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Territorial conflicts and new forms of left-wing political organization: from political opportunity structure to structural contexts of opportunities.

Tommaso Vitale

Abstract

Empirical studies of territorial conflicts in Italy show the aversion of local movements against left wing political parties. The closure of political opportunities structure does not explain the emergence of mobilisation, but it shapes the relational field of contention and has consequences on the political polarisation. I discuss the actuality of the concept of structure for sociological research; the second section is focused on the kind of historicism developed in contextual political analysis; the third section copes with sociological theory centred on opportunities and not only on constraints. The last section introduces the prominence of considering structural parameters of the population to improve the sociology of territorial conflicts, precisely around main three types of variation in a population (heterogeneity, inequality, and consolidation) to study and test hypothesis related to the political effects of social structures.

Keywords: territorial conflicts; urban sociology; social change; social structure; structural contexts of opportunities.

Biography

[Tommaso Vitale](#) (Ph.D 2003, University of Milano) is Associate Professor of Sociology at Sciences Po (Paris, France), scientific director of the master "[Governing the Large Metropolis](#)" and member of the [Centre d'études européennes](#) (CEE), of [LIEPP](#), and of the research program "[Cities are back in town](#)". He has published on conflicts and urban change, spatial segregation, social service planning, and élite and local governance of industrial restructuring. Current researches topics: 1) Tensions between endogenous and exogenous mechanisms of urban change; 2) Structural contexts of opportunities; 3) Mechanisms of racism diffusion and legitimization. His publications can be downloaded on spire.sciencespo.fr.

I'm very glad to enter into a conversation with Loris Caruso on his paper for *Sociologica*. The paper applies, discusses and refines the concept of political opportunity structure (POS). It is grounded in a precise empirical work on the "permanent mobilisation" against the Dal Molin base in Vicenza, looking at coalition internal division, at popular distrust and hostility towards left wing political parties, and at the related multilevel conflict in a context in which "social conflicts are not included in the institutional system through codified processes of social negotiation". The first main result shows that the closure of the POS is a factor for mobilising, and this is counter-intuitive compared to the available literature. At the same time, the paper stresses how much the POS shapes the relational fields of activists interaction, as well as it contributes to their representations and feelings, and -in an indirect manner- to the overall outcomes of the mobilisation. It also compares the Vicenza contention with other territorial conflicts in Italy: with the NoTav and the NoPonte cases but especially with the No-Muos case, less explored by

empirical researches on environmental and peace mobilisations, providing very important factual information.

In my comments I want to show the relevance of this paper, what it has to offer to the sociology of urban and territorial conflicts, as well as to the general understanding of the trends of political change in Italy. I do not want to defend the POS approach; I am delighted of the improvement and refinement developed by Caruso on issues of mobilisation emergence, as well as of mobilisation outcomes. Criticism to certain determinisms of a trivial use of POS is mostly welcome! Political effects of structures of opportunities are important, but they cannot be forecasted through an algorithm linking six variables. Temptation to look for general covering laws is not good for our understanding of social and political change. In my paper I want to make room for a reflection on the importance of looking at structured political opportunities not as a magic formula for the emergence of collective action. On the contrary, I will follow what Caruso shows on the link between structured opportunities and political interaction in contexts where the political sphere is almost impermeable.

This link has challenged me, my way of doing urban research and it has pushed me to reflect more broadly about *structures of opportunities* in sociological theory. I do not want to write a sort of traditional theory-ology, discussing authors with authors. We do not need another (theoretical) engine without steering: let me discuss of sociological theory not to get lost into intellectual games, but to cope with clear tools to explain and highlight social change. Conceptual tools rooted in empirical research, avoiding overgeneralization as well as any peppering with poorly developed neologisms. Caruso helps us: lot of urban and territorial sociology has forgot structural issues, and this paper aids in *grasping relational mechanisms in structured contexts*.

