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“The politics of territory in ethnically polarized cities: looking for a comparative framework”

Marco Allegra
PhD University of Turin
marco.allegra@unito.it

Anna Casaglia
PhD candidate University of Milan
anna.casaglia@gmail.com

Paolo Napolitano
PhD candidate University of Turin
paolo.napolitano@unito.it

Abstract

The paper represents a preliminary theoretical recognition for a project on the role of divided cities in ethno national conflicts. This project will be carried out through a comparative research on three or four case studies.

The founding hypothesis of this project is that territory represents one of the main dimensions of ethno national conflicts, because of the nature of the conflict itself and the use of territorial strategy by its actors. In these situations, the presence of “polarized cities” (Bollens 2007) represents both one of the main bones of contention and a fundamental element in re-shaping the very nature of the conflict. From an analytic point of view, polarized cities represent a good point of observation to understand the link between territorial (urban) policies and the dynamics of ethnic conflicts and of divided societies in general.

The goal of this paper is therefore to sketch out a general framework to define the various kinds of ethnic conflicts with reference to macro territorial variables, such as: the historical background (i.e.: the dynamics of state expansion and contraction), the political and institutional context (i.e.: the structure of the access to decision-making process) and the territorial shape of the polity (i.e.: the relation between central authority and territorially-defined sub-units), the distribution and consistence of the various ethnic groups (i.e.: cohesiveness and concentration), the presence of contested territorially defined resources (and cities in particular), etc. This framework should operate to permit the choice of appropriate case studies and refine the hypothesis to be tested in future researches.

This paper represents an intermediate step: our primary goal will be to define the theoretical framework and the main variables and secondly to receive some useful feedback for the case study selection.

1. Introduction

The general aim of the research is to study the way the territorial dimension influences the different scales of conflict we refer to: the national/institutional one and the urban one. Specifically, we want to investigate the role played by the dynamics developing in urban contexts characterized by a strong polarization and placed at the core of broader institutional conflicts: the divided cities (Bollens, 2008).

From an analytical point of view, the aim of this study is to relate the urban dynamics to the conflict trends: through the study of divided cities we will try to understand how do certain urban policies impact on the perspectives of conflict resolution. From a specific academic point of view, the aim of this work is to fulfil the existing gap between the literature on conflicts and the one on cities as privileged environments for a number of social, economical and political interactions which could have a strong influence on the conflict trends.

2. The research project: assumptions, theoretical background, analytical framework, hypothesis

We will now try to sketch out the main features of our research project, by describing the general assumptions constituting the foundation of this work and presenting a model of circular interaction between the level of territorial policies in the cities and the wider dimension of the conflict.

2.1. General assumptions

The research starts from two assumptions representing both the reasons of our interest in the category of divided cities and the he basis of this work. The first one relates to the territorial dimension of conflicts, while the second one relates to the territorial nature of the strategy of the actors.

2.1.1. The territorial dimension of conflicts

The first assumption is that the way in which conflicts are structured on territory constitutes a key element to define their nature. In general terms, we are interested in conflicts where actors competes – both in the urban dimension and in the general one – for an institutional stake: the modification or

the maintenance of certain borders, the definition of the territorial jurisdiction, the access to decision making processes, etc. In this situation, the cause of conflict is that actors perceive their own claims as incompatible – or partially compatible – with others' claims. The radical formulation describing this situation is that of a zero-sum game, where the advancing of a certain agenda determines a symmetrical withdrawal of the other.

As the public power and the decision-making arenas are territorially defined (Weber's classical definition of the State relate to its monopoly of the legitimate use of violence on a certain area), collective decisions and claims to power and resources are characterized in different ways by this territorial dimension. Thus, many times conflicts are fought to influence the division of power between the central decision-making sphere and the different territorial subunits (e.g. reform of the state's constitutional structure, local autonomies' grant, annexation, partition and secession, etc.). At the same time, conflicts often raise from disputes for the control of specific territorial areas (e.g. areas containing strategic, material, symbolical or infrastructural resources).

2.1.2. Conflict and actors' territorial strategies

Our second assumption is that the territorial dimension represents a key element, not only in determining the nature of conflict, but also in influencing the actions of the actors involved. Physical space contains material resources and is charged with symbolic meanings, which are available for social groups; consequently, space is a very important tool for the definition of any social group's actions and for the construction of social identities and collective memories.

