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Connected Proximity. 'Social Streets' Between Social Life and New Forms of Activism

Introduction

From some years now, in several Italian cities the rising phenomenon of the so-called 'social streets' has gathered momentum. Social Streets[2] can be roughly defined as the attempt to revitalise urban sociality and social capital among neighbours, enhancing common culture and collaborative practices, starting from the creation of Facebook Groups (Augé and Pasqualini, 2016). The aim of this contribution is to give an initial descriptive portrait of such emerging phenomenon, drawing on qualitative[3] data gathered by empirical research conducted in the city of Milan over a two-year period of fieldwork and to hint at some theoretical suggestions for its sociological framing.

ItalianSoSts: a quantitative framing

The analysis of an emergent phenomenon requires the drawing of its quantitative impact. The birth of the first Italian SoSt dates back to

[1] This essay is the outcome of a common reflection between the authors. In details, paragraphs 1, 3, 4 can be attributed to Fabio Introini and paragrahs 2 and 5 to Cristina Pasqualini.
[2] From now-on, SoSts.
[3] In the city of Milan, the research team has collected, 60 in-depth interviews with the founders of the SoSts. Other research actions conducted are: participative observation during events and activities organised by some SoSts; the monitoring and content analysis of the more active Facebook Groups and an on-line survey administered to all the Facebook Users. These actions were conducted in Milan, Bologna and Mantova. For the aims of this paper we only drew from in-depth interviews with founders conducted in Milan.

September 2013 (see below, Figure 1) and takes place in Via Fondazza, a street in the center of Bologna, an important city in central Italy. From this date onwards, SoSts have continued spreading in the rest of Bologna but also outside it, reaching many of the main Italian cities such as Milan, Rome, Florence, Turin and Palermo. In some cases, SoSts have also been opened abroad. At the end of the last quarter of 2013, the overall number of Italian SoSts is around 140 and in January 2014 increases to 149. After one year – January 2015 – the total amount more than doubles (365) and in January 2016 it reaches 408 units, 30 of which are abroad. The last monitoring, dated June 2016, shows that SoSts reached the 450 mark. Even though their historical roots are in Bologna, SoSts reach their highest concentration in Milan, with 71 units and a total amount of 26,000 people registered in the respective Facebook groups. The reason for this affinity between Milan and SoSts may reside in the marked metropolitan character of this city. This implies that in this city more than in others, the problem of sociality and social capital building is much more felt as a priority. However, at the same time, it also means that Milan, thanks to the complexity due to its metropolitan features, is an authentic 'sociological laboratory', open to every kind of innovation and experimentation, granting a fertile milieu even for the flourishing of SoSts[4]. In this perspective it is worth noting that before the official 'foundation' of the SoSts by the group 'Social Street International' (see below) in 2013, in Milan there was already some experimentation very similar to what had been called, some years after, 'SoSt': we have mapped three of them, the older of which is based in Paolo Sarpi Street[5], with the largest Facebook Group (around 5000 registered users). Anyway it is by virtue of the catalyst represented by the birth of Via Fondazza in 2013 that this phenomenon takes off in Milan. The bigger SoSts in Milan – by number of Facebook Groups users – first appear in this period. They are 'Parco SolariSoSt' (October 2013), 'MaiocchiSoSt' (November 2013), 'MorgagniSoSt' (December 2013), 'LambrateSoSt' (January 2014), 'San Gottardo-MedaSost' (February 2014). During 2014 SoSt phenomenon reaches its 'boom' with the opening of 48

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[4] For this reason the Observatory on SoSts, coordinated by C. Pasqualini selected the city of Milan as the main field for the empirical, quali-quantitative research concerning Italian SoSts.

[5] We have to underline that the name of this single street is also the name of the entire district, also known as the 'Milanese Chinatown'.

new SoSts whereas, in the following year, we witness a significant slow-down, with only 9 new streets. This trend is confirmed by 2016 data, in which we registered, during the first quarter, the opening of just one
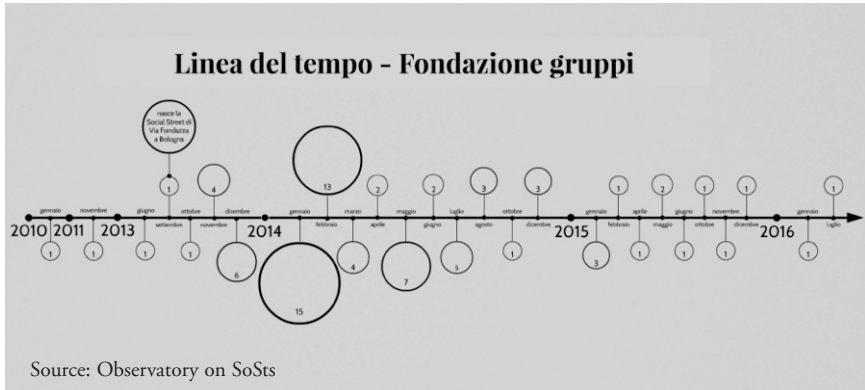

