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BOOK REVIEW

Morelli, Niccolò (2022), *La convivialità urbana nei quartieri di Milano, Bologna e Roma: Un'analisi mixed-method sulle Social Street*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, pp. 192.

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Within the framework of the Italian tradition of comparative political urban economy, the text analyzes the phenomenon of Social Streets in three Italian cities (Milan, Bologna, and Rome). The objective is to understand their main characteristics, origins, and the effects they produce in their respective neighborhoods, while also examining their evolution over time (starting from the first Social Street "Fondazza", founded in September 2013 in Bologna) and across space (identifying both common elements and differences between the three cities).

Social Streets are characterized by their hybrid nature, as they originate in the digital sphere (particularly in Facebook groups) before materializing into events, initiatives, and meetings in the physical world. Sociological research has largely highlighted how digital interactions are dominated by principles of convenience and affinity, often at the expense of emotional aspects, human connection, and altruism (Ryan, 2015). Therefore, the typical digital relationship model is marked by deterritorialization, weakness, and a lack of solidarity (Sassen, 1991). Furthermore, another frequently noted characteristic is the high mobility of contemporary individuals, which results in difficulties or a lack of willingness to establish roots in a specific area and develop localized socialization (Wellman, 2002).

However, the author challenges this thesis with several objections. The first, of a semantic nature, concerns the concept of **community** itself, which is often idealized and characterized by positive values (Bauman, 2001). Urban sociology, in fact, tends to prefer the notion of **collective efficacy**, particularly in terms of crime prevention and neighborhood safety (Sampson, 2012). More recently, research has focused on practices of **conviviality**, understood as encounters, exchanges, and points of contact between people who do not know each other and who may have very different values and cultures. These interactions involve trust and mutual recognition but do not necessarily create strong ties like friendship (Neal et al., 2019). Specifically, conviviality is defined as "an orientation towards shared lives lived through difference, as well as connective interdependencies" (Neal et al., 2019, pp. 2-3).

The second objection raised by the author concerns the **crucial role** that – according to some studies – **cities** continue to play in human relationships, countering the idea of a complete deterritorialization of social bonds (Blokland, 2017). The importance of sharing a physical space is evident, for example, in solidarity and resistance initiatives responding to economic crises (Bosi, Zamponi, 2015) and health crises (Springer, 2020), in local associative networks (Cousin, Chauvin, 2013), and in the forms of sociality in multiethnic neighborhoods (Blokland, Nast, 2014). Even among highly mobile individuals, strong attachment to neighborhoods and to loved ones from their birthplaces can be observed (Andreotti et al., 2015). Finally, regarding the decline in civic engagement, Morelli's book aligns with a body of research that has focused on new, more discontinuous and less structured forms of activism, as opposed to traditional forms that struggle to adapt to the current context (Ambrosini, 2016; Citroni, Coppola, 2021), particularly among young people (Pozzi et al., 2021).

Thanks to the internet, the Social Streets create new connections between neighbors who did not know each other, bridging the gap between the digital and the physical dimensions (Morelli, 2019; Nuvolati, 2013; Pasqualini, 2018). The Social Streets introduce **novel questions** into the established debate within social sciences. The very existence of this phenomenon demonstrates that there is a socialization issue in urban environments, yet at the same time, it highlights the initiative of residents who mobilize to create new forms of relationships.

Therefore, unlike other studies on the causes of the weakening of social ties in the city (for example: Jacobs, 1961; Wellman, Hawtornwrite, 2008), Morelli's text focuses on the analysis of the reasons behind the birth and development of the phenomenon called Social Street. The author analyzes not only the social environment, that is, the people and their relationships, but also the urban environment and the economic characteristics of the areas where the Social Streets are located.

From a **methodological perspective**, Morelli's research is based on data collected from the **three Italian cities** with the highest presence of Social Streets: Milan (72), Bologna (65), and Rome (33). Data on Streeters was gathered through an online questionnaire completed by over 1,300 users, supplemented by more than one hundred semi-structured interviews with the founders/administrators of Social Streets in the three contexts, as well as netnographic observations of residents' Facebook groups to better analyze digital interactions.

