



## Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 16(1) 2023: 169-175

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v16i1p169

Published 15 March, 2023

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

## BOOK REVIEW

---

Eleonora Pasotti, *Resisting Redevelopment. Protest in Aspiring Global Cities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 404 p.

**Gilles Pinson**

Sciences Po Bordeaux

### 1. Introduction

Are culture, image and identity becoming the new battlefield on which urban politics and the conflicts that agitate it are played out? This is what Eleonora Pasotti suggests in this new book, the result of a colossal empirical survey of some thirty urban struggles located in ten different metropolises.

The author is Associate Professor of Politics at the University of California Santa Cruz. She is the author of a previous book, *Political Branding in Global Cities*, also published at Cambridge University Press in 2010. The reference to this previous work is important because in that book Pasotti analyzed the transformation of political relations in large cities under the effect of the growing weight of issues of image, culture and identity, issues that are also at the heart of *Resisting Redevelopment*. On the basis of the cases of Bogotá, Chicago and Naples, she explained that under the weight of territorial competition, urban policies were increasingly dominated by issues of image and attractiveness. This leads to a focus on major urban projects (renovation of central districts and public spaces, construction of new public transport infrastructures, etc.) and to the promotion of the figure of the mayor as the embodiment of an urban renewal. This emphasis on the urban leader is facilitated by the fact that in many political systems the heads of urban executives are elected by direct universal suffrage. Pasotti explained that all these developments tend to profoundly transform political relations and patterns of electoral mobilization in large cities. In particular, they are undermining previous political practices based on proximity politics, direct relations between ward politicians and voters, and clientelism. Thus, a new urban policy imperative, the production of a city brand, a city image and identity, had a direct effect on the nature of political ties in cities.

In the present book, Pasotti continues to explore this thread of image, identity and culture. But this time she does so by looking not at conventional politics but rather at movements of resistance to urban policies. Her object of study is redevelopment policies, in other words, operations to upgrade central and peri-urban neighborhoods involving local authorities, promoters but also actors from the cultural industries, and above all

the forms of resistance that these policies generate. These redevelopment policies are generally closely connected with branding policies aimed at affirming the place of these 'aspiring cities' in the concert of global cities. These redevelopment policies most often result in the displacement of vulnerable populations who are not part of the 'settlement strategies' of urban governments and who do not have access to the new housing units built as part of the redevelopment operations. Indeed, and this is particularly the case in the 'northern' cities studied, redevelopment policies are most often accompanied by a strong reduction in the stock of social housing.

## 2. « Brand oriented struggles » and « experiential tools »

Pasotti studies no less than ten "aspiring global cities": Buenos Aires, Hamburg, Istanbul, Los Angeles, Madrid, Melbourne, Santiago del Chile, Seoul, Tel Aviv and Toronto. In each of these cities, the author has focused on two or three mobilizations, for a staggering total of 29 processes of struggle studied. In each of these cases, the author conducted interviews, reviewed press articles on the urban planning operations, the resistance to these operations and the positions taken by elected officials and institutions, as well as the scientific literature already devoted to these struggles.

Eleonora Pasotti's work is structured around a very bold and clearly expressed hypothesis. According to her, these movements are characterized by the increasingly systematic use of what she calls "experiential tools", which are engaging forms of collective action, based on the organization of cultural or recreational activities and which are intended to attract individuals who would not have been involved with more traditional forms of repertoire; they are also intended to positively change the image of the neighborhood and the populations that inhabit it. These modes of action also offer the people involved forms of self-realization, of revaluation of their identity. They make it possible to bypass a kind of generalized refusal of politics. "These activities were not explicitly framed as political mobilization, and even less as protest" (3). Concretely, what does this notion of "experiential tools" cover: activities consisting in occupying the space by parties, selling food or crafts, artistic performances; activities consisting in documenting the heritage and memory of the neighborhood and its inhabitants, in organizing visits to valorize and show this heritage and memory. "Experiential tools, writes Pasotti, can take many forms, but they are all instruments by which organizers seek to define and shape a community of participants. So, they often take the shape of neighborhood festivals or similar communal events with hedonistic elements. They are sometimes combined with protest squatting or encampments" (17).

