‘Being locally global’: power-geometries in post-global space

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Introduction

My thesis is that a particolar and widespread view of globalisation - as an homologating and homogeneizing force - is a very partial one and the entire story of territorial protection, the care for the very local, is exactly the other side of the coin of globalisation. I would like to briefly explore how and why global networks are politically relevant for the local and why the local is politically relevant for the global. It has something to do with the idea of ‘glocality’ but the story goes a little bit further.
The exploration moves from some preliminar considerations about the fate of local places in the age of globalisation. These considerations, despite the different theoretical positions, are widely proposed by some of the most influential social scientists, such as Anthony Giddens, Marc Augè, Ulrich Beck, or the critical geographer David Harvey.[1]
Globalisation channels objects from very far corners of the world into a single place, and implies an increasing number of languages spoken and skin colours sharing a tiny spot; it materialises in the rapid modification of the familiar landscapes, the emergence of environmental dangers, and the disorientation of moral habits and political practices.
Contemperary world, Giddens writes, “is inherently globalising”[2] and it is characterised by the intensification of worldwide social relation which link distant localities in a dialectic of presence and absence. It implies the emptying of the spatial dimension of ordinary daily activities, traditionally linked through places. The spreading of disembedding mechanisms, such as symbolic tokens and expert systems,[3] “bracket time and space”,[4] by affirming the supremacy of technical knowledge and the need of trust processes whose validity is independent from geographical and physical location. Disembedding mechanisms constantly deskill daily activities and induce the appropriation of knowledge by technical specialists. This is considered the cause of alienation that undermines traditional knowledge systems and local control structures.
The ‘phantasmagoring’ of places[5] is one of the most clear indication of a relation breaking between people and places (‘geographical disembedding thesis’): “In conditions of modernity, place becomes

increasingly phantasmagoric: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them."[6]

Global processes alter the character of bounded territories, of settled and coherent places, opened their borders so that the local vanishes away, meshing with the undifferentiated no-where all round, the undifferentiated nonplaces.

Time-space compression[7] produces a growing internationalisation which renders it difficult to sustain any notion of places as settled and coherent; again, it produces the feeling people are living in an increasingly unstable world, and the need for a secure, defined and stable place.[8]

The local, local places togheter with local societies, are regarded as the victims of globalisation and it seems necessary to resisting against this deprivation by opposing the very local to the strenght of the global.

a. Against globalisation

What this opposition toward globalisation implies? I will propose some examples from environmental politics, a kind of politics directly related with local territories protection and, at the same time, related with collective identity formation.

Environmental politics deals with a large number of different issues - from the urban chemical pollution, to GMOs experiments, to whales killing in the North Sea, to the building up of offshore wind energy plants - nonetheless, they all can be regarded as basically concerning the setting up of places at different geographical scales. Debates over the destiny of local tiny places involve the same environmental principles involved by debates over the destiny of large places – and eventually the largest one, the entire Planet.

When environmental politics emerged in the '60s it focused on the safeguard of natural environment, by resulting in a sort of a 'politics of atonement'. People have been considered as an impediment to conservation, which has been achieved through enforcement mechanisms. Nonetheless this approach relied on rather naïve assumptions, given that "Although they may appear untouched, many of the 'last refuges' of wilderness conservationists wish to protect are still inhabited or have been so for millennia."[9]

Open protests, rallies, insurgences and harassments organised by local people are unavoidable consequences of the attempt to control and direct people and place life, as the examples of Amboselu Park briefly sketches: "Created on lands traditionally used by Masai pastoralists, the Amboselu National Park in Kenya denied the local Masai access to dry season grazing lands and watering points. Although the national park management tried to provide compensations for the local people in a buffer zone, the Masai expressed their resentment towards the park by spearing lions, rhinos and other wildlife. The Masai are said to have hunted the black rhino to near extinction, not so much for its valuable horn, but because they believed white tourists desire to see the animal was the cause of them losing so much land to the Amboseli National park."[10]

The emergence of postcolonial studies represented a turning point in the elaboration of environmental politics on local places and communities protection. Environmental politics is thus regarded as a further

form of colonialism, hidden under the neutral appearance of scientific evidences and urged by environmental risks; it is regarded again as an expression of the paternalistic power of western world which imposes standard of development, ways of life, norms of conduct to non-western world. Anthropologist Kay Milton explains: "The environmentalist in me wants to get on with the work, to plant trees, lobby politicians, stop pollution, save the whales and the woodlands, halt the destruction wrought by the blind pursuit of profit and 'progress'. The trained anthropologist, irritatingly, want to stop and ask questions. Why do we believe what the scientists tell us? Why do we consider whales and woodlands important? What kinds of assumptions underlie the claim that the Earth is in danger? How does this particular way of understanding the world differ from those proffered by other cultures, and why are they different?"[11]