Source: Observatory on SoSts

Fig. 1 – *Timeline of SoSts openings. Period: 2010-2016*

SoSts: a general overview

Currently, the ensemble of Italian SoSts is quite heterogeneous and every SoSt is, in a certain sense, a sui generis world, as if this form of life were exploring all its different evolutionary possibilities. Every SoSt has its idiosyncratic genesis and development, depending, basically on the founders' motivations and personal culture, his/her confidence with web 2.0 and the net culture, his/her civic or political commitment, the history and the urban, social and demographic features of the district in which the SoSt is based. Anyway the 'official' origins of the whole phenomenon has to be connected with the birth of *Social Street International (SSI)*, a group of people, based in Bologna, which are credited with promoting the same idea of Social Street. As an interviewee told us, the success of SSI lies in its ability to create a balanced mix between top-down suggestions and bottom-up creative impetus giving to well-disposed and enterprising people an open, flexible and customizable idea to develop in different ways. At the same time, the simple existence of SSI has given a field of visibility to the whole phenomenon and acted as an incubator of relationships and knowledge among nascent SoSts. SSI is far from being the pacemaker or the crane cabin of a movement. As SSI groups – and the many 'streeters'

who adhered to this venture – bluntly recognise, the 'concept' at the basis of Social Street is not radically new inside both the worlds of net and urban culture. It was something already 'in the air' – due to broader social trends such as the need to fight the fragmentation of social fabric by building social relations and confidence, the desire to make urban spaces more livable and safe, a new spirit of collaboration and the advent of a 'sharing culture' for the sake of mere togetherness and as an antidote to the damage produced by the Finanical Crisis of 2008. But SSI has been given a much clearer identity and concreteness to the phenomenon, creating a (web) platform able to gain visibility of this phenomenon and to trigger a 'positive feedback' process. The SSI website has also democratised the practices of networking through SNS, even to people not very used to the sphere of the web 2.0, giving a *vademecum* on how to open and maintain a SoSt. But, most of all, SSI has had success in building a narrative and a 'brand' which gives a frame of meaning and recognition to the phenomenon. As many SoSt founders told us, the availability of such a brand became very useful when it came to ask and convince neighbors to join the project. SSI created a kind of 'manifesto' defining in a very general and open way the identity and mission of a SoSt: to enhance collaboration among neighbours by means of a closed Facebook group, leaving aside economic purposes and direct political commitment or the explicit endorsement of politicians and their campaigns. SSI is a brand and a network, but it does not impose an ownership of the idea. Everyone interested in opening something similar to a SoSt is free to run alone; joining SSI is just a matter of benefit: the benefit to enter a wider network to exchange experiences and practices.

SoSts as a new form of dwelling?

Even though SoSts are 'apolitical' they inevitably may assume a political dimension for several reasons: 1) the founder may be motivated in this enterprise by virtue of his/her strong civic commitment or 2) the SoSt arises as an answer to a peculiar collective problem of a specific district (e.g.: integration of immigrants, lack of services such as shops, leisure structures, as happens very often in city suburbs); 3) the district giving birth to a SoSt has a history and tradition of civic commitment and participation and finds in the idea of an SoSt another

way to channel this spirit. However, we can say that generally speaking every SoSt is somewhat 'political' because of its involvement in social capital (re)generation and in the current key question, that of dwelling. As a meta-practice concerning the whole ensemble of strategies that human beings display in their relationships with the environment (Ingold 1995), dwelling is a complex network of heterogeneous elements (legal, social, economic, political and spatial) strictly connected and co-defined with each other. Urban life can be considered a peculiar configuration of such networks so that, starting from the institutions which organise it to the material aspects of urban space, the city proposes a 'life paradigm' at the expense of others. This is even more true in contemporary cities where, according to La Cecla (2014), the discipline of urban planning hasgathered momentum and transformed our cities in places where the only one relationship you can have with the space is consumerism. We suggest that trying to transform urban relationships among neighbours – as SoSts do – has consequences on all the other dimensions of dwelling so that it makes visible all its complexity concealed behind the simplest, reductionist and naturalised version imposed by the 'neoliberal city' – and its implicit anthropology – also by means of its urban planning and architecture. It is not by chance that trying to act on social capital, SoSts attract other practices concerning urban space and its uses, social innovation in mutual service provision, gift-based relationships, sensibility to sustainable lifestyles and green areas, re-discovering of 'ancient' and traditionally non-urban practices such as gardening. In short, all the forms of relational and environmental practices discarded from contemporary city life and its 'usability'. In so doing SoSts have to be put inside the current flourishing – triggered also by the 2008 financial crisis – of dwelling experimentations: from the most radical, to the need to move outside the urban space in search of a new kind of settlement (as in the case of the 'Ecovillages') to the less demanding which try to change things inside the urban space by means of 'manipulation'.