This focus on "experiential tools" is no accident. It stems from a hypothesis that is reminiscent of Charles Tilly's intuitions (1976, 1984) on the repertoires of social movements that are constructed and transformed in a form of mimicry with the evolution of the forms of presence and action of the State. According to Pasotti, if mobilizations resort to repertoires that make an essential place for cultural expression, it is because, on the other hand, culture and identity are increasingly enrolled in entrepreneurial urban policies (Paddison and Miles, 2020). City branding is the first proof of this; the mobilization of activities and actors of cultural industries in regeneration and gentrification strategies is another (Novy and Colomb, 2013). "Urban redevelopment has tilted toward cultural-economic and consumption-based strategies" writes Pasotti (21). The redevelopment of urban spaces for the purposes of competitiveness and the extraction of urban rent is increasingly taking on the face of the "cool": that of the culturally open gentrifier, of the promoter who wants to make room for artists and cultural facilities in his operations, of the policymakers' desire to preserve the identity of redeveloped neighborhoods and to enhance their heritage. Pasotti thus comes to this enigma: the discourses accompanying redevelopment policies and overvaluing cultural activities and industries and heritage are very difficult targets for protest movements to attack. How, then, can social movements hope to counter these policies and the processes of displacement they engender?

Culture, image and identity thus become the battlefields on which urban struggles around urban redevelopment are played out. Movements are in a way forced to invest this field, to challenge the claim of politicians, planners, developers and cultural operators to define the culture and identity of the city and its neighborhoods. The place of image and culture in the new urban strategies forces urban struggles to become what Pasotti calls "brand oriented struggles" (109) in explicit reference to his previous work. The city and redevelopment policies have thus become what Bourdieu would have called "definitional struggles" (1984) around what these neighborhoods are, what defines their identity, the populations and practices associated with them and who are legitimate to practice and live in them. The "experiential tools" are thus a means for the people involved in the struggles to "perform" the legitimate ways of living and practicing the neighborhood, in contestation of the "counter-images" that the developers propose.

### 3. A qualitative comparative analysis

However, Pasotti insists that resorting to these experiential tools is not exclusive of recourse to other, more traditional types of repertoires, such as recourse to political support within municipal institutions or at higher levels, alliance with trade unions, or legal expertise and legal action. Her work consists precisely in identifying the specific role that "experiential tools" play in the fortune of urban struggles against redevelopment. She does this through a qualitative comparative analysis, in other words, an approach that seeks, through the systematic confrontation of a "medium" number (medium  $n$ ) of cases, to identify differences and commonalities between the cases, but also the configurations of variables most conducive to urban struggles' success. In this respect, Pasotti's work is situated in a political science perspective and contrasts with certain currents in urban studies, which consider that this "quasi-scientific approach" (McFarlane & Robinson, 2012, p. 767, quoted p. 49; see also Robinson, 2011) is not suitable for urban situations that escape any effort to formalize the comparative approach. Pasotti, on the contrary, does not renounce the ambition to use the comparison to identify what explains the differences between the cases. In passing, what also situates Pasotti's work in urban political science rather than in urban studies or geography, is that she insists (p. 54) on the fact that it is the mobilizations ( $n=29$ ) and not the cities ( $n=10$ ) that constitute her sample of cases.

However, what is striking in this book is that, while adopting a variabilist approach, Eleonora Pasotti does not renounce the narrative dimension in the presentation of her results and the description of her fields. This book is remarkable for its ability to restore the thickness of the cases, the urban situations, the systems of actors, the processes of public policy and contestation. There are flesh and blood actors, extracts of interviews, numerous elements of political, social and spatial context. We are therefore far from a writing that would reduce each case to a sort of deposit of values on variables. This book is a mine of case studies that urban studies professors can use in class. This book is also an inspiration for doctoral students who are confronted with abundant material drawn from a comparative approach and who wonder how to organize the restitution of data.