Hence, this is an important piece of research, offering deep insight into some streams of Italian political change, unpacking “the differences between things and facts about things” (Levi Martin, 2014, p. ix), and this is good for the advancement of sociology. Accordingly, my interest in this paper is not related only to the substantial interpretation of the political moment, but it goes through the theoretical dimensions implied in the text.

I recognise in this paper a genuine work of sociology. We can qualify it as a political sociology, attentive to dynamics of contention and their level of institutional recognition and canalization. I argue that this work shows what is at stake in a sociological study of political societies, as well as about the relation between macrosociological theory and empirical local research. Theory-work is not about writing on theorists, but on theory making. What this paper has to offer to sociological theory, as well as to our general understanding of Italian society? I will write my appreciation on the paper, as a way to advance also my selective comments to the Author. I will discuss three important points raised by the paper: the actuality of the concept of structure for political analysis; historicism and contextualisation; sociological theory centred on opportunities and not only on constraints. These three points are directly inspired by Caruso’s framework. Later I will conclude talking about what I learned from this paper, challenging Caruso to join more deeply the current debate in urban and territorial sociology, and contribute to bind the ties between political sociology and urban sociology. I consider this last point a strategic issue for the contemporary agenda of social science, especially in Europe.

1. Structure

Caruso (2016) discusses the relationship between popular protest and party politics in Italy. It applies the political process approach to understand the current moment of political change, and it offers new, important insights to discuss the limits of the concept of « structure of political opportunities ». Some advancements in the use of the concept are highlighted, to improve the analysis of political process. I do not want to focus on this issue, it is clear enough in the paper; I

have nothing to add. My feeling is that it is urgent to come back to mobilise a concept of structure to discuss territorial politics and broader trends of political change.

Students of social movements studies may find it not so path-breaking, but just one of the refinement of the political process approach, aiming to precise the use and operationalization of the political opportunity structure, adapting to Italian context. Caruso is following the classical path in Italian social movements studies: a path attentive to Tilly's legacy, highly involved in the discussion of Tarrow's thesis of centre-periphery conflict for the dynamic change of POS (Artioli 2015; Tarrow 2015), discussing the articulation between POS, resource mobilisation and framing in the long run to understand the use of action repertoires and political violence (Della Porta 2013), and evolving the concept of structural opportunities in a more relational, network based approach (Diani 2015). An Italian touch to social movement studies: i.e. recently Donatella Della Porta (2015) has offered a major contribution in reflecting again on the relation between social structure, class cleavage and political mobilisation. Following this Italian path to political sociology, the paper goes beyond questions on mobilization factors and movements outcomes. It answers these questions and it uses the answers to offers insights concerning the evolution of the Italian political system.

Therefore, macrosociology is back in studies about local politics and territories. This is probably normal for political sociology, but it is good to know for sociology, and an excellent news for urban sociology. The paper can be read as a contribution to the studies of local societies that is not reluctant of having a clear root in the great story of structuralism: within one kind of structuralism, among many others; declaring and using a structural model.

I know, the paper is also discussing it in a reflexive manner and proposing some advancement: this is normal in scientific research. In my judgement, what is important to underline is that *a concept of structure finally is back in the research on territorial conflicts* (Vitale 2012). Urban studies have tried hard to overcome the concept of structure (*sic*), to emphasize stocked situations of power asymmetries (at the concept of *urban regime*, especially for American political scientists), or to relate all sources of political change to a "new" master frame (i.e. *neoliberalism*, especially for British geographers). Urban sociology has turned cultural, in post-structuralist micro-approaches emphasizing the logic of situation, sympathetic to action and interaction among individuals. Following these paths, urban studies have improved a lot, in political science, geography and sociology, nevertheless reaching an impasse facing two major challenges: producing a broader interpretation of local societies; comparing them in a systematic way (Le Galès, Vitale 2015). As a result, today every approach based on an operational concept of structure seems wise and heuristics, once compared to the huge ambition and uncontrolled overgeneralisation of the main trends in urban studies.