Therefore, besides being the matter under dispute, territory represents the arena in which the different actors relate with each other using territorial strategies (e.g. the gerrymandering of political and administrative units, the regulation of people and goods fluxes, the territorial planning, etc.) to advance their agenda and/or to promote solutions. Nevertheless, literature on cities rarely deal with nationalism and national conflicts (and vice versa) as if the urban and the State scales were separated and self-sufficient (Anderson 2008). One of the aims of this project is, then, to investigate these connections, and to fill this gap in the analysis.

2.2. Theoretical background

The theoretical framework focus on several domains: conflict analysis, divided cities, public policies and decision making processes.

2.2.1. Conflict analysis in social sciences

In the present work we will focus on the conflict analysis, without neglecting the classical approaches of political and philosophical thought on the issue of conflict. From Machiavelli and Hobbes to Hegel and Marx, political thinkers described the nature of conflict in terms of opposition and underlined its potential in modifying the social order. Simmel's (1908) work, investigating conflict in terms of opposition as well as integration, marked a change in conflict analysis. Coser (1956) suggested indeed that a conflict implies a relation and that the possibility to settle the contrast cannot be excluded a priori. Galtung (1975) and the stream of peace studies attempted, on one hand, to overcome the logic of mere opposition related to conflict analysis; on the other hand, to extend the inner society dynamics to the inter-state level. Following Tilly and Tarrow (2006), a conflict is generally composed by three elements: a (1) subject that poses a (2) claim, and an (3) object that receives it. The conflict derives from a general incompatibility between the subject and the object relating to the claim considered.

This definition still presents a high level of generality, and it fits to a wide range of conflicts: an armed conflict, a social conflict, a conflict among individuals. More specific conflict theories developed within respect to a wide range of objects, academic disciplines or schools; conflicts within societies, inter-state conflicts, security studies, etc. Indeed, if we maintain the general definition of conflict we provided, these theories are not in contrast but refer instead to different levels, units of analysis and actors.

The literature on social movements (Della Porta e Diani 1997, Mc Adam, McCarthy e Zald 1996, Tilly e Tarrow 2006) focuses on the dynamics of conflicts within societies, in particular on the conditions and mechanisms favouring the appearance and the persistence of a conflict situation. The idea of *contentious politics* (Tilly e Tarrow 2006) is defined by the intersection between conflict, collective action and political actors involved, both institutional and not institutional. The cooperative approaches (Galtung 1975, Glasl 1999) focus their attention on the solution and the

improvement of conditions in situation of conflict. These approaches do not consider the historical and political background of conflicts, and look at them as separate from reality.

The present research work will refer to these two main schools, in order to understand, on one hand, the general mechanisms of a conflict, and on the other hand, the suggestions for possible solutions.

2.2.2. The city as a research object and the divided city

Sociological literature defines urban areas as a crucial spatial scale for the understanding of more general social and political processes. The city is a key to interpret economical, urban and administrative policies oriented towards the territorial management. (Castells and Hall 1994, Sassen 1991, Gottmann 1991). Studying this specific level of the social life allows the comprehension of complex issues from a privileged point of view since many social phenomena origin, physically and symbolically, in the city. In his analysis of the urban dimension, Simmel (1998) underlines how the sphere of influence of the city on social relations does not end within its geographical borders, but extends on a broader range.

The urban arena is also characterized by the presence of conflicting groups and élites competing for the managing of resources (Castells, 1983). Movements and conflicts thus develop more frequently in cities, and they usually have consequences on the national and international levels (Castells 1983, Melucci, 1984). In the same way, conflicts emerging on a broader level than the urban one, acquire a peculiar intensity within the city, which becomes “flashpoint, platform and/or independent focus of broader conflict” (Bollens 2007: 14).

Cities concentrates political, commercial and financial powers (Glassner and Fahrer 2004, Rapoport 1993; Hall 1993) and a wide variety of resources. Cities are indicators of the state productive assessment (Landau-Wells 2008): their good functioning (in terms of infrastructures, services and social capital) is strategically relevant on a national scale. At the same time, urban systems contain symbols, myths and memories, which are an essential tool for the construction of national identity. Thus, they become “open-air museum of the nation” (Wagenaar 2001: 350) and have an important role of social bond. Finally, urban areas are often characterized by the proximity of different ethnic and/or religious groups, so they can more easily become the scenario for conflicts and strives.

