



Partecipazione e Conflitto

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

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 17(3) 2024: 761-766

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v17i3p761

Published 15 November, 2024

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

BOOK REVIEW

Sebastiano Citroni, *L'associarsi quotidiano. Terzo settore in cambiamento e società civile*. Meltemi, Milano, pp. 275

Laura Centemeri

The sociological approach known as the “ethnography of the political” aims to study the evolving forms of people's participation in public life in contemporary societies through in-depth observation and detailed descriptions of real-life situations. This is done to gain a deeper understanding of political processes and elaborate on new concepts and theoretical hypotheses (Cefaï *et al.* 2012, p.9). Proponents of this approach suggest that one can only notice emerging new ways of communicating or cooperating through long-term immersion in the daily life of groups, networks, movements, associations, and participatory arenas. This allows *noticing* political dynamics and transformations that philosophers or political scientists might otherwise ignore or overlook since their theories do not predict them (Ibidem, p. 11).

Sebastiano Citroni's book *L'associarsi quotidiano* draws on this stream of sociological knowledge. It convincingly proves how the ethnography of the political can help enrich - and refresh - existing debates on the transformations of participation and collective action.

Over the past two decades, scholars from North America (such as Nina Eliasoph, Paul Lichterman, and Gianpaolo Baiocchi) and Europe (including Eeva Luhtakallio, Daniel Cefaï, and Laurent Thévenot) have engaged in a dialogue over the ethnography of the political as a way to renew the approaches to the study of political cultures. They share a common inspiration from pragmatism in their attempts to understand societies as dynamic realities constantly being made and remade through habitual patterns and the challenge of “problematic situations”. The situation of action – as a context of experience - is understood to be the site of the dynamic interplay of action and structure, and it is always potentially open to emerging phenomena. In every situation and context of experience, practice opens possibilities of becoming that are irreducible to any *ex-ante* explanatory model and consequently not entirely determined. The pragmatist inspiration highlights the importance of exploring situations of participation and collective action as “fields of experience” (Cefaï 2016) in which complex meaning-making processes occur. These processes rest on cultural tools that have a “historicity”: from group or scene “styles” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003, Lichterman 2005, Lichterman and

Eliasoph 2014, Lichterman 2020) to “civic imagination” (Baiocchi et al. 2014), to “grammars of commonality in the plural” (Thévenot 2014, Luhtakallio 2019).

Enlarging the understanding of politicization: the perspective of “styles” in everyday association-making

The ethnography of the political can be considered a sociological *posture* consisting of practicing a specific “art of noticing” (Tsing 2017) emergent social features. It recalls what Albert Hirschman called “possibilism,” which is a method consisting of stressing “the unique rather than the general, the unexpected rather than the expected, and the possible rather than the probable” (Hirschman, 1971: 28). According to Citroni, embracing this kind of possibilism can counteract simplistic and reductionist views of civil society’s depoliticization, resulting from increased professionalization and institutionalization. In particular, Citroni debates the depoliticization of the so-called “third sector” in Italy.

The argument presented is quite daring. However, the author does not try to force a particular methodology or view onto the reader. Instead, the author humbly invites readers to consider the benefits of exploring multiple sociological perspectives on the transformations of the political. Doing so may help better understand the current forms of de-politicization and (hopefully) re-politicization. Through engaging in a dialogue with critical sociology traditions, Citroni shows what their analytical categories contribute to the debate and what they inevitably are missing. He argues that nurturing a variety of sociological approaches to the political and its transformations is crucial for avoiding reductionism and promoting both critical thinking and possibilism.

Citroni argues that the sociological tools commonly used in analyzing third-sector organizations may not always be best suited to identifying signs of politicization in their daily activities as associations. Critical readings of the third sector assume that the neoliberal managerial injunctions third sector organizations tend to conform to inevitably cause the depoliticization of their actions. The lack of mobilization and social conflict in the third sector is often interpreted as evidence of its depoliticization and conformity to dominant economic conventions.