Regarding the relationship between associations and Social Streets, Morelli highlights how Social Streets exhibit some typical elements of **new forms of civic participation**, characterized by a lighter, more episodic engagement focused on individual initiatives rather than attachment to the association itself. As previously mentioned, Social Streets originate online: thanks to this characteristic, they manage to engage younger age groups. Moreover, they are not formally registered in association directories, and, in some cases, position themselves in opposition to pre-existing entities such as neighborhood committees (Pasqualini, 2018). Additionally, Social Streeters meet occasionally at events that do not require constant commitment, making this phenomenon accessible with low entry and exit costs. The hypothesis is that, due to generational factors and the already established presence of other forms of civic activism, Social Streets contrast with traditional associations in their positioning toward politics. At the same time, the uneven spread of Social Streets across cities, with a particular concentration in more affluent areas (Pasqualini, 2018; Nuvolati, 2014), suggests that they may align with **centrality theory**, demonstrating a pre-existing political and civic socialization among participants.

Among the main findings of the survey is an accurate description of the characteristics of Social Streets, both in terms of urban areas and the people participating in this phenomenon. Regarding the **individual characteristics of Streeters**, although studies remain limited and are primarily focused on Milan, some traits are clearly identifiable. First and foremost, Morelli's research confirms the **strong female presence**, as also observed in other studies (Pasqualini, 2018; Rania et al., 2020). Among the 1,300 people who responded to the questionnaire, women accounted for 72% of respondents in Milan, 70% in Bologna, and 74% in Rome.

However, Morelli emphasizes that the high percentage of women is not necessarily linked to the inclusive nature of the phenomenon but rather to the greater ease of balancing involvement in Social Streets with caregiving responsibilities, which are still predominantly managed by women. Indeed, low entry and exit costs, sporadic event planning, and proximity to one's home enable female participation.

In Milan and Rome, **over 70% of Streeters own the home they live in**, while in Bologna, the figure is 66%. These numbers are lower than the national average but higher than the municipal average (Morelli et al., 2019). This discrepancy can be explained by the high cost of housing in metropolitan areas, indicating that Streeters generally have good financial resources.

Regarding **demographics**, the average age of Streeters ranges between 43 and 47 years, with the majority falling within the 30–50 age group, while those under 30 are less represented, and those over 70 are almost absent. These figures suggest that the areas where Social Streets develop are not particularly attractive to young people, likely due to the high socioeconomic profile of these neighborhoods. The presence of older cohorts (aged 70 and above) is generally in line with municipal statistics, but the presence of the oldest age group is nearly nonexistent, partly due to the digital divide (Pasqualini, 2018).

In terms of **educational background**, the most common level of education is a university degree, while the number of individuals with only primary education is very low. This data aligns with the age distribution, particularly the absence of the oldest age groups, meaning that educational attainment tends to be higher than the national average, with a significant underrepresentation of individuals with lower education levels.

Regarding **employment**, more than two-thirds of Streeters are employed: in Milan and Rome, they make up 85% of respondents, while in Bologna, the figure is 74% (although Bologna has a higher proportion of students, 10%, compared to 7% in Milan and 5% in Rome). Conversely, the unemployed represent a small percentage, averaging 5% across the three cities, as do households. Although the three cities display slightly different employment profiles, they all share a higher proportion of employed individuals in Social Streets compared to the municipal average. This suggests that the areas where Social Streets are located tend to attract more socially and professionally active groups. Moreover, a closer analysis of the **professions** of Streeters reveals a predominance of highly specialized, intellectual, and scientific ones. In Milan, over 73% of employed individuals work in these fields, in Bologna 66%, and in Rome 54%, while less qualified workers are almost entirely absent.

Regarding **marital status**, the percentage of divorced or separated individuals stands at around 12% in Milan and Rome, while it is only 8% in Bologna. Morelli notes that divorced or separated Streeters are more numerous compared to the average of Social Streets and the general city population (especially in Milan). Another interesting aspect is the high number of singles among the Streeters. While this is certainly influenced by demographic factors (young people tend to postpone marriage and no longer consider it an inevitable choice), it is also important to note that census data does not account for cohabitation, which is more common among the younger generations. In fact, despite the higher rate of divorced and separated individuals, 50% of respondents are in a relationship as cohabitants or married, surpassing the number of singles. Therefore, Streeters are largely people engaged in romantic relationships.

Additionally, Streeters are evenly divided between those with **children** and those without in all three contexts. This indicates that having children does not hinder participation in Social Streets nor act as a barrier for those wishing to join. Furthermore, Streeters are also evenly divided between those with at least one child under the age of 12. This is particularly interesting, as some studies have shown that childhood years tend to lead to a decline in participation, especially among women (Magaraggia, Di Nello, 2016). In contrast, Social Streets have characteristics that make it easier to balance with caregiving responsibilities, which still largely fall on women.