The city therefore contains material, relational and symbolical resources, and social actors compete

for their control and use (Bollens 2001). For this reason the research will consider “the urban scale as a site for or actor in the resolution of international social conflicts, ethno national conflicts or inter-state war” (Stanley 2003: 11-12).

Divided cities are defined as territories where material or symbolical conflicts divide ethnic, religious or national groups. The academic debate on divided cities, however, is still not very developed, and the existing theories are not homogeneous: it is not easy to define this kind of cities, because of the ambiguity of concepts such as division and conflict.

Can we talk about division in situation of social segregation? Is it enough to find of conflicts between different social groups in an urban contexts to talk about contested cities? If so, the majority of contemporary metropolis could be defined as divided. For example, the study "Divided cities" by Fainstein, Gordon and Harloe (1992) – focused on the cases of London and New York from an economical point of view – described an high degree of social polarization separating rich and poor people; this kind of polarization produces consequences on the spatial configuration of the two cities and generates conflicts as well.

Other attempts to identify a more restricted definition of divided city have been made, by placing the city within the perspective of wider and not-economic conflicts.

Anderson (2008) distinguishes among cities divided between two nation-states (e.g. Berlin, Gorizia/Nova Gorica), cities ethnically divided (e.g. Los Angeles, Johannesburg), and cities divided from an ethno-national point of view (e.g. Jerusalem, Nicosia, Belfast). Only cities in the latter category are considered by Anderson as “divided cities in a contested state”. In his explanation, a number of essential criteria define the divided city: ethno-cultural factors (such as the presence of linguistic or religious differences); geo-political (such as the processes that shaped those territories during the period of formation of national entities), etc. Anderson underlines how the analysis of these factors can help to identify common origins of these kind of conflicts and to better understand their peculiarities. Anderson’s categories are useful to define our field of research, but they seem to limit too much the definition of divided cities.

Bollens (1999, 2001, 2007) includes in his list of divided cities Jerusalem, Belfast, Nicosia, Johannesburg, Barcelona, Bask cities, Mostar and Sarajevo. His analysis considers stresses as a crucial element the shift from social divisions to a condition of political polarization: divided cities

are therefore characterized by the presence of violent political conflicts originating from ethnic or national cleavages. This definition introduces the elements of violence and of territorial claim as a feature of divided cities, but allows us to include in the category cities not formally divided, or in which ethnic and national divisions are not always present at the same time.

One of the purposes of this project is to systematize these diverse categorizations, in order to define more clearly the object of our research. We aim to develop a category of divided cities that can be functional for analytic purposes, but can also contribute to the theoretical debate.

2.2.3. Policies and actors

The focus on urban policies represents a relatively new element in the field of conflict analysis. Through the analysis of policies in divided cities, the research aims at describing and understanding potentially ambiguous or non-linear decision making processes. In these processes it is difficult to find a single binding decision: progresses are of incremental nature (Lindblom 1959, Majone e Wildavsky 1984) and results are not necessarily coherent with the actors' initial goals.

The research thereby considers complex interactions between individuals, groups and institutions that are part of the process of decision-making and implementation. From this point of view, we are interested in considering dynamics and results of the policies as the stake of a conflict between actors, instead of trying to derive them from the existence of a given structure of legal incentives and constraints or from the rational choices of groups and public institutions (as in public choices theories; Downs 1957, Olson 1965).

At the same time, the research tries to avoid both asking direct questions about which regimes favour or not specific contents of the policy (Wolfe 1989, Freeman 1989) and referring to a deterministic impact on policy trends of a given economic, technological or ideological context (Sharansky 1971, Bennet 1991). It could be more fruitful to follow instead the idea of a plural – and not necessarily rational or even well-informed – policy making sphere. The focus is therefore on a variety of actors and policy tools (Doern e Phidd 1992, Baxter-Moore 1987) that are present on the scene at the same moment, and on a complex pattern for the formulation of the policies themselves (C. O. Jones 1984).