Citroni recognizes that third-sector organizations risk deviating from their primary mission of serving as “antennas” to identify social problems and needs, and providing support for social justice initiatives. However, he aims to show that third-sector organizations can still be the site of politically relevant experiences. Compared to what sociological analyses valorize as fully or authentically political (especially advocacy), these experiences can be seen as a “minor mode” (Rémy and Denizeau 2017) of the political. Still, the everyday association-making is where meaningful collective experiences and shared civic imaginations take shape.

Citroni’s approach involves understanding the political as being related to how things are practically done, including the ordinary normativity that is “enacted” (Mol 1999) through the styles adopted in everyday scenes of interaction and coordination. This means that social interactions within third-sector organizations are inherently political. Citroni aims to grant political relevance to what is usually taken for granted, i.e., to what is not sufficiently appreciated due to its ordinary nature and, therefore, goes unnoticed, even in sociological analyses. This involves taking an interest in the political as a daily social experience that involves creating and maintaining a “common sense” (Gramsci is the reference here).

In order to clarify his argument, Citroni introduces the concept of “everyday association-making” (*associarsi quotidiano*). This notion recovers the variety of ways people are “practicing democracy” (Luhtakallio 2012) by getting involved in the everyday activities of associations. According to the author, this

everyday association-making is a “primordial element of civil society”: it is “the complex web of practices, routines, recurring patterns and group dynamics with which every associative experience is carried out in its day-to-day life” (p.13). Practices aren’t just Citroni’s research focus: they are the analytical lens to study the transformations of civil society. According to Citroni, practices have a “relative autonomy” from macro or structural factors, which means they have a certain level of independence regarding organization and decision-making. Here, Citroni refers to the work of Italian sociologist Ota de Leonardis on the instituting power of everyday practices. Her direct involvement in the Italian reform processes of psychiatry has influenced De Leonardis’ work. Initiated by the experiments of psychiatrist Franco Basaglia (1924-1980) they culminated in the formulation of Law 180 abolishing asylums. De Leonardis’ sociology highlights the potential of practices to challenge established norms and create new ways of operating institutions. This is achieved by creating spaces for critical reflection and deliberation on evaluative criteria and norms.

Citroni elaborates on a similar perspective of analysis, and discusses third-sector actors as an expression of civil society in a Gramscian sense, as the place of elaboration of cultural frames. The primary theoretical-methodological reference here is the “civic action” approach developed by Paul Lichterman and Nina Eliasoph (2014) and, in particular, the notions of group and scene styles. Styles can be defined as shared expectations that inform interactions in different situations of daily group life concerning group bonds, group boundaries, and speech norms. Recalling the lessons of Tocqueville and de Certeau, Citroni stresses the importance of analyzing ordinary group-making activities, the recurrent patterns of interaction shared and accepted as “natural” in the same cultural context. These patterns or styles operate as “filters” that allow to “twist” the formal normative order. Citroni adopts de Certeau's view that styles of doing transform order silently, making it function unconventionally under the surface of conformity.

The “laboratory” of Milan : styles of everyday association making in the making of the urban space under new regulatory framework

Citroni identifies five styles in his work: militancy, active citizenship, community of interest, community of identity, and plug-in volunteering. These styles are presented and discussed in the analysis of the empirical data collected through the ethnographic research that Citroni conducted in the Italian city of Milan from 2013 to 2018.

Citroni suggests that Milan is an ideal case to study the transformations of the third sector, given the city's strong and active civil society and the high level of institutional recognition it receives. The author contends that there would be a particular way of “governing through civil society” specific to Milan. Access to public funding, the low active participation of volunteers, and the problematic relationships with other nonprofit entities are the main transformative drives in today’s Milanese civil society. In particular, Citroni emphasizes the importance of digital innovation. Associations must invest in digital communication to gain public visibility in highly competitive networked “economies of attention”.

Three case studies of associations that operate in the Padua Street area have been selected. Padua Street is a Milanese neighborhood that has become emblematic of urban problems related to integration, poverty, and exclusion. In contrast to the very popular multisite research approach, Citroni focuses on one specific site and analyzes various associations to highlight the role of their association styles in explaining their specific ways of intervening in the same problematic urban reality.