Briefly, what local places protection plans are said to do is constructing "a reality that contains mountains of data, but no people. The data do not explain why Tuaregs are drive to exhaust water holes, or what makes Germans so obsessed with high speed on freeways; they do not point out who owns the timber shipped from the Amazon or which industry flourishes because of a polluted Mediterranean sea; and they are mute about the significance of forest trees for Indian tribals […] In short, they provide a knowledge which is faceless and placeless."[12]

As a consequence, from '80s onward post-structuralists scholars and campaigners started to criticise the exclusive interest for natural environment and claimed the necessity to include human culture and their physical manifestation as deserving higher consideration. 'Participation' became a tool to involve people in drawing conservation project. As a result, nowadays, environmental politics on place protection is frequently based on the empowerment of local people.

It is possibile to enucleate some peculiar features of these strategies of protection of the local/s:

1. Postcolonial studies tent to romanticise the 'others' by shifting from the colonial excess of *denying* them to the postcolonial excess of *feticising* them.[13] This ensures locals to be owners of a special relation with the places and part of the conservation process. Efforts by international environmental organisations, individuals and networks, to sustain their struggle for the preservation of their home place, confirm the legitimacy of their cause.[14]
2. Threat to local cultures and intensification of modernity effects produce political strategy of strengthening cultural diversity as a mean to access the authentic meaning of a place.[15]
3. Struggle over nature and land, and meaning are simultaneously turned into struggles over identity and rights:[16] "local people themselves adopt and deploy transnational environmental rhetoric"[17] because language of rights, of political struggle and scientific description confers them authority.

b. Critical points

From a philosophical point of view, this attempt at resisting against globalising effects presents some problems:

1. The essentialising strategy frequently adopted implies the creation of stereotyped models from which the dissonant is materially and imaginary removed. Quite often when they present

themselves to foreign researcher or campaigners, especially if western, local people tend to essentialise their identities by stressing their relation with Mother Earth, their ancestor 'usos y costumbres', their peculiarities, in order to clearly differentiate themselves from newcomers. From non-locals point of view, it is much simpler to campaigning for the noble savage protection, rather than to protect the complex heterogeneous entities that every local or indigenous identity is (in which technicalities, long chain of commodities and desires, bodily practices and so on are the product of a long history of various hybridisation). Furthermore, to embracing the romanticised ideal of noble savage, who is a disinterested natural custodian of the environment, disregards that local inhabitants might be very proprietarial about their land and resources, and deeply resent the idea that foreigners have any right to declare them in need of conservation or to limit their economic activities.

2. Despite all, in the local protection strategies, locals still are seen as a sort of remain of the past: there is no space for them in present. Anthropologists Johannes Fabian suggests that in a linear view of societal development, different political subjectivities are seen as belonging to different ages; this implies a denial of coevalness.[18] Thus, according to the geographer Doreen Massey, what colonial-style thinking did (and does in its modern form) is to interpret spatial differences as time distances, so that 'other' countries have no to tell 'other' stories, to follow 'other' paths. Geographical differences are practically interpreted as a question of backwardness, instead of co-production of different trajectories inherent to the world itself. The differences between spaces are implicitly assumed and described as differences over something existing *per se*, a fixed background, where the geographical differences are reconceived in temporal terms. This understanding of differences "sees the others as really only a variation on oneself, where the 'oneself' is the one constructing the imagination".[19] The possibility for alternative voices, trajectories and narratives is therefore closed. Considering spatial imagination as a temporal variation implies relevant political effects. In the grand narrative of globalisation the suppression of concomitant effects of spatial difference is convened under the discourse of temporal sequence "and once again the potential openness of the future is foreclosed in a tale of inevitability".[20] .
3. Empowerment of local and marginal voices and opposition of the local toward the global, tends to exclude non-locals as unable to feel a real attachment to a specific place or to decide about its becoming. It should not be forgotten that local tradition is frequently a conservative force, so that locals' claim to protect authenticity are far from being open-minded and inclusive claims because "It is not just their occupation of the land which is at the issue but the fact that the entry of new people, new activities and crucially different view of the world will prevent them from going on living in the way they have known for so long."[21] As a matter of fact, locals' and indigenous' claims are a mixture of open and bounded view of places; they use transnational solidarity and universal claims (such as Human Rights), but at the same time they require boundaries to be erected around places.
4. At the same time, local communities are not internally homogeneous: there can be several differences, and weaker or dissident groups are often excluded from public affairs. A monolithic

image of local communities does not recognises the ways in which unequal and exclusionary relations are inscribed into small scale communities; or tends to subordinate internal differences to a higher common sense of belonging. Indee, the spatial organisation of the local, as a result of the living activities, reflects social orders and power structures; territoriality is a primary geographical expression of social power which determines those who belongs, and those who doesn't.[22] This means that instead of being idyllic, for a part of inhabitants their 'home-place' can be oppressive and silencing.

