

Giovanni Semi

**Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich and Catherine Trundle (eds.), Local Lives. Migration and the Politics of Place. Farnham-Burlington: Ashgate, 2010, 203 pp.**

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## Book reviews

**Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich and Catherine Trundle (eds.), *Local Lives. Migration and the Politics of Place*. Farnham-Burlington: Ashgate, 2010, 203 pp.**

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Fifteen years make a good time lapse for reconsideration. Going back to the mid-1990s, several works on migration, globalization and the remaking of social, cultural, political, and geographical spaces had huge impacts on social sciences. Appadurai's book on *Modernity at Large* (1996), for instance, as well as Glick-Schiller and colleagues appraisal of transnational migration (1995), had the strength to reconfigure the perception of the global arena in which we are embedded as citizens, migrants and observers. Journals, book series, research strands, as well as individual professional careers developed since, making virtually impossible, now, to study the movement of people throughout planet Earth without taking into account their multiple belongings, shifting identities, and ambiguous social activities.

In fifteen years people too have adapted to this changing world, namely by constantly attaching themselves to localities, making places suitable for dwelling, and political engagement. The book edited by Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich and Catherine Trundle tries to catch the theoretical and political consequences of what people have done locally to overcome the pressure of the global/local divide. In a sense, these authors challenge the ideology of nomadism as a global and cosmopolitan ethos that lies behind most of recent accounts of international migration. It is clearly a hard task for an edited volume whose format is a collection of separate ethnographic essays ranging from Albania to New Zealand, Hawai'i, France, Spain, Santo Domingo, Australia, and England.

The main entry points in the general approach of the volume are the rehabilitation of the notions of place and community in the anthropology of migration. Scholars from other disciplines, like geography, sociology or urban studies may be surprised of the newness of this reconsiderations, since place, and place-making, is one of the main conceptual tools of the last twenty years. The spatial turn in the social sciences, and the diffusion of theoretical advancements by Ash Amin, David Harvey, Dolores Hayden, Linda McDowell, Doreen Massey or John Urry, just to name some major scholars, has been so pervasive and relevant that one simply cannot use the term of space, locality, scale or territory without a prompt self-positioning on the space/place debate. In their introduction, the editors explain that, in their opinion, anthropology of globalization had a rather different development from other disciplines and the opposition between "local" and "global" had left little room for "place" thus "redefining the local, often as a residual or reactionary category of globalization" [p.2]. The same can be said about the concept of "community," easily dismissed in scholarly analysis but persistent in people's appraisal of localities and realities. It is unclear whether this perception of anthropological faults in adopting views from spatial turn advocates is fair or, rather, it reflects a specific, encapsulated, standpoint of a cluster of scholars.

When the reader skips to the empirical chapters, the major pros and cons of the book clearly stand out. On the one hand, the selection of the case-studies had offered

a vivid and wide-ranging accounts of place-making activities. It is the case, for instance, of Catherine Trundle's analysis of a local conflict in the coastal side of the Tasman area, New Zealand. The chapter tells about the emergence of a local conflict on the entitlements of having a local voice between a resident of American origins, whose property investments were seen as an attempt to build a wealthy gated community and therefore contributing to uneven development, and the multiple "locals" that arose against this plan. Who is entitled to be the real, true, authentic, local voice? This is an issue whose relevance constantly appears in local politics and is hence a global problem. The variability between local residents and the subsequent multiplying of communities has increased dramatically in the last twenty years world-wide but has been mostly examined in urban context, especially within global cities. For this reason, accounts of rural encounters and confrontations are particularly significant, in the sense that they might help to decenter our understanding of localities. It is the case with Michaela Benson's depiction of British middle class settlers, mostly retired people, in the Lot region of France. The British population living in the French villages, as we learn from the chapter, is all but an homogeneous group of Britons abroad. Rather, they constantly distinguish one from another because of the degree of incorporation within the French population of Lot. The local life they experience is clearly a cultural and ideological project of distancing themselves from other British people "here and there." Staying on your own to drink all day, while in rural France, is viewed from many co-ethnics, for instance, as a way to continue bad British habits abroad, a sign of lesser integration.

All the ethnographic accounts presented in this book, as it is their major force here and elsewhere, provide rich, detailed and vivid portraits of social situations, which is a plus per se. Nonetheless the fragmentation of scapes and interpretations asked for an dynamic theoretical synthesis. The scope of this book urged for a broader proposal of concepts, paths of inquiry and advancements that are, since the early pages, constricted by caution. When the Editors write that "by allowing our interlocutors to define spatial and social boundaries contextually, the authors of this book do not offer a totalizing model of 'the local,' but an ethnographic exploration of the term" [p. 3], they avoid themselves an urgent task, the one of originating theory from fieldwork experience and hence developing a model for the analysis of the local. Place-making theory could have provided some of the foundations of this model and, to put it more bluntly, the conception of anthropology as a bounded perspective within the field of migration studies looks like a heavy burden rather than a vantage point. The local lives are by all means relevant for contemporary social theory and they therefore ask for theoretical consideration. Integration between different disciplines may be a starting point, but this consideration requires also an attempt to generate new concepts and theories. To this respect *Local Lives* is an early step in the right direction but also a step that could have been more daring.

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