Regarding the **locations** where Social Streets are concentrated, their distribution is not uniform: they primarily develop in central and semi-peripheral areas of cities, where the concentration of university graduates is higher. Specifically, in Milan, they extend just beyond the historic center, to areas rich in services but with

fewer retail activities than in the past, densely populated, particularly by middle-upper-class individuals (Cousin, Préteicelle, 2008). In Bologna, Social Streets are mainly found in the city's central area, within the old city walls. In Rome, however, Social Streets are fewer in number and mostly located near the historic center. In the three cities, Social Streets are not found along main roads but rather on side streets: although well connected to public transport networks, they function as "small quiet islands" and have retained public physical elements that facilitate social interactions, such as small squares and gardens. Lastly, in all three cities, professional activities are more prevalent on the streets where Social Streets emerge and expand. This means that these districts are actively lived in and used by residents, contributing to the sense of belonging that underpins neighborhood relationships.

Regarding the concentration of **foreigners** in Social Streets across the three contexts, their presence has increased significantly since 1991 when it was almost nonexistent. However, it is worth noting that the municipalities of Milan and Bologna have recorded a sharper increase than Rome. Additionally, in Milan, Social Streets initially reflected the same percentage of migrants as the municipal context, but later, the proportion decreased compared to the city. In Bologna, foreigners in Social Streets were more numerous than in the overall municipal context until 2011, after which they followed a similar trend to Milan. The situation in Rome is quite different, as the presence of foreigners in Social Street areas has consistently been higher than in the city, reaching 11% in 2011 compared to the municipal average of 9%. However, Rome represents a unique case due to the significant presence of diplomatic corps and foreign officials residing in the capital.

The lower presence of foreigners, combined with the higher concentration of highly educated individuals and the absence of non-productive age groups, all indicate a process of **gentrification** within the Social Streets. This means that the characteristics of the streets involved are changing due to the economic, cultural, and social capital of new residents. This trend fits into the broader debate on community dynamics, where a strong presence of migrants is often seen as a factor that makes it more challenging to build social ties, due to differing expectations regarding social control (Sampson, 2012), high mobility rates, and lower attachment to the neighborhood (Wellman, Haythornthwaite, 2008). However, two aspects must be considered: first, the Italian context – where, on average, only one in ten residents is foreign – is far from the so-called "hyperdiverse cities" (Kathiravelu, Bunnell, 2017), i.e. urban settlements with a massive presence of people from highly diverse backgrounds. Secondly, many recent studies challenge the idea that the presence of foreigners weakens social cohesion, instead emphasizing the role of economic vulnerability in shaping social relationships (Blokland, Nast, 2014; Andreotti et al., 2015; Wacquant, Howe, 2008). Following the social centrality approach (Milbrath, 1965), socioeconomic status significantly influences individuals' capacity and inclination to form social bonds. Economic fragility often translates into precarious relationships and, in some cases, into an aversion – sometimes driven by shame – toward interacting with close neighbors (Wacquant, 2014).

In summary, similar trends can be observed across the three cities, allowing for a **unified profile of the typical Streeter and Social Streets**. These areas tend to be populated by the productive segments of the population (people aged 30–50), with lower representation of non-productive groups (students, retirees, and households). Streeters have higher educational attainment than both their neighbors and the municipal average, with a greater presence of entrepreneurs and highly skilled professionals. All these characteristics support the hypothesis that Streeters and the Social Street phenomenon align with the theory of **social centrality** (Milbrath, 1965), involving people who are inherently more inclined to participate due to their socioeconomic status (Biorcio, Vitale, 2016).

Regarding the **motivations** that led the Streeters to engage in this phenomenon, the results from the questionnaires highlight the desire to take care of their own street, indicated by one in three respondents (with a response rate of 49% for Romans). In addition to this, the willingness to share opinions and socialize by meeting new people is also mentioned. Conversely, the willingness to propose initiatives, seek information, and build a network of people to rely on or give/receive help is less significant.

Now, what are the **effects of Social Streets** in terms of the sociality they generate? First, it is important to clarify that many Streeters already had frequent interactions, at least on a weekly basis, even before the foundation of the Social Street. Therefore, the latter can be seen as a means to strengthen attachment to the neighborhood. In fact, in all three contexts, the percentage of people stating that they interact at least once a week since the establishment of the Social Street exceeds 60%, reaching as high as 72% in Rome. In Bologna, this percentage has increased by 14 points since the Social Street was launched (although it should be noted that this was the context where residents were less familiar with one another). Moreover, the majority of Streeters agree that, thanks to the Social Street, they have increased their connections within their neighborhood (60%). Regarding the type of **sociality**, unlike more "traditional" associations, Social Streets offer a variety of activities, allowing residents to participate in **different initiatives** according to their interests.

