

# Adolescence in the flow:

## The cultural and social reconfiguration of Teen's lifestyles in post-modern cities

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### Abstract

Le traiettorie adolescenziali oggi sembrano portare verso fenomeni di transitorietà e di “dispersione”, di attraversamenti che generano movimenti e flussi, difficilmente ancorabili a luoghi significativi di identificazione e appartenenza. Le modalità di fruizione dei luoghi educativi, formali e informali, nel territorio urbano, risultano connotate da un “nomadismo” metropolitano in cui si esprime un bisogno di movimento continuo. Le aggregazioni hanno perso la caratteristica della sedentarietà e del riconoscimento localizzato e delineano modalità fluide di appartenenza e di identificazione. Le traiettorie di cui sono protagonisti oggi gli adolescenti, somigliano ai legami di rete dei network sociali. Le aggregazioni si sviluppano sulla base di “emergenze” attrattive nel territorio, che fungono da punti nodali per la realizzazione di esperienze “fugaci”, caratterizzate da forme di intrattenimento, in cui prevalgono i tratti della temporaneità e della transitorietà. Cogliamo nelle modalità specifiche con le quali gli adolescenti attraversano gli spazi territoriali delle città e ne abitano i tempi, un effetto del dispositivo complesso che a livello urbanistico contribuisce alla produzione di una soggettività per il “consumo”.

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Contemporary adolescent trajectories appear to lead towards phenomena of transience and “dispersal”, constant movement and flow, which are difficult to relate to significant places of identity and belonging. Teenagers’ use of educational places, both formal and informal, across the urban territory, is characterized by a metropolitan “nomadism” that expresses the need for continuous movement and short time-frames. Groups are no longer fixed in one place or reliant on local recognition but display fluid modes of belonging and identification. The paths followed by the adolescents of the early twenty-first century are similar to the social networking model. Groups develop around attractive features “emerging” from the territory, which serve as focal points for the production of “fleeting” experiences, characterized by events-based forms of entertainment that are temporary and transitory in nature. This leads us to interpret the specific ways in which adolescents move through the territorial spaces of their city and inhabit its timeframes, as an effect of a complex dispositive that at the urban level contributes to producing a consumerist subjectivity.

**Parole chiave:** spazio urbano; adolescenza; esperienze di flusso; luoghi educativi; modelli di rete.

**Keywords:** urban space; adolescence; flow’s experience; educational places; network models.

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## 1. The global transformation of the post-modern city

An analysis of the rapid change affecting the experiential contexts in which contemporary adolescents find themselves growing up, cannot omit the context of the local territory, or the material places in which daily existence is played out. It is clear that the geographic and economic position of the local area can determine vastly different experiences of adolescence, and I am keenly aware that continuing injustice and social inequality among the planet's geographical regions prevents us from developing universally valid conceptualizations of what it is to be an adolescent. However, if we limit our observations to the Western socioeconomic and geographical context, a key phenomenon to be noted is the spread of post-modern urbanization, with its specific traits, in practically all the metropolitan areas of Europe and North America, and in the majority of large cities in South America and Australia. The increasing similarity among these Western urban areas and cities is one of the most obvious effects of the market globalization process. The global transformation of the contemporary city provides a key focus for the human sciences – including education – by bringing to light the formative impact of the cultural and social reconfiguring of lifestyles and intergenerational relationships. It might be said that the city, though the site of phenomena that have radically altered its functions over time, appears to conserve, or even to have further refined, its ancient capacity to integrate social, cultural and ethnic forms and models. Analysed from this perspective, the city might be defined as a laboratory in which “emerging forms of coexistence” (Lazzarini, 2011, p.157) may be observed, in terms of dynamics and situations that in turn are bound up with the subjective formative pathways of the senior citizens, men and women, youths and children resident in metropolitan areas. From a pedagogical and social point of view, this is to some extent an unpredictable process, especially if we consider changes in urban planning and the redefining of the city's spaces dictated by the globalization process; one effect of this process – as most social research conducted over the past decade has shown – consists in a scattering and dispersing of the local territory's “places”, leading to a weakening in people's sense of belonging to an urban context, and ultimately to the disappearance of identities based on belonging. Nonetheless, in contemplating the proliferation of so-called non-places in urban topographies, we

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should also take note of a lively dialectic that is typical of contemporary cities: between dynamics of uprooting and unbelonging – with the associated mechanisms of strong individualism – on the one hand, and new forms of social, interethnic and intergenerational integration, innovative forms of solidarity and cooperation, and potentially anti-anomic processes, on the other.

