



1506
UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI URBINO
CARLO BO

UUP
URBINO
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

IL SACRO E LA CITTÀ

A cura di
Andrea Aguti, Damiano Bondi

uup.uniurb.it



**INCONTRI
E PERCORSI**

N.03

INCONTRI E PERCORSI è un collana multidisciplinare che nasce nel 2022 e raccoglie le pubblicazioni di convegni e mostre promossi e organizzati dall'Università di Urbino.

Volumi pubblicati

01.

Le carte di Federico. Documenti pubblici e segreti per la vita del Duca d'Urbino (mostra documentaria, Urbino, Biblioteca di san Girolamo, 26 ottobre - 15 dicembre 2022), a cura di Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, Marcella Peruzzi, UUP 2022

02.

Paolo Conte. Transiti letterari nella poesia per musica. Contributi di studio a cura di Manuela Furnari, Ilaria Tufano, Marcello Verdenelli, UUP 2023

IL SACRO E LA CITTÀ

A cura di
Andrea Aguti, Damiano Bondi

IL SACRO E LA CITTÀ

a cura di Andrea Aguti, Damiano Bondi

Convegno organizzato dal Dipartimento di Economia, Società, Politica (DESP) all'interno del progetto di ricerca biennale "Un secolo di René Girard. La violenza e il sacro tra antropologia e politica", finanziato dal DESP, e realizzato in collaborazione con il Dipartimento di Filosofia "Piero Martinetti" dell'Università Statale di Milano.

Progetto grafico

Mattia Gabellini

Referente UUP

Giovanna Bruscolini

In copertina

Immagine di Carlo Andrea Schlatter e ISIA U

PRINT ISBN 9788831205481

PDF ISBN 9788831205467

EPUB ISBN 9788831205474

Le edizioni digitali dell'opera sono rilasciate con licenza Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 - CC-BY, il cui testo integrale è disponibile all'URL:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Le edizioni digitali online sono pubblicate in Open Access su:

<https://uup.uniurb.it>

© Gli autori per il testo, 2024

© 2024, Urbino University Press

Via Aurelio Saffi, 2 | 61029 Urbino

<https://uup.uniurb.it/> | e-mail: uup@uniurb.it

L'edizione cartacea del volume può essere ordinata in tutte le librerie fisiche e online ed è distribuita da StreetLib (<https://www.streetlib.com/it/>)

SOMMARIO

PREMESSA Andrea Aguti, Damiano Bondi	9
ON MIMETIC DIMENSIONS IN TRAVEL MOBILITY CHOICES Emanuel Muroi, Ivan Blečić, Eleonora Sottile, Italo Meloni	13
ACCERCHIAMENTO, ISOLAMENTO, ESPULSIONE: Gianfranco Mormino	39
RÉNE GIRARD CONTRO L'UNANIMITÀ OMICIDA Ardian Ndreca	55
IL VILLAGGIO E LA FORESTA Cristiano Maria Bellei	71
LA FORMAZIONE DELLO STATO-NAZIONE COME PROCESSO DI SACRALIZZAZIONE Damiano Bondi	85
LA CITTÀ E L'ASSEDIO Luigi Alfieri	105
<i>POLIS/POLEMOS</i> LA DECONSTRUZIONE DELLA RAZIONALITÀ DEL POLITICO IN RENÉ GIRARD Silvio Morigi	113
GIRARD E LA RIFONDAZIONE SACRIFICALE DELL'IMPERO TARDOANTICO Ulrico Agnati	137
SPAZIO SACRO E SPAZIO POLITICO NELLA QABBALAH. UNA LETTURA A PARTIRE DA GERSHOM SCHOLEM Carlo Altini	165
LA FOLLA NELLE PIAZZE DEL DECAMERON (II 1, IV 2, V 6) Marco Stucchi	183

ON MIMETIC DIMENSIONS IN TRAVEL MOBILITY CHOICES

Emanuel Muroi, Ivan Blečić, Eleonora Sottile, Italo Meloni

University of Cagliari

ABSTRACT

In this contribution, we propose extending the application of mimetic theory to previously underexplored domains of travel mobility choices and behaviour, against the backdrop of the European Commission's strategic initiatives, particularly the Green Deal, which highlights the need for 'behavioural transitions' towards sustainability, and amidst a growing interest in identifying social and psycho-attitudinal factors that influence travel behaviour.