The research will therefore concentrate on the existence of different actors – “units capable of

developing a recognizable course of action (individuals, groups or collective/corporate entities)” (Teisman 2000) – on their own identities and practices, and on the way they interact forming transversal coalitions (Jenkins-Smith e Sabatier 1993). Empirically, the research will focus on specific cycles of policy elaboration and implementation, following the “policy round” model (Teisman 2000), as opposed to models articulated on “phases” (Mintzberg 1976) or “streams” (Kingdon 1984).

The aim of the research is therefore to put the reciprocal relations between actors at the centre of the stage, without identifying in the first place a single policy maker or a given mechanic of the relationships. This kind of approach should introduce an interesting element in the field of conflict analysis, de-emphasising the idea of binary oppositions and neat boundaries between the actors.

2.3. The analytical framework. The conflict, between urban and national scale: a circular-interaction model

Our main interest is to study the interaction between the two scales of the conflict – the urban and the national one – through the study of the divided city, representing the set of such interaction. From this standpoint, our main hypothesis is that the conflict within urban contexts – and in particular around urban policies in areas such as public administration, urban planning, managing of the financial resources, residential distribution of the different social, religious, national and ethnic groups – represents one of the crucial factors influencing the dynamics on the national scale.

This research hypothesis can be tested through a circular-interaction model concerning the urban and the national scales of the conflict (Yiftachel 1992, Gurr 1993, Bollens 1998). In a given moment, a national conflict is characterized by the existence of two or more opposite sets of identities and political, cultural and territorial claims. The incompatibility between opposite institutional claims affects a specific urban area – the divided city – shaping the general context of the urban government.

This contrast is expressed through diverging visions (governing ideologies) on how the city should be administered and developed; these visions and their mutual, complex interactions shape the direction of the urban policies, which in turn affect a set of fundamental issues: the control of the territory, the distribution of resources, the participation of residents in the policy making process, the cultural and territorial identity of the different groups, etc. The outcomes of these policies do not

affect the conflict only on its urban scale, but also contribute to redefine the general features (issues, meanings, objectives, balance between forces) of the conflict on a wider (national) scale.

The circular-interaction model can then be synthesized as follows:

- a) the national level of the conflict: it is the conflicting relation between two or more actors who compete over the institutional sphere – boundaries, government, resources, etc. – on which they have partially or totally incompatible claims;
- b) the urban level of the divided city: the conflict described above affects a specific urban area within the range of the conflict; in this area we see the rise of different governing ideologies and visions on urban scale;
- c) the policies: these diverging visions translate into a complex and contested process of urban decision-making, which produces urban policies;
- d) the outcomes at the urban level: these policies produce transformations of the cities and of the conflict on the urban scale;
- e) from the city to the conflict: these transformations on the urban scale produce significant transformations on the national scale of the conflict.

Ideally, this cycle of interactions takes place within a specific period of time (T0-T1); nevertheless, we assume a constant, mutual interaction and reciprocal influence between the urban and national level. The focus on the divided cities serves the aim of observing a continuous and mutual relation between the two scales of the conflict and not to separate them either in space or time.

The idea of a “cycle” of interaction, however, maintain an important analytical and methodological value. The time of the research will be the time of the urban policy’s phases, and the time of the conflict’s main changes. Empirically, we will analyse the development over time of a significant decision-making process, which will be strategically chosen when selecting the three case studies.

2.3.1 Analytical stages

The analysis proceeds in several stages and the following scheme defines an interactive framework among the different levels of conflict. The distinction among levels, once again, is merely functional: the city and the conflict coexist and they are part of the same reality. This allows us to systematize the analysis of events we cover; the framework of circular interactions allows us to organize the research in several steps.

The levels (a) and (b) will be analysed through the construction of a typology that defines conflicts, and among them, the divided cities. The following list of basic observable variables is related to historical, political and territorial elements:

- Political and Historical background of the conflict;
- Institutional context and the territorial jurisdiction;
- The actors involved (the subjects of claim) and the criteria of definition their identity;
- The type of claims and the issues involved;
- The claim and their mutual relations.
- The spatial organization and the representation of the territory.

At this stage, the problematic point consists on the choice of the variables in order to operationalize our typology.