In terms of **security perception**, Morelli stresses the fact that urban sociality literature connects neighborly ties with greater social order (Sampson, 2012), contributing to an increased sense of security (Lub, 2018). The questionnaire results confirm this thesis: thanks to Social Streets, the majority of Streeters feel safer, can rely on more people in case of need, and are more attentive to what happens in their street. Morelli's survey therefore confirms the importance of sociality factors in security: institutions and the police alone cannot produce a high sense of security (Lane, 2018; Orum, Anderson, 2022), but "eyes on the street" are also needed (Jacobs, 1961).

Morelli's study also investigates the sense of **attachment to Social Streets**, which appears to be high, although participants do not have the impression to "own" their street. This may be linked to the sporadic and diverse nature of Social Street activities, as well as to the low level of structuring and the absence of leadership figures. However, Rome stands out as an exception: there, Streeters exhibit a more detached attitude, despite being the ones who perceive greater sociality and security. This detachment may be explained by the presence of other local organizations in Rome that are more focused on fostering a sense of identity and belonging, such as neighborhood committees.

Nonetheless, a significant portion of Streeters does not feel particularly connected to the phenomenon, likely due to **multi-affiliation, fragmentation, and weak associationism** (Citroni, 2018), as well as the peculiar nature of Social Street initiatives: they are sporadic and non-homogeneous events. An interesting finding concerns those who, while not having personally benefited from increased sociality, still declare their attachment to the phenomenon, acknowledging its utility. In general, in Milan, there is a stronger sense of attachment regardless of personal benefits (in terms of sociality or security). In Bologna, on the other hand, the defining factor of belonging seems to be a sense of security.

Morelli also examined the **associative dimension of Streeters**: over 35% of them are involved in associations (rising to 45% in Bologna and 40% in Rome). This is significantly higher than the national average (16.2%), the North (20.8%), and the Center (16.0%) – a trend consistent across all age groups. Analyzing the types of associations in which Streeters are engaged, cultural and welfare associations dominate (the latter being cited by one in two associated Streeters in Rome). Religious associations are much less relevant, and – contrary to other research findings –so are civic associations, i.e., those committed to defending, protecting, and promoting civic or political values (Biorcio, Vitale, 2016).

Streeters show strong interest in **politics**, particularly men, consistently with the social centrality model (Milbrath, 1965) and major findings from scientific research (Mayer, 2010; Magaraggia, Di Nello 2016). This is particularly notable given that recent results indicate that less than one in three Italians declare an interest in politics (Marini et al., 2017). Morelli also highlights how Social Streets attract people particularly sensitive to these issues, despite the founders expressly prohibiting political discussions. Furthermore, considering educational background, the theory of social centrality is fully confirmed. Streeters with higher education levels are more interested in politics, with scores exceeding 60% in all three contexts, whereas those with low or medium education levels range between 50-55%. In other words, Streeters are largely the result of **self-selection by participants** who already value the importance of civic participation and collective action.

However, despite a significant number of Streeters declaring themselves very or fairly interested in politics, only a quarter of respondents identify with a **specific party**, aligning with the national average. Numerous studies have shown that party identification is higher among more educated social classes (Mayer, 2010; Piketty, 2020), but this trend contrasts with the experience of Streeters. This may also be attributed to age factors, as highly educated Streeters tend to be younger, whereas party allegiance is more common among older cohorts. Nonetheless, interviews clearly reveal that **anti-political sentiment** is widespread even among Social Streets, a sentiment that has become pervasive in Italian society since "Tangentopoli" (Vitale, 2019). This translates into a strong criticism and distrust of institutions and political actors or an instrumental relationship with them, where institutions are seen merely as facilitators for carrying out activities more easily. However, Morelli does not absolve local administrators and political actors who use Social Streets for partisan rather than political purposes: normalizing the relationship between citizens and institutions faces obstacles on both sides.

As previously mentioned, the average Streeter profile is that of a woman, engaged but generally not yet married, aged between 30 and 50, with a high level of education and a high socio-professional status. Regarding **administrators**, in all three contexts, women represent over 60% of respondents and have children. It is noticeable that, in all three contexts, the female gender is negatively associated with interest in politics and participation in associations. Associative participation, therefore, manages to bring together people from different cultural and professional backgrounds, but demographic factors still have a strong influence. In contrast, Social Streets are more homogeneous in terms of education and socio-professional status, but in terms of generation and gender, they are much more inclusive than more traditional associations.