The emphasis of the mimetic hypothesis on the relational and interindividual nature of preference formation offers at least two operational suggestions. One is that the reasons for choice are not only due to affordability, individual perceptions, availability and service levels, but also to social interactions and conditioning inherent in mimetic processes. The second suggestion is that such preference systems are dynamic, capable of evolving, and potentially sensitive to policies designed to operate through mimetic processes.

The paper briefly presents the concepts of mimetic theory and employs them to re-analyse a published case study that describes the after-effects of the Living Street experiment in the *Brugse Poort* neighbourhood in Ghent, Belgium. The re-interpretation draws attention to the additional insights brought into focus by the Girardian perspective. The significance of mimetic thinking for travel behaviour and transport planning is then discussed. In conclusion, we suggest how specific interventions could effectively and durably encourage or discourage the use of sustainable modes of transport and alternatives to private cars. The interface with the mimetic theory allows us to explore the potential

implications of strategies developed through these interventions, paving the way for the definition of decision-support techniques and tools for sustainable urban mobility policies.

INTRODUCTION

The ‘mimetic theory’, formulated by the philosopher and social theorist René Girard, has gained attention from various disciplines due to its significant impact on the humanities and social sciences. This theory has been studied and applied in a variety of disciplinary contexts, including psychology and sociology, as well as less obvious fields such as economics and biology. The application of Girard’s theory concepts appears to benefit each disciplinary context. However, some academic disciplines have not yet shown an interest in mimetic theory. This may be related to the division of academic opinion surrounding the provocative charge of theory. While some view it as innovative and fertile, others view it with much scepticism. Theoretical issues that have been explored elsewhere¹ converge to affirm that we are faced with a «morphogenetic theory» with «heuristic power»². Its concepts have applicative flexibility, making it an effective tool to clarify many behavioural oscillations, from social tensions to the formation of preferences, as well as transformative and appropriative drives. What if we consider this object as a piece of land, public space, or a section of a street? These characteristics suggest that disciplines of planning may benefit from the application of mimetic theory. While some research has been conducted in architecture³, there is still a significant gap in exploring the

1 Cfr. Jean Pierre Dupuy, Paul Dumouchel, *L’Enfer des Choses: René Girard et la logique de l’économie*, Paris, Seuil 1979; René Girard, Pierpaolo Antonello, João Cezar de Castro Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion. Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*, London, Bloomsbury 2008, pp. 17-40; Gabriel Ernesto Andrade Campo, *¿Es falseable la teoría mimética?: Girard, Popper, y la muerte de Simón Bolívar*. “Pontificia Universidad Javeriana”, vol. 27, n. 55, dic. 2010.

2 Cfr. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Paul Dumouchel, *Totalization and Misrecognition*, in *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard*, ed. by Paul Dumouchel, Cambridge, Athlone Press 1988, pp. 75-100; Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Naturalizing mimetic theory*, in *Mimesis and science: empirical research on imitation and the mimetic theory of culture and religion*, ed. by Scott Garrels, East Lansing, Michigan State University Press 2011; Paul Dumouchel, *The Ambivalence of Scarcity and Other Essays*, East Lansing, Michigan State University Press 2014, pp. 195-208.

3 Cfr. Samir Younés, *The Imperfect City: On Architectural Judgment*, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing, 2008; René Girard, Léon Krier, Kent C. Bloomer, *Architects and Mimetic Rivalry*, ed. by Samir Younés, Winterbourne, Papadakis 2012; Andrew Herscher, *Violence Taking Place: The Ar-*

potential implications and explanatory power of mimetic desire hypotheses on an urban scale, particularly in relation to mobility plans. Indeed, almost no attempts have been made to explore the psycho-attitudinal factors that influence people's choices to use sustainable means of transport from a Girardian perspective. The main aim of this work is to contribute to the implementation of strategies for voluntary changes in travel behaviour. This will be achieved through the development of a methodological approach aimed at (1) detecting underlying mimetic behavioural dynamics and their interaction with factors traditionally assumed as correlated to travel behaviours, and (2) improving the understanding of the phenomenon of travel behaviour in order to build the necessary tools to guide individuals towards new behavioural patterns.

