Living in diversity: Going beyond the local/national divide

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

As contemporary societies are undergoing a demographic change, spurred in great part by international immigration, living in diversity continues to remain a topical issue. Moving away from the nation, considered as a site of discrimination and exclusion, geographers and social scientist more broadly have focused on alternative socio-spatial formations. Over the last two decades or so, the local place, particularly the city or the neighbourhood within the city, has attracted considerable attention. Imbued with transnational and cosmopolitan traits, these local places have been narrated as progressive and empowering in contrast to a nation perceived as embodying opposite dimensions. The present study critically interrogates this local/national divide. Drawing on narratives of Italians with foreign background talking and writing about their individual experiences of living and growing up in Italy, the article offers empirical evidence which challenges the local/national divide in two ways. First, participants blurred the distinction between these two scales, as identification and attachment to local places were narrated by also mobilizing national markers. Second, the sense of local rootedness of the participants was not cast against the nation, but it was strategically deployed to claim a place in the nation. These findings invite scholars to explore the different ways in which the nation intervenes in shaping life in diversity, beyond the dominant narrative of the local/national divide.

Introduction

Nation and ethno-cultural, racial and religious diversity (henceforth, abbreviated as diversity only) are often cast in opposition, both in the political discourse and in the academic debate (Antonsich & Matejskova, 2015a).[1] Politically, the present surge of populist nationalism in the US and in some European countries can be read as the latest manifestation of large portions of national electorates increasingly uncomfortable with the demographic transformation of 'their' nations brought about by international immigration (Beauchamp, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2016). In this context, demands by the white majority to retain a privileged entitlement to the national territory, culture and resources have also been voiced, linking the surge of populist nationalism to racialized conceptions of nation (Goodhart, 2017; Kaufmann, 2017). From this perspective, nations appear as closed and inward-looking collectives, where diversity, particularly when bearing visible Muslim traits, becomes a source of concern (Brubaker, 2017).

Maybe more conspicuous than in the past, these public attitudes and the political rhetoric which accompanies them are nevertheless not a new phenomenon, as studies based on past opinion surveys clearly reveal (Bail, 2008; Hochschild & Lang, 2011; McLaren, 2003; Shapiro, 1997; Sides & Citrin, 2007; Simon & Sikich, 2007). One could also point to the fact that, historically, the very process of nationalization of territories has often been read as either a process of eradication of pre-existing diversity in the form of local traditions and identities (Gellner, 1983; Weber, 1976) or a process of absorption of these local differences into a national whole (Applegate, 1990; Kaufmann, 2017). Thus, it is not surprising that many scholars working on diversity-related issues have moved the focus of their research away from the nation, in search of alternative socio-spatial registers where diversity might be more fully embraced and lived.

Starting in the early 1990s, transnationalism and cosmopolitanism have emerged as the two main paradigms alternative to nationalism. Criticizing the tendency in nationalism studies to conflate societies with nations (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), transnationalism has shown how migrant lives exist *across* rather than *within* national territories (Basch, Glick Schiller, & Blanc-

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[1] I use the term 'diversity' here in a rather descriptive manner, as a way to account for the above mentioned variation, without investigating the processual character and the power dynamics at work in the formation of these categories and without loading 'diversity' with any positive or negative value, as for instance in some debate between 'diversity' and 'difference' (Kobayashi, 1997; Eriksen, 2006; Modood, 2011).

Szanton, 1994). Accordingly, the nation has been dismissed as a bounded container which reduces complexity and plurality (Amelina & Faist, 2012; Levitt, 2012), whereas the transnational field has been heralded as a site of 'solidarity in diversity' which challenges the opposition between natives and immigrants produced by the very existence of national boundaries (Dahinden, 2016; Glick Schiller, 2009).

Cosmopolitanism has also operated a similar move beyond the nation-state. Although this term can be associated with a plurality of positions, from the moral call for the universal values of justice and right (Nussbaum, 1994), to the political call for global governance (Archibugi, 2004) and, again, to the cultural call for a global condition of hybridity, contamination and creolization (Bhabha, 1993; Cohen, 2007; Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, & Chakrabarty, 2000; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002), the common denominator is one of disputing the stability of territorialized identities (nation included), questioning the unity of the 'we' and the otherness of the 'other' (Antonsich & Matejskova, 2015b).

Among geographers, transnationalism and cosmopolitanism have been equally instrumental in rethinking how living in diversity can be operationalized away from the nation to more local scales.[2] To this end, since the early 2000s geographers have started focusing on the micro-publics of everyday encounters to generate a politics of transnational connectivity (Amin, 2002a) or cosmopolitan conviviality (to borrow Gilroy's (2004) term), beyond national cultures of belonging and identity (see Wilson (2016) for a review). Within these accounts, the city — conceptualized as the main site of these everyday encounters — has been narrated in opposition to the nation: celebrated as dynamic, inclusive, heterogeneous, and empowering the former, dismissed as static, exclusive, homogeneous and constraining the latter (Rossetto, 2015).