I look sympathetically to Caruso's gramscian critical approach to POS because for me it is another example of how useful social movements studies are for the renewal of sociological theory. Major contributions from the study of participation and contention have already spin-off to the fields of policy analysis, international relations, terrorism, and so on. The paper of Caruso testifies of this positive contribution and hybridization between social movements studies and urban studies. I want to repeat my self, being as much precise as possible. The added value of this spin-off (or hybridization, if you prefer) is not just to better comprehend local politics, outside looking in. It is related the capacity to move from local empirical research to testable hypothesis of macrosociological changes. Exactly what has been denounced as a problem for urban regime theory (Stone 2015), for urban geography (Scott, Storper 2015) and for urban sociology (Harding, Blockland 2014).

Furthermore, the paper participates of this broader movement of empirical researchers able to articulate structure and agency for providing sociological explanation (see Massey *et al.* 2013). I want to quote two very different kinds of works, both in urban sociology: the one of Sampson (2012) and the one edited by Casavola and Trigilia (2013, see Vitale 2015). These are very different streams of work in urban sociology: both of them emphasize structural contexts of

resources and opportunities, and the relevant role of action and interaction to activate (or not) these resources and opportunities. They are rooted in competing frameworks: the ecological approach of the revised Chicago school, for Sampson, and the political economy approach, for Casavola and Trigilia. So to say, the two main adversarial traditions in urban sociology (Gottdiener, *et al.* 2015): they have different methods, concepts, and core research questions. But both of them have turned to reaffirm a move towards the articulation of structure and agency in empirical research, and have moved from a basic account of structural constraints to an advanced operationalization of structural opportunities. In terms of sociological theory, the paper of Loris Caruso participates of the same movements. Well rooted in a deep knowledge of internal epistemological and theoretical debate in social movements studies, he has been able to affirm the centrality of a concept of structure of opportunities for urban studies, and mobilise the interplay between structure and agency to make sense of current trends of party-aversion in local mobilisations.

2. Historicization

What happens when (one kind of concept of) structure and (one kind of account for) agency are mobilised in empirical research? A very strong historicization. John Levi Martin have made it very clear, in a not so casual critics of Giddens (1984). It has been part of his argument in his “Social structure” (2009), probably better proved in his 2011 book (“The explanation of social action”). That is true also for Sampson and Casavola&Trigilia masterpieces. Before anyone else, and looking at potential development of comparative metropolitan studies, Peter Blau made the point clear in 1997. The challenge of articulating structure and agency in empirical research is not for solving some intellectual games about the origin of social process (as unfortunately it was the case for both phenomenology and structuration theory). Empirical, comparative research articulates structure and agency and produce good macrosociology based on context and historicization: place and moment matter. There are names of cities, surnames of actors, precise historical tipping points. In this sense James Jasper and Jeff Goodwin (2013), in their reference book on the development of the POS concept talk about “context”. The two editors have solid roots in pragmatism, and have massively contributed to social movements studies emphasizing action, situation, and frames (and representation&feelings, like Caruso in his paper). Previously, they had criticized POS in 1999 for the risk of underestimating contingent, emerging factors related to movement creativity. But later, in 2013, they have denounced the opposite risk, of empirical researches only emphasizing eventuality and inventiveness, almost forgetting any opportunities structure, even strong structured inequalities in capitalist societies. Coming from the agency side of the spectrum, they challenge but appropriate the foundational concept of opportunities structure, enriching it, affirming how heuristic and inescapable it is (once again criticising every temptation to use it as a magical formula for covering laws). Conclusion for both the editors is in the same title of the book: talking about political opportunities structure and the emergence of the protest means looking at “Contention in context” (2013). Moreover: to fully account for strategic interaction, we need to describe seriously an opportunity structure, or otherwise give up studying strategic interaction.