The next section provides a brief overview of the theory's central concept of mimetic desire and how it relates to travel behaviour, including its implications for the promotion of the most familiar forms of active mobility, *i.e.* walking and cycling, with a view to offering practical solutions in this direction. The aim is to introduce the reader to specific terminology and concepts commonly used in the field of transport planning. The methodology employed is then described. The subsequent section provides an introduction and summary of the secondary case study presented in the published article. The section after focuses on the application of mimetic theory concepts to reinterpret the case study. Finally, the significance of the reinterpretation of the case study for the multidisciplinary field of urban studies is discussed before the conclusion, which reiterates the main points.

MIMETIC THEORY'S INTERFACE WITH TRAVEL BEHAVIOUR AND TRANSPORT PLANNING: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

In recent years, the growing preference for motorised private options over public transport and active mobility has become a defining feature of urban areas, with a negative impact on quality of life⁴. The result is an imbalance in the use of urban spaces, excessive energy consumption, and a range of negative externalities that impact the economic, environmental,

chitecture of the Kosovo Conflict, Stanford University Press 2010.

4 Cfr. Robert Gifford, Linda Steg, *The Impact of Automobile Traffic on Quality of Life*, in *Threats from Car Traffic to the Quality of Urban Life*, ed. by Tommy Gärling, Linda Steg, Bingley, Emerald Group Publishing Limited 2007, pp. 33–51.

and social systems. Taking as a starting point the necessity to change the modal split, it seems necessary to identify which measures can guarantee positive effectiveness, perhaps even at low cost, in inducing shifts in travel behaviour and transportation choices.

Several studies show that the car is seen as «much more than a means of transport»⁵, with symbolic and affective aspects such as the sense of power, superiority, control, and the thrill associated with driving. Indeed, it is claimed that «resistance to measures aimed at car use»⁶ could therefore be attributed to these symbolic and affective features. In transport planning, Travel Demand Management measures⁷ are frequently employed to influence and modify travel behaviour sustainability. These strategies can be divided into structural and information measures⁸. Structural measures, also known as ‘hard measures’, aim to change the physical and/or legislative context in which choices are made. Examples of hard measures include road pricing, road closures and infrastructure improvements – e.g., the introduction of a new bus route. Behavioural measures, also named ‘soft measures’, such as Voluntary Travel Behavior Change programs, are interventions that provide appropriate information and support to encourage people to use more sustainable transport modes⁹.

According to the literature, infrastructure interventions that aim to increase capacity, such as an expansion of the roadway, are no longer sustainable and may even lead to a worsening of travel times and exacerbate congestion – a phenomenon known as the Downs-Thomson Paradox. Interventions in transport supply conditions and mobility demand to implement a travel behaviour change objective can address the major challenge of breaking the daily routine associated with private motorised transport¹⁰. In particular,

5 Linda Steg, *Car use: lust and must. Instrumental, symbolic and affective motives for car use*. “Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice”, vol. 39, n. 2-3, 2005, p. 148.

6 *Ibid.* p.160.

7 Cfr. Peter Loukopoulos, *A Classification of Travel Demand Management Measures*, in *Threats from Car Traffic to the Quality of Urban Life*, ed. by Tommy Gärling, Linda Steg, Bingley, Emerald Group Publishing Limited 2007, pp. 273–292.

8 Cfr. Francesco Piras, et. al., *Does the joint implementation of hard and soft transportation policies lead to travel behavior change? An experimental analysis*, “Research in Transportation Economics”, vol.95, 2022.

9 Cfr. Benedetta Sanjust di Teulada, et al., *Modeling the propensity to Use a sustainable mode in the context of a program of voluntary change in travel behavior*, “Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board”, vol. 2412, n.1, 2014, pp. 11-19.