In particular, Citroni addresses the relationship between the drive toward professionalization, changes in participation, and the rise of new forms of civic engagement. The styles of association are analyzed here as “filters”. The case study highlights the tensions between the style of associative militancy (where individuals fight together for a common cause) and the style of active citizenship. The latter requires participation in solving problems and a collective effort in identifying and addressing issues of general interest. The need for professionalization creates “solidarity crises” in volunteer action and the “dissociative implications” of such trends do not directly result from the pressure to professionalize but are “filtered” by associative styles. In other words, they are related to new codes of practice that are not apolitical but differently political - not through social conflict (militancy) but as a collective effort in problem setting and solving (active citizenship).

The book also illustrates how new urban development trends impact social policies. This is the case of the increasing relevance of cultural events and the “culture industry” in Milan's economy. Cultural events have become a new form of action in the third sector. Using scene styles as a vantage point, Citroni tries to overcome the binary perspective that pits those who view cultural events as a means of depoliticization against those who enthusiastically support them for their ability to combat exclusion and “empower” communities.

The author analyzes two “multicultural festivals” organized by third-sector associations to support social inclusion processes in Padua Street. The Festival *Via Padova è meglio di Milano* is a community festival organized through a participatory process open to a variety of actors. Through his ethnography, Citroni shows the relevance in this process of the “community of interest” style of participation: a way of group-making characterized by short-term relationships, oriented to the pursuit of a common interest, and in which participation is based on compatible individual interests. A community of interest is propitious to the emergence of a “platform.” Interestingly, Citroni demonstrates how this predominant associative style, supposedly inclusive of diversity, actually excludes the festival's target audiences - migrants and foreign citizens. In a revealing vignette, Citroni illustrates how a group of migrants misunderstood the styles of participation in the assembly. They believed it was based on a community of identity and destiny, which resulted in their marginalization in the process.

The second festival Citroni discusses is *Popolando-Mi*, promoted by a coalition of five local organizations funded by a private foundation. If the festival *Via Padova è meglio di Milano* resulted in a range of small events scattered across the area, the festival *Popolando-Mi* organized a large multi-ethnic parade as the main event, with additional smaller (ethnic) shows taking place on a stage set up in the local park. The format seems more rigid and professional than the previous one. Still, the ethnography indicates that many “unexpected” meaningful individual and collective experiences emerged, resulting in the festival being more inclusive, that is, more accommodating to a variety of styles of participation.

As the case of the festivals shows, styles are influenced by the evolution of policy instruments. The success of certain association styles and the relative decline of others can be related to transformations in modes of regulating civil society participation in public action. For example, the success of “plug-in volunteering” is linked to its potential to combine the objective of involving beneficiaries while making their “activation” measurable through standard metrics. These metrics are needed to justify funding tied to a selective mechanism of call for projects (*bando*). The call for projects replaces the traditional “mutual accommodation” logic with competitive dynamics between the third sector and the municipality. These competitive mechanisms rely on social impact assessment tools. These tools ensure that beneficiary activation and empowerment results are objectively reported.

The challenge of complexifying the understanding of critique and oppression

Citroni's research provides valuable insights for revitalizing the field of the sociology of social movements which tends to insist on strategic action as how collective actors rationally organize to reach their goals. Instead, Citroni contends that the forms of everyday association matter in defining the ends chosen and how they are pursued. Furthermore, the growing significance of coalitions and campaigns calls for analysis based on situational styles, which would greatly aid in exploring the underlying dynamics beyond tactical maneuvering.

Citroni argues that the ethnography of the political is distinct from the micro perspective that supplements the macro view. Styles are captured in the order of interaction. Still, styles are culturally specific options for practicing group-making in a given context and at a specific time. Once certain association styles become established as associative commonsense, their practice becomes dominant even where they prove counter-productive, harmful to the goals pursued, and deleterious to the associative processes they initially supported.