Caruso shows it in a precise way: political opportunities structures contentious interaction in Vicenza, produced polarization, which in turn fashioned visibility and politicization and created new dynamics of centre-periphery conflict. The point is not to apply an algorithm to find a general rule (as it was at the time of Eisenger: open POS -> more mobilisations), but to realise that a structure of opportunities shapes the relational interplay among collective actors, with political outcomes as well as social outcomes in terms of identification, community ties, crosscutting social circles. Once again, the specificity of the *local relational field*, it is a mode to historicise. A mode strictly related to that kind of “Contextual Political Analysis” that Chuck Tilly

has legitimised as one of the most fruitful and fecund empirical approach to historicism (Goodin, Tilly 2006).

The paper of Caruso, as well as the work of Gianni Piazza (2011), they participate to this broad approach. Caruso brings a Gramscian touch into contextual political analysis, and it enters in a more direct conversation with urban studies. In the interpretation of the Italian case both urban studies and political sociology sensitive to territorial structures have not considered this stream of literature coming from social movements studies and the contentious politics approach. Caruso offers a bridge to discover the heuristics of contextual political analysis, and its current developments.

3. Opportunities

Let me stress also my interest on the concept of “opportunities”. One of the main results of the political process approach has been to prove that in most of the cases, people mobilise not when their condition are worsening, but when they see opportunities for the success of their action (just see Tarrow, Tilly 2006). It is a major result, which has been tested by quantitative comparative analysis as well as by qualitative case studies. It shows a deep aspect of collective action, its cognitive basis and motivation. But it is not a general law, as Caruso demonstrates. On a theoretical point of view, what is important is related to the great intuition of Wright Mills (1940), that the motives of action are external to the actor and related to the context.

Micro-sociology has developed Wright Mills statement with an obsession on the logic of the situation, affirming that action in situation is constrained by external factors. Being very smart and sensitive in describing the action, as well as being (often) poor in describing the kind of constraints that limits the action. Some authors have taken the radical ethnomethodological path of describing external factors as constraints only if named and recognised by the actor (in a sort of radical rationalisation of indexality). Even when it has refused the radical ethnomethodological stance, microsociology has reduced the context to a system of constraints. Few social theorists have clearly challenged this vision, probably because they have conceived the role of the context as the hard side of social life, as a limit for human creativity and reciprocity in interaction (Joas 1996).

Peter Blau has radically overcome this idea, offering a model of actor as a social actor acting in a context structured by differential, unequal opportunities. On a completely different path, Chuck Tilly (1999) has shown in his masterpiece that looking at structures as organized relational pattern of opportunities would have not reduce the hard, tough side of the social but on the contrary it would have helped to develop a stronger account of “Durable Inequality”. The point is not a minor issue: long-lasting, systematic inequalities in life chances, as well as political chances, can be operationalize in a more robust way than any representation of inequalities stressing constraints and coercion (the point has emerged thanks to previous well known criticism developed by Kriesi, *et al.* 1996). I am back to Tilly because he is the scholar of coercion (1992), and when it is the moment of explaining social action (mobilisation, strategy, contents and cultural meaning of collective action) he shows clearly that the justification of action can be easily grasped looking at the relational mechanisms related to a structure of opportunities (Tilly 2008a; 2008b). Moreover, following the inspiring criticism of Goldstone (2004), social movements studies have included the enquiry on the interaction among *different kind* of opportunities.

Sociology and political science focus on opportunities especially when looking at inequalities. Urban studies too, whenever interested to move from case studies to a broader interpretation. The detailed reflection of Caruso in this paper offers an adding leverage for urban and territorial studies to incorporate and operationalize the concept of opportunities to study

structural dynamics in the space. John Logan (2012) has raised a similar issue when pointing at the desirable developments for urban sociology and space-based social sciences.