In order to grasp the importance of the changes today defining urban life in the globalized world, we need to carefully consider the ways in which post-modern cities differ structurally and functionally from their forerunners. The most evident sign of transformation is the decline of the “city-factory” model (Lazzarini, 2011, pp. 80-82) that underpinned the architectural and topological form of buildings and street systems in cities between the second half of the nineteenth, and the end of the twentieth, century. This metamorphosis is reflected in the development of polycentric cities, characterized by the distribution of production and consumption functions over a far larger area, in keeping with a network model no longer based on the traditional centre-periphery framework of urban/economic functioning. Anna Lazzarini (2011) has suggested that: “Up to the early 1900s, cities expanded following a regular and disciplined centripetal pattern. It was the nature of the boundaries that changed: military boundaries (walls) gave way to industrial boundaries (factories). The explosion of the city took place at a later date, particularly in the wake of World War II. This was underpinned by immigration and by the development of public and private transport, which allowed the physical limits of urban territory to be extended and new relations to be forged among distinct and distant places. From the 1980s onwards, the modern city based on work, production and the notion of progress entered a phase of rapid decline. This change was caused by the crisis of the “large factory”, with widespread redundancies, the decentralization of production to locations outside of the urban area, and increasingly to parts of the global south. The city no longer organizes itself around work” (Ivi, p. 80, auth. trans.).

The reconfiguring of space and time driven by the new production and commercial requirements of the globalized market has led to a progressive reduction in distances; in the “net” era, mobility and speed are two of the key variables affecting subjects’ activities and modes of relating to others and conferring new meaning on their individual relationships with space and time. This process has led to a redefining of urban space, whose ascribed function is now that of facilitating transit, passage, movement, and flow;

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an emblematic and visible example is provided by our city street systems, in which traffic light junctions are increasingly being replaced by roundabouts: the quest to speed up and mobilize city traffic flows is eloquently embodied in the roundabout system which, in the best case scenario, allows cars to circulate without ever needing to stop. Analogously, the contemporary city's departure from the concentrated model of the city-factory organized around the centre-periphery schema, may be represented by the urban sprawl that now extends far beyond the city's historical boundaries, forming a monotonous landscape that stretches uninterruptedly along the principal roadways joining the major cities. Thus, the city increasingly takes on the role of a "space of flow" characterized by "circulation, transport, mobility, passage and vibration".

The contemporary city is characterized by the coexistence of forms and models that are heterogeneous in terms of their ethnic, cultural and social characteristics; it is a hybrid phenomenon that has not yet become completely "de-territorialized", in that it continues to fulfil "central" productive, commercial and service-related functions, although these functions are no longer linked to particular locations as they were in the twentieth century industrial city model based on the centre-periphery dialectic (Lazzarini, 2011, p. 100).

## **2. A consumerist subjectivity**

"Selling the city means selling many different cities to different audiences. One city must be sold to entrepreneurs and another to intellectuals and researchers, still another to the inhabitants. [...] We cannot expect travelers' tales, the works of painters or the accounts of great authors to build up a strong enough image of the city over long-range historical time. The city must be reflectively self-aware, producing and conveying images of itself that allow it to be present and compete in the media universe. Furthermore, it needs to construct effective images in a context that is already saturated with stimuli, images and signs. If it is to stand out amidst the din of the media universe, urban communication must itself be noisy and deploy the most widely used codes. Images must be extreme, language over-emphatic, and the models used those of advertising and the world of the media" (Amendola, 1997, p. 202, auth. trans.). This description by Giandomenico Amendola allows us to briefly introduce the theme of the "city-shop-window", which expresses the specific character of one of the most powerful imaginaries of the