### 4. « Experiential tools » and other elements of repertoire

Overall, all the cases studied by Pasotti confirm his hypothesis of the centrality of experiential tools. These elements of repertoire activate logics of mobilization on cultural and identity bases and make it possible to bypass the reluctance of the inhabitants to what looks like a discourse and practices associated with politics, ideology or partisan organizations. These experiential tools are present in all the movements studied, with varying degrees of intensity and success. But even in contexts marked by the weight of more radical approaches, such as the squats in Berlin, experiential tools tend to take over. In Berlin, squats have gradually tended to become meeting places, cultural spaces, and places where participatory urbanism is organized.

The mobilization of experiential tools allows neighborhoods and populations that were not predestined to know how to organize, struggle and triumph to do so. In Lawrence Heights in Toronto, a social housing neighborhood threatened by plans to replace social housing with private units, residents, with the help of architects, cultural actors and representatives of the main social housing owner, succeeded in "patrimonializing" their neighborhood through a series of activities (artists' interventions, creation of archives, organization of exhibitions, etc.). These activities eventually led to the elaboration of a plan for the defense of the neighborhood's heritage, finally validated by the city hall, which allowed the inhabitants not only to save the social housing but also to be involved in the design of public spaces and the naming of streets.

Chapter after chapter, Eleonora Pasotti insists however on the fact that the recourse to experiential tools is absolutely not exclusive of the mobilization of other elements of repertoires. Moreover, this articulation often proves to be essential to the capacity of the movements to reach their objectives. Among the repertoire elements that could be said to be "auxiliary" to experiential tools, there is the use of what she calls "judicial resistance", in other words, the building of cases presented before judicial bodies. An interesting case from this point of view is that of the Trust South LA movement in Los Angeles, an organization founded in 2005 to create a land trust in the downtown area of the Californian metropolis in order to keep populations threatened by displacement in place. The initiative targets a neighborhood called Rolland Curtis Garden, a complex of affordable housing whose owner wanted to organize the transfer to private housing by taking advantage of the proximity of the University of Southern California campus and the construction of a tramway. On a few occasions, the movement used experiential tools, but most of the action was based on legal instruments. These tools aimed first at delaying or even cancelling the landlord's request for eviction, then at building a case for a buyout of the project by the occupants, and finally at the demolition-reconstruction of an affordable housing project with the help of public grants. The movement initiated a participatory planning process to define the redevelopment, which won the goodwill of local politicians. Its audience also allows the movement to put on the agenda the problem of affordable housing neighborhoods that are losing their status and are threatened by an onslaught of developers and landlords eager to put them back on the open market.

In the final chapter, she also discusses cases where experiential tools coexist with the maintenance or return of more radical, even violent, forms of action. She evokes at length the case of the Boyle Heights neighborhood, also in Los Angeles, where associations recruiting from the Latino population in majority in the neighborhood have allied themselves with extreme left-wing organizations in order to engage in a real guerrilla war against the cultural operators who are settling in the neighborhood and are at the origin of the displacement process. Here, the construction of a counter-discourse opposed to that of the real estate and cultural actors, promoting what the activists themselves call an "aesthetics of displacement" through exhibitions, parties, in short "experiential tools", goes hand in hand with an explicitly political discourse and the use of more classic militant techniques such as the denunciation of political adversaries (on social networks in particular), the organization of demonstrations disrupting openings and even forms of intimidation of cultural actors. Here the objective is not to mobilize to save the presence of the original populations but to get the gentrification agents out. It remains to be seen whether this victory will be sustainable.

##### 5. Les facteurs de succès

Thus, for Eleonora Pasotti, the use of "experiential tools" is widespread in most of the cases studied and constitutes an ingredient that is often essential to the capacity of struggles against redevelopment to mobilize widely but also to obtain the at least partial satisfaction of demands. However, chapter after chapter, she refines her interpretation and shows how these experiential tools are necessary but not sufficient conditions to ensure the success of mobilizations.