5. Assertions of place-bound identity rests on the power of tradition which through the presentation of a (generally) mythical and illusory past justifies its normalising power on people and places. It is the quest for security, the need for identification and a 'place to call home', which reinforces exclusivist claims and invents a stable (no matter how much illusory) ground for identity; "One of the problem has been a persistent identification of place with community. Yet this is a misidentification. On the one hand a communities can exist without being in the same place [...] On the other hand, the instances of places housing single 'communities' in the sense of coherent social groups are probably- and I would argue, have for long been- quite rare. Moreover even where they do exist this in no way implies a single sense of place."[23]

c. Back-side stories

By considering all this points, I want to argue that nothing is so smooth as it can appear when talking about globalisation, and if we consider the attempt of protecting territorialities, local embeddedness, we can discover some interesting back-sides of the stories. When protecting the local we often endorse, as the other side of the coin, very global mechanisms.

The example of ecotourism in Malaysian National Parks clarifies this point.[24] When travelling toward the jungle of Malaysian National Parks people expect to find authentic places in which ecological balance is maintained by sustainable way of living, undisturbed nature in harmony with traditional culture:[25] "[T]ourist do not visit mere jungles or areas covered with rainforests. They visit them if they are protected, if they carry the label of conservation area, a forest reserve, a national park, or even of a World Heritage Site. This label serves them as a guarantee for visiting an authentic place."[26] Ironically, this experience of authenticity will only be chosen if a certain degree of security feeling and situation control will be provided; and this goal can only be achieved by an intensive proliferation and use of what are generally referred at as non-places, namely spaces of globalised understanding which plays a fundamental role in everyday lives (such as airports, shopping malls, theme parks and so on).[27] The ironic result is that authentic places, preserved by modern world as a monument to the past and a resolution for the future, only exists and can be enjoyed as such through the mediation of a massive apparatus of inauthentic places: "For the tourists [the parks] should be easily accessible, but at the same time show signs of remoteness, which is often associated with authenticity and virginity"[28].

A further example is provided by the case of Brunello di Montalcino wine production in Tuscany.

The *Brunello di Montalcino* wine area in Tuscany, province of Siena, has a leading role in Italian wine production, and it is regarded as a successful case of place authenticity protection, economic well-being promotion and high-quality welfare fulfilling. This happy circumstance is said to derive from appropriate politics aimed at preserving local traditions, productions, behaviours and traditional ways of managing the land. In social imaginary, political planning and market strategies, *Brunello di Montalcino* wine is closely associated with the classic image of the Tuscan countryside: a place apparently untouched by modernity, in which it is still possible to taste traditional food, to experience healthy way of life and to discover the Renaissance cultural heritage.[29] However this wine has been 'created' only 50 years ago, when an north-american family inherited a large part of Montalcino hills and started an international production and selling of the Brunello wine.

d. Dealing with the global/local frame

I think the problem is: how can we deal with this frame, if we don't want to reject globalisation neither to enthusiastically adopt it? Probably it would be necessary to conceive local/global relation in terms of power-geometries. Those are the social/material (often unequal) relations stretched over space; they connect people, places, objects, information, and processes around the globe by giving a different weight to every relation; they can be variously structured according to the position, the history, the aspirations and the physical bounds.

For instance, there is a remarkable difference between the case in which the principle of free circulation is applied to migrant people entering Europe, or to multinational corporations establishing new plants in a Southern country, because the construction of power geometries is completely different; weakness is differently attributed who wants to move or to who want to stand. It is always necessary to argue on the base of spatialized social practices: "it is the power relation in the construction of the spatiality, rather than the spatiality alone, which must be addressed."[30] As geographer Doreen Massey suggests: "Is the local culture of Fortress Europe to be made equivalent in political discourse to the local culture of the Zapatistas of Chiapas? No: because the power relations through which both their hybrid identities and their relations with the 'outside world' are constructed are vastly different, as is the content of those relations. So maybe there cannot be any 'rights of local people' outside of the context of the particular power geometries in which they are constructed and set."[31]