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postmodern city. The primary function that underpinned transformation of the city from pre-modern into industrial, that is to say, the productive function, has now been lost: thus, the role of contemporary city is centred around consumption and pleasure, whereby the possibility – or lack thereof – to access places and objects offering valued social status lies at the heart of urban experience. Even more importantly, the duties of contemporary city also include attracting and facilitating the entry of outside subjects and capital so that more consumption can take place, and this means working on the city's symbolism and image. The relationship between consumer and brand, which must be in place for loyalty to develop, depends in the first instance on the outer appearance of the brand itself (Ivi): the more an aesthetic tie is formed with the brand, the more the consumer will identify with it and trust it. Post-modern cities are not foreign to this logic, but on the contrary invest heavily in “signs”, both at the architectural/urban-planning level and in socioeconomic terms. Amendola's acute analysis once again helps us to fully grasp the significance of this: “Postmodern architecture seems to be purpose-made for this; after all it issued from the logic of store signs and the phenomenon of the Main Street. For corporate image strategies, nothing could be better than a style that prioritizes the need to communicate effectively by adopting the audience's own codes. This is brought about by linking project design more strongly to the setting – contextualization – and including highly evocative elements that elicit memories and lexicons of relevant meanings” (Ivi, p. 83, auth. trans.). The contemporary celebration of the sign points up the specific nature of the dispositive at work in postmodern society. A semio-technical dispositive, with the capacity to manipulate mental representations and therefore to act directly on the individual mind and its subjective behaviors. A strong relationship is therefore formed between individual imaginaries and signs, or the symbolic meanings underpinning daily urban experience in our postmodern cities.

The trends that we have outlined so far clearly suggest that subjects' relationship with the local territory has undergone a deep transformation in recent decades, with implications for the very nature of urban experience. The new features of hybridization, dispersal and de-territorialisation, as social research has shown, impact considerably on patterns of socialization, cultural identity, civic participation and social engagement, altering their meaning. The younger generations, especially adolescents, are those most affected by these material and symbolic changes in urban places, to the extent of having

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to resignify their relationship with the area in which they live, from an existential point of view as well as in terms of social practices. How then is adolescent experience changing in relation to the places of urban territory in post-modern cities?

In keeping with the perspective adopted throughout this chapter, which focuses on the structural and material features of the contexts in which concrete human experience is produced, the best way to approach the question of contemporary adolescent experience in cities is to explore what has changed in terms of the background structural dimensions of space and time. For the metamorphosis of the contemporary city may be explained in terms of the radically altered material and symbolic meanings taken on by the categories of space and time in contemporary social life; our very experience of time and space is inextricably bound up with the reconfigurations imposed on us by the architectural and urbanistic forms providing the background to the flow of our daily lives.

This inevitably leads us to interpret the specific ways in which adolescents move through the territorial spaces of their city and inhabit its timeframes, as an effect of a complex dispositive that at the urban level contributes to producing a consumption-oriented subjectivity. And equally inevitably it follows that these changes are reflected in new ways of identifying with the local community, on the part of contemporary adolescents and youths in particular. As observed by Simona Guglielmi in the IARD Institute's sixth Italian youth survey (Buzzi, Cavalli, De Lillo, 2007): "When [...] we turn our attention to the youth populations of the Western countries, we are more drawn to the persistence viscosity of the "trivial cosmopolitanism" process (to use a highly effective expression coined by Beck [2003]) and its effects on individual life paths than to the possible existence of ties of loyalty and reciprocity generated by the local territory. The daily experience of individuals is permeated by elements of globality: capital, goods, information and people cross boundaries, offering a wealth of possible worlds [Appadurai 2001] that have no links with the local territory and culture. At the micro level, we can imagine, construct and redefine our identity under the stimulus of a process of individualization that accommodates hybridity and contamination among cultures; at the macro level, the space of flows challenges the space of places [Castells 1989; 2003] and, consequently, territorially based forms of social regulation" (Guglielmi, 2007, p. 273, auth. trans.).

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### 3. Towards phenomena of dispersal and transience

It is undeniable that the new generations' use of urban territory differs from that described in sociology studies on the habits of groups of adolescents and youths in the last century. The differences concern two main aspects: the first is the group's ties and sense of belonging to a territory; the second, its stable location in, and strong identification with, a given space-place. For while the peer group remains a key context for adolescent experience, in which young people may practice and test their social skills, "educational" observation of the phenomenologies of adolescent groups suggests that young people are progressively freeing themselves from dynamics of belonging to spaces-places which no more than two decades ago defined particular social and cultural ties.