It shows in particular that the mobilization of pre-existing mutual aid, cultural or militant networks is an essential adjuvant to ensure the victory of the movements. The case of the Yungai neighborhood in Santiago, studied in chapter 5, of Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, studied in chapter 11, and of Lawrence Heights in Toronto, studied in chapter 10, show that the existence of associative networks built on the basis of professional or community affinities is an element that guarantees the success of mobilizations. In Yungai, the pre-existing network is made up of intellectuals and architects who organized to challenge the poor quality of garbage collection service. When the collective extended its action to the struggle against the construction of high-rise buildings, it initially succeeded in broadening its scope, thanks in particular to the use of experiential tools, to include activists from a more modest social background. In Boyle Heights, it was the existence of a highly organized Latino community that enabled the resistance to achieve results. Thus, the use of experiential tools can be very useful in building cross-class alliances beyond the representatives of the petty and middle intellectual bourgeoisie that often drive these movements. However, it also happens that the overemphasis on these elements of repertoires and the existence of too great a difference in starting points renders them ineffective. This is the case in Tel Aviv or Istanbul, where experiential tools are mainly used to construct moments of conviviality and opportunities for self-construction for representatives of the cultural bourgeoisie only. This can also be explained by the existence of very strong class and/or ethnic divisions in these two cities.

Another factor in the success of the struggles is the existence of political, partisan and ideological divergences between levels of government and the ability of the mobilizations to find support among the institutions and elected officials most sensitive to their cause. This support can be of a nature to stop development projects. This is what the Yungai movements in Santiago managed to obtain with the support of the Ministry of Culture, which made the neighborhood a "*zona típica*" protected by more restrictive urban planning rules. On the other hand, in the case of Tel Aviv, a case of failure, Pasotti shows a movement, Betze-Ohel, whose leaders are too busy "branding" the movement, making it an Israeli version of the "square movements", giving a cool image of themselves even if it means neglecting the work with the institutions.

Eleonora does not avoid the weight of more classic political and partisan variables. Experiential tools count, but what also counts is the possibility of having relays, especially those marked on the left within municipal institutions and, when the municipal majority is hostile, within higher government bodies. A first set of very interesting results of this work is the consideration of "politics" variables. Issues such as the links established with local elected officials, the question of misalignments between local and higher powers is decisive for the fate of mobilizations. Eleonora reminds us that the "structure of political opportunities" and "multi-level governance" are determining factors, that the national political context and not only the urban political context must be considered to explain the fortunes of mobilizations. She also insists on the fact that the right-left divide remains important. Even if political actors anchored to the left can be essential protagonists of "development regimes", it is better for mobilizations to have this type of interlocutor than right-wing elected officials. If local or higher governments of the left are not always unconditional and sufficient supporters of the movements, governments of the right are systematically hostile to them. What is also striking is that the combination of a right-wing urban government and more left-wing higher levels (federal state, province or region; national state) is a guarantee of success for the movements. The author uses the cases of Yungay, Madrid and Buenos Aires to illustrate his point (238-9).

## 6. Discussion

There is no doubt that we are facing a work of great magnitude that will be a milestone in the study of urban movements. To my knowledge, no other work, conducted individually (Pasotti indicates on page 64, that the book is the result of a "single-author project" and that she "conducted all interviews and fieldworks [her] self"), had managed to accumulate such a mass of data on such a wide variety of cases. From this point of view,

Resisting Redevelopment is a real "*tour de force*". In a sub-field of urban studies, that of the analysis of urban social movements, characterized by an interest in eclipsing scholars and an uncertain cumulativeness of work, this book is very good news.

The other strong point of this book, as outlined above, is the high quality of the restitution of each case. Even if each of the 29 case studies is mobilized for a comparative analysis with a variabilistic aim, this does not lead the author to sacrifice the dense description of the mobilization processes. The cases are not reduced to the status of a pool of variables that the author would draw from in the service of a writing solely dedicated to the presentation of "results". They are seen as "configurations", "constellations", "conjunctures" that are necessarily particular and that consequently deserve to be documented, to be described in their thickness, in the manner of the mixed comparative method defended by Ragin (1987) or of what we have proposed when speaking of comparative monographs (Pinson, 2023).