The present article aims to look further into this divide, making the case for reconciling the local and the national within the context of increasingly diverse societies. In fact, while in time scholars have shown, both empirically (Baban, 2006; Brett & Moran, 2011; Conway, Potter, & Bernard, 2008; Moran, 2011) and normatively (Beck & Levy, 2013; Calhoun, 2008; Delanty, 2006; Hedetoft, 2011), that cosmopolitanism and transnationalism actually reframe rather than replace nationalism, this point does not seem to have fully informed the work of those geographers who continue to explore forms of living in diversity at the local scale and at the city level in particular. Within the majority of these works, the nation continues in fact to be either dismissed for its exclusive thrust or merely ignored.

Drawing on narratives of Italians with foreign backgrounds talking and writing about their individual experiences of living and growing up in Italy, this article explores the intersections between the local and the national. While there is substantial literature which has investigated the links between these two registers (Appleton, 2002; Confino & Skaria, 2002; Jones & Desforges, 2003; Jones & Fowler, 2007; Jones, 2008), pointing out how the intersections between the local and the national scales, among others, organizes and makes make social life meaningful, little has been written on how these links operate in the presence of a diverse population. By incorporating this dimension, I show how

'the tale of two scales' (Rossetto, 2015), which opposes the local and the national and which often characterizes geographical works on diversity, is too simplistic a reading. In fact, while participants in the present study often lamented their exclusion from the national imaginary, they also jointly activated local and national repertoires and, more importantly, they strategically mobilized the local (particularly through the use of the vernacular) as a way to claim their place in the nation.

The article is divided into four sections. In what follows, I shall offer a broader discussion of the local/national divide as mainly occurring within geographical literature. The methodological section discusses the choice of Italy as a case study, offers contextual information, and illustrates how data was collected and analyzed. Empirical evidence is organized around two themes: the blurring of the local/national divide and the strategic use of the local for claiming a place in the nation. In the conclusion, I argue that by adding the national register to their studies scholars can offer more accurate accounts of how living in diversity is narrated and practiced within our contemporary societies.

The local vs the national

How to reconcile nation and diversity has long been a central theme in the research agenda of various disciplines. In normative terms, political theorists have tried to rework the meaning of nation, substituting its ethnic thrust with civic (Habermas, 2001), liberal (Kymlicka, 2001; Miller, 2000), multicultural (Modood, 2007; Parekh, 2000) or intercultural (Bouchard, 2011) principles (see Antonsich, 2014 for a review of these various positions). Geographers — and with them other social scientists — have been, however, skeptical or merely oblivious of these normative reflections. For many of them, the nation is irredeemably associated with a space of exclusion and the only possible answer to the living in diversity is to look beyond the nation. Accordingly, cosmopolitan and transnational registers have attracted considerable attention. Yet, contrary to some influential anthropologists, who in the early 1990s popularized the idea of the de-territorialization of identities (Appadurai, 1996; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992), geographers have argued that transnationalism and cosmopolitanism are emplaced phenomena (Leitner & Ehrkamp, 2006; Ley, 2004; Mitchell, 1997). It is in transnationalized and cosmopolitanized locales — often the city or neighborhoods within cities — that diversity can be and feel 'in place' (Cresswell, 1996).

Looking at this geographical literature, I would argue that there are two distinct, but related ways in which diversity has been said to feel 'at home' in local places. In the first case, the locale is imbued with ethnically and religious familiar repertoires and/or life experiences in phenomenological terms. For instance, in her study of Turkish immigrants living in Marxloh, a northern neighborhood of the German city of Duisburg, Ehrkamp (2005) shows how transnational ties enable them to forge local attachments and a sense of belonging to the neighborhood, against a national context of discrimination and exclusion. The neighborhood acts as a sort of cocoon or, in the words of one of her participants, as "a protective wall" (Ehrkamp, 2005, p. 360), where ethnically and religiously familiar places (mosques and teahouses) and people (Turkish immigrants and their descendants) offer a defense against the potential threat originating from the hosting nation. This attitude is certainly not specific to Turkish immigrants in Germany. It is reproduced, for instance, by children of Turkish immigrants also in France and in the Netherlands (Ersanilli & Saharso, 2011) or by British Muslims in Britain (Phillips, 2006), who equally experience a dissonance between their sense of inclusion in local places and exclusion at the national level (Isakjee, 2016).

In a study by Wessendorf (2010) on 'second generation' Italians

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[2] Contra to the more common 'living *with* diversity' (see, for instance, Valentine, 2008), I use the preposition *in* to overcome what I see as a hegemonic position implicitly at work in the use of *with*. To live with someone/something stresses indeed the subjectivity and agency of the person who carries out that act and, under certain conditions, might also suggest that to tolerate them is the only possible way to live *with*. Using *in* allows to take into consideration the growing ethno-cultural mixing of contemporary societies without falling into the trap of constructing two opposite, essentialized categories (we/them) and without resorting to the very problematic concept of tolerance (Brown, 2009).