10 Italo Meloni, et al., *Misure soft per la mobilità sostenibile: I programmi per il cambiamento*

through communication and the provision of personalised information – soft measures – it is possible to stimulate voluntary changes in travel behaviour by creating awareness that motivates people to shift their mobility choices towards the use of more sustainable modes. In general, experience over the last 20 years, using a variety of approaches, indicates that soft measures can reduce individual car use by 4-15%¹¹. In addition, soft measures are less costly to implement than building new infrastructure, are more likely to be accepted by citizens than coercive measures such as parking management or road pricing, and demonstrate greater durability over time¹².

Due to their undeniable benefits, the need to assess both the short and long term effects of the implementation of soft measures on travel behaviour in different contexts has led to a growing interest in identifying the psycho-attitudinal factors that influence travel behaviour. This work is another attempt in this direction, but from a distinct set of patterns and perspectives. Although approaches such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour¹³ or the Transtheoretical Model of Health Behaviour Change¹⁴ have been widely used to study the role of psychological-motivational factors in travel behaviour, they do not directly take into account determinants, conditioning and, above all, the evolution of strictly relational and interindividual dynamics¹⁵. In other words, there seems to be a lack of focus on capturing interpersonal processes, particularly the relationships established between individuals and their social worlds in a given situation. This paper aims to fill this gap by exploring the relationship between psychosocial and mimetic factors in travel mode choice. This article examines the evolution of relational and interindividual dynamics and delves into its mimetic trajectory from a Girardian perspective. The objective is to argue how this

volontario del comportamento di viaggio, Roma, Aracne Editrice 2017.

11 Sally Cairns, et. al., Smarter choices: Assessing the potential to achieve traffic reduction using 'soft measures', *Transport Reviews*, vol. 28, n.5, 2008, pp. 593-618; Alin Semencescu, et al., *30 Years of soft interventions to reduce car use – A systematic review and meta-analysis*, "Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment", vol.85, 2020.

12 Louise Eriksson, et al., *Acceptability of single and combined transport policy measures: The importance of environmental and policy specific beliefs*, "Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice", vol.42, n.8, 2008, pp. 1117-1128.

13 Cfr. Icek Ajzen, *The theory of planned behavior*, "Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes", vol. 2, n. 50, 1991, pp. 179–211.

14 Cfr. James O. Prochaska, Wayne F. Velicer, *The Transtheoretical Model of Health Behavior Change*, "American Journal of Health Promotion", vol. 1, n. 12, 1997, pp. 38–48.

15 Cfr. Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Mimetic Brain*, Michigan State University Press 2016.

might guide the development of decision-support techniques and tools for sustainable urban mobility policies.

René Girard explores the evolution of individual behavioural entanglements by looking at interindividual dynamics. According to Girard, desire is triangular, *i.e.* composed of a desiring Subject, a desired Object and the Other, who acts as the mediator of desire. Girard's claims are distinguished from other theoretical approaches by the central role of the Other, who is selected by the Subject as a Model to emulate. For instance, consider theories that explore the role of travel socialisation¹⁶. These theories suggest that travel behaviour is influenced by social norms, whether explicit or implicit. A social norm refers to when individuals adopt a behaviour because they believe that others like them or in their community adopt the behaviour – descriptive norms –, or because they believe that those who matter to them approve of them adopting the behaviour – injunctive norms. The mimetic theory, on the other hand, focuses on the status or perceived prestige of those who engage in that behaviour. Mimetic desire is driven by the desire to imitate or emulate individuals who are seen as models or influencers within a social group, rather than simply following what others are doing. Therefore, it is not just about the prevalence of behaviour, but also about the social status or perceived attractiveness of those who embody that behaviour. With the introduction of the concept of mimetic desire, what was said above about the symbolic aspects of car ownership, such as a sense of power and superiority, becomes more significant. Girard argues that the desire to possess a specific good, such as a car, is not actually related to the real value of the good, but rather to the even more powerful desire to be the one who has the good in their hands. In essence, Girard seems to suggest that we should consider the imitative drive in individuals at least in the same way as we consider other instrumental motivations associated with appropriative drives towards a good. For instance, we should view the imitative drive similarly to the freedom, flexibility, and comfort traditionally associated with the use of a car.