In terms of **trajectories** of the founders of Social Streets, Morelli identifies four paths:

1. **The installed ones**: administrators who have moved to the area from other cities or neighborhoods. After an initial period of adjustment, these individuals develop a sense of attachment and a high level of interest in local life.
2. **The returnees**: people who are originally from the area but moved elsewhere (mainly for professional reasons) and then return to the same neighborhood after a period. For these individuals, attachment to the neighborhood arises from noticing negative changes after their period of mobility, which motivates them to take care of the neighborhood themselves. Additionally, there is a desire to recreate or reconnect relationships that were lost over time.
3. **The frequent flyers**: individuals who travel frequently for work but primarily live in the neighborhood, which serves more as a base rather than their residential area.
4. **The historical residents or natives**: people who were born, grew up, and lived in the neighborhood. They are an exception among administrators and even among users. In this case, both attachment to and knowledge of the neighborhood are considerable, but this does not seem to hinder the desire to create new social connections.

In these trajectories, it emerges how the trait of **mobility** – increasingly common among the younger generations of the middle-upper classes – is shaping lifestyles: attachment to the territory, the recreation of bonds, and commitment to one's environment persist despite mobility, but in forms that differ from the past (Pfirsch, 2018). Moreover, the role of **social networks** is crucial as they allow people who are physically close but don't know each other to connect. Even those who are not mobile can benefit from them by extending their sociality and connecting with the locals.

Regarding the functions of the **Social Street**, three main categories emerge, which can coexist and are not mutually exclusive. The first sees the Social Street solely as a means of creating sociality (**conviviality**); a

second sees the Social Street and sociality as tools to activate engagement in the territory, for civic commitment focused on the neighborhood and the street (**mutual help**). This activism and civic engagement can be expressed in two different forms: either the Social Street is a general place for building relationships, or it is closer to neighborhood committees. Finally, the Social Street can be seen as a means for the exchange and sharing of information about what is happening in the neighborhood (**information sharing**). Morelli also clarifies that the absence of the concept of "integration" of foreign-born people is not due to ideological reasons, but rather to the homogeneity of the population in Social Streets, which makes it less urgent.

In **conclusion,** Morelli's work provides three main contributions to the current sociological debate:

1. **Motivations of Social Streets' participants**

   The motivations declared by Streeters challenge theories that associate more mobile people with less interest in sociality and that identify the city as a major generator of loneliness. While it is true that cities produce isolation (Jacobs, 1969), citizens are reorganizing to build bonds, mutual aid, and collective actions (Bosi, Zamponi, 2015). These processes are more straightforward when neighborhoods have a **homophilic presence**, even in the absence of residential stability (Sampson, 2005). Social Streets show that it is precisely those who experience trajectories of mobility who are more interested in creating bonds in their neighborhood. This is a way to create and consolidate roots while simultaneously giving the neighborhood a new identity. The most effective way to create connections in these contexts is through **conviviality**, which involves low entry and exit costs and is based on the pleasure of interacting with others. Facebook serves as a trigger and accelerator of the processes of meeting and organization, whose outcome, however, are physical interactions in the neighborhood.

2. **The importance of analyzing interactions and urban characteristics**

   Morelli provides empirical evidence of the importance of analyzing the interactions between actions and urban characteristics. This is an important approach for deepening the study and moving beyond merely analyzing motivations, which in the case of Social Streets would have left many open questions, such as the relationship between Streeters and the rest of the neighborhood population, and the housing evolution in those areas. Morelli demonstrates how Social Streets are effective and solid realities but do not spread to highly segregated neighborhoods. The strength of this phenomenon is simultaneously its greatest weakness: being spontaneous (bottom-up) means that attempts to export this phenomenon to neighborhoods with low collective efficacy tend to fail.

3. **The importance and relevance of the phenomenon**

   Social Streets exhibit innovative characteristics in the field of associationism, which could be precursors of new ways of producing actions in the territory. Social Streets show new or updated ways of creating sociality, vitality on the street, and reclaiming the street itself, taking care of it while avoiding the bureaucratic constraints that are often seen as too burdensome. This represents an important challenge for institutional actors, who increasingly promote forms of civic collaboration for territorial care but require constraints and methods that do not seem to meet citizens' needs, at least in the case of Social Streets.

All these dynamics are significant for understanding how sociality, participation, and care for territory can evolve in the contemporary urban context.

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