Another very convincing aspect of Pasotti's work is the hypothesis of an institutional homology or isomorphism between urban policies and urban social movements. As we have said, in this she takes up the hypotheses of Charles Tilly, who saw in the evolution of the repertoire of social movements over the centuries an adaptation to the growing statehood of societies and the construction of relatively unified national political spaces. In the case of cities, the enlistment of culture, image and identity references by urban politics forces an evolution of the repertoire of urban struggles. This is a risky evolution, because there is always the possibility that the valorization of neighborhood identities through experiential tools will constitute an additional fuel for the logics of gentrification through culture.

To conclude on the evocation of some of the many merits of this book, let us mention its inclusion in the tradition of "identity" approaches to social movements. These approaches differ from the economic readings of collective action developed in particular by Mancur Olson by focusing on the question of "lived meanings" (Neveu, 1996, 52), on the question of the construction of mobilizable and mobilized groups and on the importance of political work on the contours of these groups and their identity (Melucci, 1995). Here again, we find the influence of Charles Tilly (1978), for whom the identity of groups was both the object of mobilization - to make social groups exist, in this case groups of inhabitants - and a resource for collective action. The way Pasotti uses the notion of "experiential tool" refers directly to this issue of construction and maintenance of collective identities as an essential dimension of collective action.

Let's end with a few small reservations that arise from reading this opus. This will be brief... First, we can regret the absence of cartographic and iconographic elements in the book. They would have enriched the contextualization data and, above all, would have allowed us to see more clearly how experiential tools are materialized.

More fundamentally, we must return to the strategies of writing and restitution chosen by the author. The structure of the book can appear confusing. Some chapters (especially in the first part) focus on elements of repertoires. Others focus on variables that explain the scope and impact of mobilizations. The description of the 29 case studies are scattered according to what variable they best illustrate. However, in the end, and as already stated, it is not so much the cases that are sacrificed by this choice of organization of the book. It is the identification of the variables that suffers from this choice and, ultimately, the overall analytical framework. The author -and the reader with her- gets a bit lost in the very wide range of factors she wants to take into account in her analytical approach. To paraphrase Salieri, who in Milos Forman's *Amadeus* criticized Mozart for putting "too many notes" in his music, there are perhaps too many variables considered here. It is sometimes a little difficult to fully identify what Pasotti is getting from his qualitative and variabilistic comparative approach. Especially since the conclusion is not devoted to the presentation of the main results. Pasotti has not

found the editorial martingale that makes it possible to combine "thick description" and variabilistic analysis, but given the pleasure one takes in reading what she says about each of her cases, no one will hold this against her.

References:

- Bourdieu, P. (1984). Espace social et genèse des « classes ». *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 52(1), 3-14.
- McFarlane, C., & Robinson, J. (2012). Introduction: Experiments in comparative urbanism. *Urban Geography*, 33(6), 765–773.
- Melucci, A. (1995). The process of collective identity. *Social movements and culture*, 4, 41-63.
- Neveu, É. (1996). *Sociologie des mouvements sociaux*, Paris, La Découverte.
- Novy, J., & Colomb, C. (2013). Struggling for the right to the (creative) city in Berlin and Hamburg: new urban social movements, new ‘spaces of hope’?. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37(5), 1816-1838.
- Paddison, R., & Miles, R. S. (Eds.). (2020). *Culture-led urban regeneration*. Routledge.
- Pasotti, E. (2010). *Political branding in cities: the decline of machine politics in Bogotá, Naples, and Chicago*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pinson, G. (2023). « Odious comparisons in urban studies. A plea for comparative monographs » in P. Le Galès and J. Robinson (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative Urban Studies*, London, Routledge.
- Ragin, C. (1987) *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Robinson, J. (2011). Cities in a world of cities: The comparative gesture. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35(1), 1–23.
- Tilly, C. (1976). Major forms of collective action in western Europe 1500–1975. *Theory and Society*, 3(3), 365–375.
- Tilly, C. (1978). *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Tilly, C. (1984). Les origines du répertoire de l'action collective contemporaine en France et en Grande-Bretagne. *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 89-