Therefore, styles are related to conventions and modes of governing; still, they can be combined in practice in ways that challenge the established order of things. Citroni argues that the pervasive spread of neoliberal ideologies and practices, coupled with the rise of digital technologies, can result in the domination of certain styles of engagement in the third sector, such as the "community of interest" and "plug-in volunteering". Consequently, other more confrontational forms of engagement could become less available.

According to Citroni, our societies risk oversimplifying the styles of how we associate. There needs to be a greater appreciation for the diversity in how meaningful participation and politicization occur, and sociological knowledge plays a role in supporting such an endeavor. Therefore, practicing an ethnography of the political expresses a critical and possibilist-oriented sociology that fosters social reflexivity and pays attention to emerging venues and features of participation and politicization.

An essential contribution of Citroni's book is to warn on the performative effect of a sociological narrative on the third-sector that insists on the elements of depoliticization while paying little attention to the transformations of the forms of participation and politicization. In other words, the neo-liberalization of instruments and regulatory frameworks is not equivalent to a neo-liberalization of practices. Still, Citroni's work also shows that emerging modes of governing, stressing "objective objectives" (Thévenot 2022), standards, and quantified evaluation systems seem to reduce the space of autonomy.

Citroni's book shows the relevance of a sociological approach that pays attention to the diversity of "normative expectations" surrounding the concrete functioning of *dispositifs* that are often wrongly assumed to automatically produce an alignment of practice (see Barbot and Dodier 2016). Instead, Citroni shows that there is no such automatism and that social organizing results from a more complex - and partially opaque - dynamic.

Overall, Citroni's book is a relevant contribution to the Italian sociological debate and beyond, bringing to light the potential contributions of cultural sociology in understanding political cultures' transformations. It shows that we can benefit significantly from adopting a sociological approach that acknowledges the normative complexity of social worlds and stays close to how social life is experienced. Such an approach can help increase our knowledge of society and collective political imagination.

References

- Baiocchi, G., Bennett, E. A., Corder, A., Klein, P.T. and Savell, S. (2014) *The civic imagination: Making a difference in American political life*. Routledge.
- Cefai, D. (2016) 'Publics, problèmes publics, arènes publiques...', *Questions de communication* [on line], online since December 31, 2018, accessed January 31, 2024. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/questionsdecommunication/10704> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/questionsdecommunication.10704>
- Cefai, D., Carrel, M., Talpin, J., Eliasoph, N. and Lichterman, P. (2012) 'Ethnographies de La Participation', *Participations*, 4(3), pp. 7–48.
- Dodier, N. and Barbot, J. (2016) 'The Force of Dispositifs', *Annales* 71(2), pp. 291–317.
- Eliasoph, N. and Lichterman, P. (2003) 'Culture in interaction', *American Journal of Sociology*, 108(4), pp. 735–794.
- Hirschman, A. O. (1971) *A Bias for Hope: Essays on Development and Latin America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press
- Lichterman, P. (2005) *Evasive togetherness: Church groups trying to bridge America's Divisions*. Princeton University Press.
- Lichterman, P. (2020) *How civic action works: fighting for housing in Los Angeles*. Princeton University Press.
- Lichterman, P. and Eliasoph, N. (2014) 'Civic action', *American Journal of Sociology*, 120(3), pp. 798–863.
- Luhtakallio, E. (2012) *Practicing democracy: Local activism and politics in France and Finland*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Luhtakallio, E. (2019) 'Group formation, styles, and grammars of commonality in local activism', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 70(4), pp.1159–1178.
- Mol, A. (1999) 'Ontological Politics. A Word and Some Questions', *The Sociological Review* 47(1_suppl), pp.74–89.
- Rémy, C. and Denizeau, L. (dir.) (2017) *La Vie, mode mineur*, Paris : Presses des Mines.
- Thévenot, L. (2022) 'A New Calculable Global World in the Making: Governing Through Transnational Certification Standards'. In: Mennicken, A., Salais, R. (eds) *The New Politics of Numbers. Executive Politics and Governance*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78201-6_7
- Thévenot, L. (2014) 'Voicing concern and difference: From public spaces to common-place', *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 1(1), pp. 7–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2014.905749>
- Tsing, A. L. (2017) *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.