Obviously, I'm not suggesting overcoming description of constraints to focalise only on opportunities: the articulation of the two is a major suggestion political sociology is offering to empirical studies (see Della Porta, Diani 2015, part VII). Also, constraints and opportunities are not the same thing with just an opposite sign: constraints exist while they are enforced and imposed to the individual ("nothing *inside* the actor can constrain the actor", Levi Martin, 2014, p. 54). Opportunities too exist outside the individual, but are effective only if their potential beneficiaries perceive them. Taking seriously Hobbes (and Locke, and their legacy in social thought), a constraint is something that prevents an actor from doing what it wants. Constraints are not rule and resources translated into memory traces, as it was the case for Giddens (1984: 377): on the contrary, they do not need to be perceived to be effective, unless they are not constraints.

4. Macrosociology and empirical research for political and urban studies

This conversation about Caruso's paper brings me back to the dialogue between political sociology and urban sociology. I've to admit that in many syllabi of urban sociology I've seen I've not recognized the relevance of these three analytical concerns, structure-historicization-opportunities. Correspondingly, in current debates in the discipline these points are somehow missing. I'm not blaming anyone on these points. If I look at my empirical work I have to admit that I have systematically underestimated the relevance of these three analytical dimensions. Clarification in social sciences requires a lot of empirical research, and a little bit of intellectual dispute (Swedberg 2012). To understand populism and anti-politics just claiming for the cartelization of political parties and the end of redistributive policies could be not enough, and we need to clearly measure the impact of collective action on people attitudes, behaviour and ties. I insist: not only on values and representation, as in standard opinion pool surveys. But on ties too. Urban sociology is good at measuring *the effects of facts on community ties* (Tosi, Vitale, 2013, 2016). In the Vicenza case, the fact is a mobilisation failure: what kind of consequences it has produced in the web of groups and associations, moreover in the community interactions among the individuals? Has this failure enhancing consequences on the already existing willingness to replace political parties by local movements?

Additionally, what else urban sociology has to offer to political sociology, contentious politics and social movements studies? I would say, a bit of macrosociological tools to better describe the contexts these streams of literature are looking at. Contextual political analysis is great, and could be improved by taking contexts seriously. Contexts are made by institutions, POS, relational fields, but also by social structures. And a good description of contextual social structure is the expertise, and the jewel of the crown of urban sociology (Cousin, 2015). It is not just because sociology without an analysis of the social stratification and social group composition is weird, but because it helps a lot in understanding the dynamics of relational fields. The points are already in Caruso's paper, just need to be taken seriously. Social structure can be defined in terms of a population's distributions in various dimensions or the variations among people in these dimensions (the two ways of viewing social differences are equivalent, see Blau 1984).

A promising improvement of a macro sociology based on local case studies would be to precisely rely the political process outcomes to three types of variation in a population: heterogeneity, inequality, and consolidation. Heterogeneity is the variation of people among nominal categories (ethnicity, or religion); inequality is the variation of people among status gradation; consolidation is concomitant variation of several kinds of social differences among

people and intersection is its reverse (in Blau's definition, 1984, p. 99, "how closely variations in several respects approximates being orthogonal").

Looking at these dimensions could help improving our knowledge of the relation between contentious politics and social change: Caruso talks about it in the conclusion, referring to the fact that in XVII Century centre-periphery conflicts of the local communities were cohesive, they had an inter-class nature, and took place in a political space not dominated by the nation state. Let me elaborate: to understand if the direct assumption of a political-electoral role by social movements will push towards new form of left-wing political organization we still need to study and test hypothesis related to the political effects of social structures. Intersecting social differences probably foster conflicting allegiances and engender a multiplicity of diverse group pressures (Vitale, Podestà 2011), on the contrary group boundaries and class differences are probably consolidated by closely related differences among people (Vitale 2009). Looking at structural contexts of opportunities seems to improve our understanding of broader dynamic of political change.

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