Furthermore, as SoSts are exposed to open evolution, and rooted in complex social and anthropological meaning and processes, it could happen that in some cases the civic commitment increases to the point of leading them to take part more explicitly in political issues and processes. As regards this possible evolution and the role SoSts can assume as political collective activists inside the city, we have to account for a trajectory which has characterised, in 2015, some Milanese SoSts and

which has led to an important convergence between them and the local institutions. Although in order to better understand the meaning and the consequences of this convergence we have to specify two important features of SoSts as a collectivity: 1) SoSts are 'virtual' but have to be rooted in a precise urban place. This creates an interesting, innovative form of sociality because it leads to a different way of joining online and offline dimensions. If virtual communities and groups generally find in elective ties based on common interests the ability to join people from everywhere, a SoSt, albeit virtual, is 'proudly' defined by ascription as it has to connect people living in the same urban premises. In other words SoSts are virtual communities which can continuously be in conditions of meet-up[6], with deep consequences for their main purpose; the creation of bonding social capital. This is also the originality and the gamble of the SoSt model: using the Internet (via Facebook) to enhance and maintain communication among people living near each other– and not distant and scattered – but that, for a 'metropolitan paradox' needs Computer Mediated Communication to put people in touch, trigger sociality and build social capital; 2) SoSts want to maintain a fluid collective identity, so that they are different from other more traditional forms of collective ties, such as associations, which are clearly and formally defined by an official charter. This endorsement of fluid identity, according to SSI, is an expression of the desire to propose a light and totally voluntary adhesion, more consistent and affordable with the rhythms of current urban life.

The road to institutions: the Milanese experience

In a closer analysis we can say that Milanese SoSts encountered local institutions in a 'durkheimian' way: proud of their fluid nature and their innovative form of collectivity, they hadn't searched the dialogue with them until they realised, in a very concrete process of organising even the 'simplest' event (e.g. 'street parties'), they were forced to request public permission from these local institutions. This led some SoSts to address the local administrative institutions. The Municipality of Milan showed great sensitivity to SoSts requests from

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[6] For the way in which meetups can enhance bridging or bonding social capital inside an on-line based community, see Shen and Cage (2015).

the beginning and gave way, in 2015, to a series of public meetings open to all those SoSts that were interested. As the delegates of the Milan Municipality bluntly recognized their lack of knowledge of such a cutting edge phenomenon, the very first meetings were dedicated to learning from the direct voice of the streeters what a SoSt is and what are its purposes. Following that, the discussion shifted to the ways in which the municipality could legally and formally receive SoSts requests and how to help them in their mission. In this regard, the fluid and non-formalised nature of SoSts revealed a problem. Not being an approved association proved to be an obstacle to obtaining permissions to use, for example, public spaces and to enhance some civically committed activities and practices which SoSts are interested in promoting and which are devoted, mostly, to the safeguarding of urban public property. The municipality recommended that SoSts become associations in order to easier gain permissions. However SoSts, proud of their fluid identity, convinced the municipality to come up with another solution. Hence, due to Streeters' desires and the normative void, SoSts and Milanese Institutions gave birth to several negotiating tables[7] to plan and build a 'special' regulation capable of legally recognising and making room for new forms of social collaboration and active citizenship.

Once ascertained that SoSts have as their main objective the enhancement of sociality without profit, The Milan Municipality, drawing inspiration from the pre-existing experiences of Rimini and Bologna, (which launched a similar regulation respectively in 2011 and 2014) on 25 January 2016, in a meeting with the Streeters, presented the first draft of a 'Guiding Act for the institution, by public advice, of a town register of informal groups for active citizenship'. SoSts members enthusiastically approved this document, as, in their opinion, it fully recognised their informal and fluid collective subjectivity.

SoSts which are interested can now register on a public list which enables them to activate temporary conventions with the municipality on the basis of specific projects. Once submitted to the authority, such projects have to be assessed by the administration and are eventually authorised. In this way every SoSt can organise meetings and events in places such as streets, squares, parks; they can also promote and 'advertise' their initiatives with fliers and posters. Most importantly, all

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[7] Our Observatory on SoSts took part, as observer, in such meetings.

people involved in such initiatives will receive insurance coverage for the whole duration of an event.

Currently it is not possible to assess if this important development will be enough to sustain, and make effective, this new kind of urban activism or if some SoSts will go a step further and convert to being more traditional types of associations. Or, on the other hand, if SoSts opt for a 'lighter' profile, dedicated to simply enhancing sociability for sociability's sake. However, in any case we believe that SoSts will remain an object deserving of our sociological attention.

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