However, this is not the only consideration. Reciprocity is a crucial aspect of mimetic theory, referring to the dynamics of desire and imitation between individuals. It involves a mutual exchange of influence where individuals seek to emulate each other's desires and behaviours. Unlike social norms, where conformity may be driven by the desire to fit in or avoid

16 Cfr. Hazel Baslington, *Travel Socialization: A Social Theory of Travel Mode Behavior*, "International Journal of Sustainable Transportation", vol.2, n.2, 2008, pp. 91-114.

social sanction, mimetic reciprocity is rooted in a deeper psychological inclination to imitate and internalise the desires of others. In mimetic theory, individuals engage in a reciprocal process of desire imitation, where the desires of one person influence the desires of another, and vice versa. This reciprocal influence can create cycles of emulation and rivalry, as individuals strive to attain the same objects or statuses coveted by others. In other words, the Subject tends to model his own behaviour on the desires of the Other and, in continuous reciprocity of the imitative drive, produces opportunities for disputes and rivalry.

If Girard is correct, the desire to possess an Object, which would be rooted in the desire to become the Other, plays a pivotal role in travel behaviour. The above section provides an overview of the basic tenets of mimetic theory and their potential contribution to the fields of travel behaviour and transport planning. In the next section, a published secondary case study is summarised. Substantively, the case raises concerns about the application of Girardian perspective in a situation of interest to sustainable mobility planning. After the re-analysis of the case study, further concepts from mimetic theory will be discussed.

METHODOLOGY

The article adopts an unconventional method¹⁷ of re-analysing a published case study to make visible a re-configured interpretation of a specific urban phenomenon. Methodologically, this means that these authors only have access to case information included by the original authors in their publication, without adding any new empirical facts. The contribution of the new article lies in the novel positioning of the published empirical material. In this article, the constructive re-reading and interpretation uses insights from the mimetic theory by Girard. In doing so, it draws attention to the added insights that are yielded by this theory.

The approach is consistent with Girard's previous proposals for validating his intuitions. For instance, in his re-analysis of Sophocles' tragedy Oedipus Rex, Girard provides his own interpretation based on Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation. *Mutatis mutandis*, this article presents a reinterpretation of a specific urban phenomenon previously analysed and

17 Inspired by the contribution of Angelique Chettiparamb, *Meta-operations, autopoiesis and neo-systems thinking: What significance for spatial planners?*, "Planning Theory", vol. 17, n. 4, 2018.

interpreted dynamic phenomenon by Elisabet Van Wymeersch, Stijn Oosterlynck and Thomas Vanoutrive¹⁸. It must be noted that the purpose of this approach is not to disprove traditional theories or original interpretations but rather to demonstrate how observing the progression of mimetic reciprocity between social actors can be both suggestive and useful for planning practices aimed at promoting sustainable mobility.

For a theory such as mimetic theory, which provides an alternative understanding of human behaviour and proposes the exact mechanism on which any functioning society is based¹⁹, several empirical situations in such a society should be suitable for theoretical analysis. The choice of this case study is therefore not primarily based on theoretical considerations, but rather on the following methodological concerns. First, a secondary case study with sufficient empirical detail is required. Empirically rooted, case-study-based work showcases and provides detailed evidence for claims, which is essential for this methodological approach. Second, this case study was chosen for its implications for sustainable mobility planning, its focus on citizen participation and the social dynamics it produces. Thirdly, the case study was selected because it adopts a socially interpretive view of the phenomenon that appears to be completely unaware of the concepts of mimetic theory. This offers an opportunity to provide a different re-interpretation. The case presents itself as an important vehicle for exploring the insights that mimetic theory can offer planners when designing soft measures for sustainable mobility and structuring programs to encourage voluntary changes in travel behaviour. It is important to acknowledge that the article is not recent, and the empirical descriptions are interpretations of the original authors at a specific point in time.