A sense of belonging and social bonding that was reflected in mechanisms of identification, whereby the social recognition of a group could even depend on the space-place it had chosen as its exclusive "territory". The transformation now underway appears to be gradually destroying the myth of the youth "group" or "gang" identified by the coordinates of a particular territory or space-place, after which the group may even be named. This Western myth, which was widely celebrated in the literature of the twentieth century (from Ferenc Molnár's "The Paal Street Boys", to Susan Hinton's "The Outsiders", and "Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo" by Christiane F., Kai Hermann and Horst Rieck), no longer provides a useful account of the dynamics underpinning the relationship of groups of adolescents with territorial places.

Contemporary adolescent trajectories appear to lead towards phenomena of transience and "dispersal", constant movement and flow, which are difficult to relate to significant places of identity and belonging. This tendency is partially confirmed by the decline in participation affecting some of the educational places traditionally designated for the socialization and entertainment of the young (whether religious, such as parish centres, or secular, such as youth clubs). Such places still attract reasonable numbers of children and pre-adolescents but are challenged to engage adolescents in medium-term educational programmes. However, the problem is not only to be attributed to these "centres'" limited appeal but may be interpreted as part of the broader phenomenon of profound material and social change affecting the very structure of our cities and territories.

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Teenagers' use of educational places, both formal and informal, across the urban territory, is increasingly characterized by a sort of metropolitan "nomadism" that expresses the need for continuous movement and short time-frames. Groups are no longer fixed in one place or reliant on local recognition but display fluid modes of belonging and identification. The paths followed by the girls and boys of the early twenty-first century are extraordinarily similar to the social networking model. Groups develop around attractive features "emerging" from the territory, which serve as focal points for the production of "fleeting" experiences, characterized by events-based forms of entertainment that are temporary and transitory in nature. Increasingly, the peer group previously documented by psychosocial studies – an informal "company" made up of 8-10 adolescents of the same sex, with shared and exclusive "cultural" interests and generational concerns that were different to those of the other sex – no longer appears to represent a typically adolescent feature. Contemporary groups of adolescents meet increasingly rarely, with young people devoting more of their time to smaller groups of friends with whom they share their deepest interests and desires (Buzzi, Cavalli, De Lillo, 2007); there is a further marked tendency for these smaller groups of friends to include members of both sexes, whose interests and generational concerns currently display considerable cross-contamination (thanks among other factors to the impact of video-games, and other forms of cultural entertainment in the spheres of literature, music, comics and film), transcending the former cultural and social constraints imposed by the attribution of gender-based roles.

#### **4. Effects of relational fragility**

The urban life of contemporary adolescents has therefore shifted well away from the social imaginary of the twentieth century and at the same time is marked by new and notable phenomena of suffering and distress (Ammaniti, 2018). The forms of experience made possible by an urban fabric that has been redesigned in line with the "consumer city" model, give rise to a problematic relationship with the city's places: the weakening of subjects' identification with, and belonging to, significant places, while undoubtedly fostering the desire for mobility and accommodating the need for flexibility and continuous transformation in social relations that characterizes the present era, produces effects of relational fragility and intense social loneliness, which are

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further heightened by the general crisis affecting the Western world. This reduction in social ties is reflected in how adolescents' experience friendship: on the one hand, friendship appears to be exalted by the development of new forms of virtual and distance communication, but on the other, it is adversely affected by the selective mechanisms implicated in the "commandment" of "performance", which, in the perceptions of adolescents, but equally in practical everyday terms, can lead to the exclusion of those who do not conform from the "magic circle" of the socially successful. Exclusion, rejection, non-acceptance, fears of inadequacy, fear of being judged, feelings of isolation and loneliness, are distinctive features of a form of adolescent suffering that has grown considerably more acute over the past ten years. The urban territorial context offered by post-modern cities challenges the very idea of "place" as a context for living: the undermining of the material and symbolic value of places that previously fulfilled the key pedagogical function of defining patterns of relationships, meaning and social recognition among the younger generations; the proliferation of spaces that are increasingly symbolically weak, somewhat along the lines of the "non-places" described by Augè (1993); such is the backdrop to the relational insecurity and existential fragility displayed by contemporary adolescents, who are increasingly exposed to the risk of mental illness given the lack of a strong territorial network of relationships and affect to help them deal with the distressing phantoms of an era of crisis, marked by the decline of solid alliances among the traditional agents of education (Massa, 2000).

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