

Angelo Torre. *Production of Locality in the Early Modern and Modern Age*. London & New York: Routledge, 2019, 238 pages

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l'extension des espaces universitaires dans la ville apparaissent, d'hier à aujourd'hui, comme difficiles ou délicates – tout en constituant des moments particulièrement révélateurs de leur histoire croisée et parfois commune.

Enfin, ce n'est pas le moindre mérite de l'ouvrage de soulever la question de ce qui *fait* un espace universitaire : s'agit-il d'un ensemble bâti plus ou moins centralisé ? D'espaces physiques où des relations de formation et d'enseignement prennent place ? Et puis, comme le soulève Jacques Verger en conclusion, quel type d'espace doit être occupé pour parler d'espaces universitaires, compte tenu des formes « virtuelles » ou « dématérialisées » qu'elles prennent déjà et prendront assurément dans le futur ?

Angelo Torre. *Production of Locality in the Early Modern and Modern Age*

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What is a locality? Behind this seemingly simple question lies a whole subjective, conceptual field with which the term is often conflated, such as “identity” or “belonging”. Aiming to re-inscribe the locality in geographical space and giving it a concrete existence, Angelo Torre, professor of Early Modern History at the University of Piedmont, has published a revised and translated English version of his book *Luoghi, Produzione di località nell'età moderna e contemporanea*, originally published in 2011.

While Torre's study mobilises microhistory as analysis—that is, the idea of looking “from the bottom up”, focusing on the agency and on practices of individuals—the author criticizes the limits of this approach for spatial analysis. According to him, even researchers undertaking the “Spatial Turn” have failed to shape a concrete vision of space, reduced to subjective dimensions. Torre thus seeks to broaden the notion of place to include the practices of production of a locality, “a place characterized by a matrix of human settlements, and thus of neighbors, whose intent to share resources and relationships is manifested in their ritual and political practices, their work and trade”. For Torre, locality is not a subjective construct, but is “emic”; that is, shaped through the practices and categories that belong to those who use them.

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Making microhistory of a place requires leaving aside the serial analysis of sources in favour of a “topographical” approach, which highlights, in a given space, the co-presence of a typology of different phenomena through various documents. Above all, it is indispensable to consider sources as an attempt by those who produce them to shape a reality.

His vision of sources takes on its full meaning in the proposed field of analysis: the region of Piedmont from the sixteenth century to the present day. The reader enters a complex territory, where polycentric centres related to kinship groups coexist with an intertwining of jurisdiction, due to the many powers that shared the territory, such as the Republic of Genoa, the Holy Roman Empire, the Duchy of Savoy, the Duchy of Milan, and the Kingdom of Sardinia. Jurisdictional overlap, alliances and family rivalries led to frequent disputes and negotiations between the settlements, whose inhabitants mobilized every resource at their disposal to assert their prerogatives.

The great interest of Torre’s book is to successfully show the possibilities arising from microhistory of locality. To do so, Torre first identifies different practices capable of generating space. Although many of the examples listed concern rituals and disputes within rural settlements, his study of the consequences of a Eucharistic miracle that occurred in the chapel of a charitable institution in Asti in the eighteenth century clearly shows the jurisdictional struggles that played out for control of the urban space. Beginning with various accounts of the miracle recorded by witnesses, Torre illustrates how these accounts betray the intentions of the actors and their relationship with the place where the miracle occurred. Above all, the examination of a report written by an intendant who investigated the events renders it possible to consider the spatial consequences of the miracle. Hence, its recognition by secular authorities—that is, the Savoyard kingdom, and later the kingdom of Sardinia—would grant immunity to the institution where it took place, and would therefore be removed from fiscal obligations and lay jurisdiction.

Understanding the intrinsic nature of the creation of a locality detailed in Torre’s work allows new analyses of some practices, such as trade, usually a subject of economic and social history. Considering the uniqueness of the places of transit, Torre unravels how various groups involved in commercial activities defended their own economic interests, and thus shaped three modes of transit of goods across the Apennine ridge: toll-free roads; “contracts” between locals; and, free passage for certain muleteers depending on the jurisdiction to which they belonged. Torre then brilliantly points to how each of these models had jurisdictional implications: for example, local contracts implied close relations with the imperial representative, which some notables tried to exploit in order to acquire fiscal immunity, and to take advantage of their rivals. It appears, then, that trade represents, beyond the economic sphere, a jurisdictional act with political consequences.

Aiming to show that the production of locality is not specific to the modern age, Torre devotes the last part of his work to contemporary practices. Here the demonstration is less convincing: in fact, the study of the unsuccessful privatization of public land around Biella between 1930 and 1960 throws more light on the governmental intervention that interrupted the project than on the agency on

the part of the locals. In this case, the work of a civil surveyor showed that public lands had been sold without the authorization of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, thus making the transfers null and void. This raises the question of whether the production of locality is as intrinsic as Torre seeks to show, at least for the contemporary period. Even the study of the successful creation of the locality of Mappano on the outskirts of Turin, fails to convince. While this success is largely attributable to the actions of groups of neighbours who, between 1980 and 2018, created institutions to give substance to the administrative autonomy they sought, official recognition of this municipality still depended, in the end, on legal decisions rendered by various courts.

In short, if Torre succeeds in showing the potential of the microhistory of the locality, his work would have benefited from varying geographical contexts in order to demonstrate the truly universal nature of the production of locality. The examples he relies on are profoundly contingent on the exceptional geopolitical situation of northern Italy in the early modern and modern eras that it is difficult to think how the production of locality could occur in a place where the control of the central state was more strongly applied. In this sense, Torre's work is only partially successful, but the approach remains promising, and it is to be hoped that future study will allow for results to be viewed in different contexts.