but also igniting social and political conflicts. In media narratives, it has become the most recurrent term across languages. In essence, the concept of distance found itself at the heart of a stream of discourses and practices that adulterated its original significance conceptualized by social sciences: in part distorting it and in part, perhaps, modernizing it. Specifically, the term social distance improperly became synonymous with social distancing, understood as the set of actions aimed at containing the spread of infection. This inappropriate juxtaposition of two concepts from distinct fields (sociology and medicine) effectively diminished the spatial, cultural, and dynamic dimensions of the "distance" concept, altering its essence and meaning.

Generally, the pivotal issue remains the relationship between physical and social distance; the measures taken against the COVID-19 pandemic spurred sociological contemplation on this relationship, highlighting the lexical association's ambiguity. An initial observation worth noting is that social distance implies a deliberate choice, whereas physical distance is a rather tangible possibility. Social distancing, understood as the reduction of contacts, is a non-pharmacological epidemiological concept, aimed at limiting physical proximity to reduce infection probability and control the spread of contagious diseases (Bennato, 2020). The linguistic ambiguity in social distancing lies in its emphasis on the social aspect of the term. During various pandemic lockdown phases, physical distance was more enforced than the social. The latter, in some ways, was mitigated by resorting to digital and social media to maintain relationships, often even reviving weakened ones (Bennato, 2020).

In this context, the Naples conference aimed to refocus on the concept of Distances (intentionally using the plural) at various levels (spatial, practices, knowledge), necessitating contributions from various disciplines. It also underscores the need to develop new analytical methods and approaches while staying true to the traditional frameworks established in sociological knowledge.

It is known that this line of study was initiated by George Simmel, one of the first to reference the concept of social distance (Historizes Wörterbuch der Philosophie, 1908) in his reflections on societal spatial arrangements. For Simmel (1989) space gains meaning and manifests as a psychic content when individuals transition from alienation to interaction. In the early 1920s, amidst the burgeoning empirical approach to urban reality characterizing the Chicago School, Robert Park (1924) would then further this perspective, somewhat diverging from Simmel's view.

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The concept of social distance was translated into an attempt to quantify proximity or intimacy between individuals or groups, mutual trust, and perceived similarity in terms of culture, beliefs, and identity. Space was seen as an external category to society, an objective element posing constraints to social activities, overlooking the intrinsic cultural dimension that Simmel (1989) attributed to spatial processes.

In the subsequent developments of sociological reflection – backed by empirical evidence search – social distance was conceptually formalized in various ways: affective (Bogardus, 1933); normative (Durkheim, 1971); interactive (Fisher, 1982; Boissevain and Mitchell, 1973); cultural (Bourdieu, 1994). In all these perspectives, the physical, symbolic, and spatial implications retain significant relevance. In different contexts, the use and organization of spaces, along with their symbolic and cultural meanings, can be indicators of social distance/proximity (Warner, 1949). Moreover, as noted by Simmel, spatial distance promotes the development of social distance between individuals as it intervenes in relational processes, thereby favoring intellectual ones. Simmel highlights that the difference between closeness and distance is notably relative: the sociological meaning of spatial conditions for each is not always consistent. This is even truer in modern times: physical and social spaces have lost their co-planarity to intersect and refract each other (Mandich, 1996).

The contributions gathered in this volume based on a selection of articles offer reflections on the concept of distance in light of the pandemic experience and its repercussions. On one hand, these repercussions impact the very articulation of the concept itself; on the other, they influence certain social processes which necessitate the invocation of the distance concept for comprehension.

Colloca, Lipari, and Lombardo delve into the topic of the territorialization of social inequalities through the lens of international migrations and settlement models in urban contexts. The focus is directed towards the extent to which these models delineate distances between the center and peripheries, both within cities and on a global scale. In terms of spatial organization, the concentration of immigrant/foreigner groups and communities can be highlighted not only as an indicator of segregation and social marginality but also as a representation of social distance structures and power dynamics.

Razzano and Bernardi investigate specific practices of mutual aid and grassroots solidarity that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. They present the case of Brigate Volontarie per l'Emergenza (Volunteer Emergency Brigades – hereinafter BVEs), born in Milan during the Covid-19 emergency to support people in need, discussing the hypothesis of their potential in reducing both urban and social distances. The resources anchoring these practices are both material and immaterial in nature, but are invariably spatially situated.

Sabatino, Madonia and Ragozini introduce the case of the "Scuola Viva" program, initiated by the Campania Region, which engages public, private, and citizen actors to bolster local learning communities. More specifically, the initiative aims to combat school dropout and educational poverty. Through the reconstruction of territorial disadvantage maps based on synthetic dropout risk indicators, the authors probe the implications of the project in terms of its effects on social distances predicated on socio-economic and demographic factors.

Marotta, Minervini, and Scotti broach the subject of the sustainability of the Energy Transition. They observe that, in combating the crisis induced by the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Union has allocated significant investments to promote actions in the ecological transition and digitalization sectors. The necessity – and opportunity – of involving diverse "new" actors in these processes complicates the decision-making landscape. The main impending is perceived as the "epistemic distance" among the actors involved in the transition process. This gap undermines the perspective of transdisciplinarity.

Two years after the conference held in Naples, the thought-provoking insights provided by these contributions remain highly topical. They suggest avenues of research and analysis on the concept of Distance, to which the end of the pandemic crisis is progressively restoring a meaning free from ambiguity, yet no less intricate and dynamic.

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