As a matter of fact, what is at the stake in any account of modernity or globalisation is not the collapse of every difference, the post-modern loss of meaning, the meshed of proximity and remoteness, the appearance of otherness in our everyday life, but the nature of the embedded power relations: "[w]hat are at the issue are the constantly-being-produced new geometries of power, the shifting geographies of power-relations."[32]

Thus, it's not just the local versus the global dimension that is at the stake. Obviously, it would be a nonsense to affirm that geographical or ecological location does not count in bounding together metrically close places, at any scale defined; but upon this geometry, a 'similarity linkage' should be added, and in some cases it could prevail by determining a sort of 'relational proximity'. What has been

identified and implicitly assumed as a standpoint in geographical tradition, namely that geo-ecological features are a source of identity definition, is not self-evident. It can be easily recognised that Casablanca is probably closely akin to any other big mediterannean city, than to villages on the Atlas Mountains, despite both part of Morocco. 'Space of similarity' is not anymore produced in form of concentric circles moving from very tiny spots toward larger areas of proximity; it is the web provided with causal potentiality, produced by dispersed points in different areas of the world.

Conclusions

Places are neither the victims of the globalisation, nor the redoubts against the global, as the anthropologist Arturo Escobar says: "Even in the global world local places still are vital, dynamics because they are spaces of daily life, power generations, novelty emergence and tradition contestation; what we need is needed a "reassertion of place"[33] :

He affirms not to be worried about the opening of borders occurring in global age, rather he fears the elimination of borders corresponding to a denial of localization, not in terms of nationalistic and chauvinist interests overwhelming, but as a mere strategy of other borders edification. According to a current understanding of placelessness, material place relevance is vanishing (as if things actually happen in a Second-Life world). However, Escobar says: "There is an 'implacement' that counts for more than we want to acknowledge, which makes one ponder the idea of 'getting back into place'" so that "a defence of place as project [is] not so irrelevant after all."[34]

Escobar rightly affirms that "People continue to *construct* some sort of boundaries around their places, however permeable, and to be grounded in local socio-natural practices, no matter how changing and hybridized those grounds and practices might turn out to be. To capture the place specificity of the production of place and culture thus become the other side of the necessary reconceptualization of culture as deterritorialized and transnationally produced."[35]

In order to subscribe this global sense of place there is no need to be reactionary. Esclusivist idea of place is an imaginary one - a secure nest in the uncertainties of global space; but this kind of place has never been effective because even the very remote region of the world are not immune from long-distance effects of global web relations. Local places are (and have always been), more dynamic, more heterogeneous, more path-dependent, than a foundationalist and essentialist view suggests.

This is not to argue for the irrelevance of changes and sense of losses, nonetheless, as Massey writes (despite in a very discourse-based politics): "I may not like the changes happening in my local place, but appealing to some eternal, essential ('natural') character of place that is being disturbed is no grounds for argument. Rather at the issue are (should be) political; questions about power, equality, ethics, democracy and so on. The stake is not change itself (the denial of it in the past or the refusal of it in the future), for change of some sort is inevitable; rather it is the character and the terms of that change. It is here that the politics needs to be engaged."[36]

[1] See A. Giddens, *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1990; U. Beck, *What is globalisation?,* Balckwell Publishing, Cambridge, 2000 (*Was ist globalisierung?*); M. Auge', *Non places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, Verso, London, 1995 (or.ed. *Non-Lieux, Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, 1992) ; D. Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity: an enquiry into the origins of cultural change*, Blackwell Publishing, Cambridge (MA), 1990.

[2] A. Giddens, *The consequences of modernity*, p.63

[3] "Symbolic tokens are media of exchange which have standard value, and thus are interchangeable across a plurality of contest. The prime example, and the most pervasive is money" (A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 18); "Expert systems [deploy] modes of technical knowledge which have validity independent of the pratictioners and clients who make use of them" (A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 18).

[4] A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 18.

[5] "Place has become phantasmagoric because their structure by means of which it is constituted are no longer locally organised" (A. Giddens, *The consequences of modernity,* p.108).

[6] A. Giddens, *The consequences of modernity,* p. 18-20

[7] The analysis of time-space modification carried on by Giddens can be interestingly compared with the analysis provided by Manuel Castell (*The Power of Identity: The Information Age - Economy, Society and Culture,* Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 1998) in which he envisage the specific character of environmental movement's proposal in the introduction of a time encompassing the sort of future generations.

[8] D. Harvey, *The conditions of postmodernity*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989.

[9] M. P. Pimbert, J.N. Pretty, "Parks, People and Professionals: Putting 'Participation' into Protected Area Management", p.9

[10] M. P. Pimbert, J.N. Pretty, "Parks, People and Professionals: Putting 'Participation' into Protected Area Management", p.9.