The selection of the case study represents the most sensitive issue for the present work. We can articulate the process of selection into two main stages:

- The first stage sees a quantitative analysis on a large number of countries. Using large databases on conflicts, we will be able to select the cases that have a common outcome: the ethno national conflict;
- The second stage sees a qualitative analysis on a small number of selected cases that present the same variable – the ethno-national feature – and share a common outcome: the divided city.

The levels (c) and (d) will be the core of the research on the case studies, in order to understand the role of actors with respect to the definition, the progress and the outcomes of the policies. The analysis of decision-making process represents the tool we choose in order to analyse several fundamental areas related to the construction of urban policies; in this perspective, the definition of actors' interaction does not constitute the starting point but the research aim. The main areas examined will be:

- The presence of formal discrimination in the system of policies and urban planning;
- The presence of institutions and organizations at the local level separated from the institutional framework, and the development of cross collective actions among rival groups;
- The presence of mechanisms or formal/informal sites for the coordination of citizens;
- Internal cohesion among groups – mainly referred to the actors involved in the decision making process – with respect to the issues of territorial policies;
- The quality of citizens' participation in the choices related to urban policies;
- The level of residential segregation among the different communities and the influence of policy-making;
- The distribution of public resources and services in ethnically identifiable areas;
- The presence of frictions between the national and local level of decision making.

Mapping the events related to the development of certain urban policies will provide a framework to analyze decision-making processes that are potentially ambiguous or not clear, where it is difficult to identify a unique, principal and binding decision, and that proceed in an incremental way (Lindblom 1959, Majone e Wildavsky 1984). The policy round model is the framework we use for this stage, it is in opposition both with the phase model and the stream model (Teisman 2000): our interest here is to put the actors as the core of our observation, without identifying a single policy-maker dealing with the terms of the problem and its solution.

The research will focus on a plurality of actors, on their different definitions and objectives, and on the way they interact. In each round and for each chosen sector, we will define a series of relevant problems, the actors involved and their claims, the type of action taken, the interaction among actors and the outcome of the final decisions. The decision-making process could be divided into two elements: the *learning*, that is, once the different positions and the possible solutions with respect to a given problem reach a definition, it is possible to analyse how the actors involved react

because of the knowledge they have of each other; and the *participation*, that is, the direct or indirect involvement in the process of several actors – and not only the institutional ones (Gallo 2008, Arielli, Scotto 2003). The combination of these two elements allows us to break up the decision making process by focusing on the actors and to understand a more general level of complexity of the political choice.

A preliminary mapping of main events will allow us to individuate recurrent elements related to the outcomes (for example standstills, transformation in the nature of the problem, the trend +/- of human and material sustainability of the conflict, etc) or to the mechanism (for example, formalization of the procedure or not, application or de facto impasse, interaction of actors in terms of participation/conflict, etc.). This scheme will be used as a map to be investigated through the study of the considered cases; by starting from the systematization obtained through the use of rounds, several in depth interviews will allow us to stress the qualitative aspects related to the actors' motivations and interactions.

The levels (d) and (e) try to explain the influence of the urban dimension on the nature of the conflict. This type of interaction could be evaluated in two ways:

- with respect to the urban scale, the outcomes of such policies could be compared with the premises and the aims previously expressed by actors, and with changes in their identities (for example: were the actors able to elaborate a set of policies coherent with their claim? How did these claims change?).
- with respect to the conflict, it could be evaluated if and how the urban policies influence the main issues of the conflict, previously identified, modifying the institutional and social geography also on the national scale (for example, certain policies modify boundaries and jurisdictions, they contribute to changes in the composition of population or make the cities as the “favourite places” for encounters and the clashes of social groups, etc.).

3. Expected outcomes

Our analytical and methodological choices come from the need to analyse, from a comparative point of view, complex and non-linear processes of policy-making. This methodology privileges – starting from the definition of typologies – the qualitative side of the analysis, using a dual focused approach model (George e Smoke 1974, Shnabel 2001, Bollens 2007) to carry out the comparative study.

Starting from this framework, we can now define the expected outcomes of the research; this model enables us to envision the outcomes on different stages:

- the definition of a typology containing a wide range of cases of conflicts and divided cities;
- the production of in depth analysis for each case study;
- the test of a few but significant hypothesis from the comparison of the selected case studies.

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