[11] K. Milton, *Environmentalism and cultural theory*, Routledge, London, 1996, p.2

[12] W. Sachs, "Global Ecology and the Shadow of 'Development'", in W. Sachs, (ed.), *Global Ecology: A New Arena of Political Conflict*, Fernwood Books, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1993, p.22

[13] "Large international conservation NGOs have also adopted the narratives and rhetoric of the populist discourses in promoting people-oriented conservation and development projects and in forming alliances with indigenous peoples' organisations." (W. Adger, T. Benjaminsen, K.Brown, H. Svarstad, "Advancing a political ecology of global environmental discourses", p.706).

[14] J.P. Brosius, 'Endangered Forest, Endangered People: Environmentalist Representation of Indigenous Knowledge". *Human Ecology*, vol.25, nov.1, 1997

[15] A.Vallega, Geografia Culturale, UTET, Torino, 2003

[16] B.Braun, J. Wainwright, "Nature, Poststructuralism, and Politics" in N.Castree and B.Braun, *Social Nature*, Blacwell Publishing, Oxford, 2001, p.41

[17] J.P. Brosius, 'Endangered Forest, Endangered People: Environmentalist Representation of Indigenous Knowledge", p.55

[18] "The usual coeval, and especially the noun coevalness, express a need to steer between such closely related notions as synchronous/simultaneous and contemporary.[…] The term coevalness was chosen to mark a central assumption, namely that all temporal relations, and therefore also contemporaneity, are embedded in culturally organized praxis." (J. Fabian, *Time and the other*, p.34) Fabian explain that, despite ethnographers have acknowledged coevalness as a condition for understanding of other culture (namely to 'enframe' other people into our time), nonetheless in the final practice of producing diaries, descriptions, analysis etc. they forget their experience of coevalness by disjointing experience and science, research and writing.

[19] D. Massey, "Spaces of politics", p.281

[20] D. Massey, "Spaces of politics", in D. Massey, J. Allen, P. Sarre (eds.), *Human Geography Today,* Polity Press Cambridge, 1999, p.284

[21] D. Massey, " Imagining the world", in D. Massey, J. Allen (eds.), *Geographical World*, p.18

[22] "There is no such thing as a place or a community per se, but these are mere constructions of discourses and practices. These are always tied to positions of power and are embedded in systems of exclusion and inclusion. Nevertheless this position does not deny

the existence of spatial identities, but criticises its often essentialist character by emphasising underlying power structures." (U.Best and A.Stüver, 'The Politics of Place: Critical of Spatial Identities and Critical Spatial Identities", in International Critical Geography Groups, *For Alternative 21st century geographies. 2nd International Critical geography conference*, Taegu University, http://econgeog.misc.hit-u.ac.jp/icgg/intl_mtgs/taeguprogram.html, accessed May 1, 2008, p.1)

[23] D.Massey, "Global sense of place", *Marxism Today*, Jun 1991, p.28

[24] N. Backhaus, " 'Non-place jungle': the construction of authenticity in National Park of Malaysia", *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 31:89, 2007.

[25] This desire often result in a sort of 'commodification of people' and place. I'm grateful to Linda Longmire for having suggested me this short but very suggestive formula.

[26] N. Backhaus, " 'Non-place jungle': the construction of authenticity in National Park of Malaysia", p. 151.

[27] N. Backhaus, " 'Non-place jungle': the construction of authenticity in National Park of Malaysia".

[28] N. Backhaus, " 'Non-place jungle': the construction of authenticity in National Park of Malaysia", p. 155.

[29] Tuscan administrators' statements, publications and Regional Rules clearly expand these points (see Brunello di Montalcino Consortium's web-page at http://www.consorziobrunellodimontalcino.it/brunello/). It is also widely expanded by several fictions and travel reports from the 17th Century's *Grand Tour* up to the present time (see, for instance, J.W. Goethe's or H. Hesse's italian diaries, E. M. Forster's *A room with a view* (1908) or the more recent F. Meyer's *Under the Tuscan sun* (1998)).

[30] D. Massey, "Spaces of politics", p.291

[31] D. Massey, "Spaces of politics", p.292

[32] D. Massey, *For space*, p.85.

[33] A. Escobar, "Culture sits in places: reflections on globalism and subaltern strategies of localization", p.2

[34] A. Escobar, "Culture sits in places: reflections on globalism and subaltern strategies of localization", p.2

[35] A. Escobar, "Culture sits in places: reflections on globalism and subaltern strategies of localization", p.6

[36] D. Massey, 'Landscape as a provocation', p.40