THE GHENT LIVING STREETS: SUMMARY OF A CASE STUDY

The case describes the application of the Living Street concept in the urban regeneration of several areas in the city of Ghent, Belgium – see Figure 1. The Living Street experiment aims to reduce traffic congestion by

18 Cfr. Elisabet Van Wymeersch, et al. *The political ambivalences of participatory planning initiatives*, “Planning Theory”, vol. 3, n. 18, 2019, pp. 359–381.

19 René Girard, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, California, Stanford University Press 1987, p. 294.

supporting ecological bottom-up initiatives²⁰. This coincides neatly with the city's ambition to become climate neutral by 2050. The initiative involves neighbourhood residents redesigning their street to create «the street of their dreams»²¹. Between May and July 2016, after a year of active experimentation in the city centre of Ghent, the association Trojan Lab – founded to support the Living Street initiative – decided to extend the experiment to the neighbourhood of *Brugse Poort*. Trojan Lab proposes several Living Street experiments in this neighbourhood, which is characterised as one of the poorer, densely populated and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods of Ghent. Five Living Streets were organised simultaneously in the *Brugse Poort*, resulting in the creation of the 'Living Area' with the same name.

Despite fierce opposition and resistance from local residents against measures to reduce car traffic in the city, the experiment took place and the function of many streets in the neighbourhood changed. Most of the residents who supported the initiatives opted for a complete cut of traffic on their Living Street. As the spatial transformation occurs, the contestation of those who choose not to adhere to the Living Street initiative becomes more intense.

In just two months, the logic of using a space that has been colonised in recent decades by the instrumental rationality of mobility, characterised by the use of private cars, has been completely transformed²². The physical distribution of urban elements, such as artificial turf mats and the replacement of parking lots with colourful picnic tables, self-made flower boxes, street furniture and pop-up bars, temporarily transform the streets of *Brugse Poort* – see Figure 2. Several testimonies collected by the authors show the revival of interest in the streets of the neighbourhood by the whole community, both those opposed to Living Street and those in support of it. The street in the *Brugse Poort* Living Area is described by the authors as a contested object between two previously non-existent groups: the «opponents» and the «initiators»²³, who can also be referred as 'supporters'. Furthermore, each group appears to gain strength as tensions escalate, in a manner that is directly proportional to the increase in animosity towards the opposing group.

20 Cfr. Sophie Devolder, Thomas Block, *Transition Thinking Incorporated: Towards a New Discussion Framework on Sustainable Urban Projects*. "Sustainability", vol. 3, n. 7, 2015, pp. 3269–3289.

21 E. Van Wymeersch, et al. *The political ambivalences*, cit., p. 365.

22 *Ibid.* p. 368.

23 *Ibid.* p. 373.



Figure 1. An example of the Living Street initiative. The intervention at Volmolenstraat 29, located in the city centre of Ghent, showcases a specific road configuration where car traffic is restricted. Source: Dries Gysels (ed. by). Cahier 1: De Leefstraat. Experimenteren met de stad van straks. Gent: Lab van Troje, 2015, p. 12.



Figure 2. Living Street occurred in Brugse Poort, a neighbourhood in the 19th- century belt of Ghent. Source: Lab van Troje, <www.leefstraat.be>²⁴. Image by Dries Gysels.

The case provides an accurate description of the processes and developments of the Living Streets experiments in the regeneration of the *Brugse Poort* neighbourhood in Ghent. The authors analysed the political ambivalences of participatory planning processes, focusing on the dynamics of contention that arise when public streets are opened up to citizen participation. The importance of integrating diverse understandings of democratic politics in participatory planning is emphasised by the authors. They use empirical analysis to reveal the complex and contested nature of these processes. Then, highlight both successful collaborative outcomes and negative aspects of the specific Trojan Lab participation planning trajectory in the Living Street experience in the *Brugse Poort* neighbourhood. The case study emphasises that adversarial and identitarian politics have created unexpected and unwanted polarisation around the issue of car usage, making it clear that for at least a significant section of the population, there is no common lifeworld. Supported by evidence, the authors conclude that

24 All websites were last accessed on 15/04/2024.

theoretically informed empirical analysis can explain the controversial nature of participatory planning processes by referring to how different actors involved operate on different understandings of democratic politics.

The authors provide insights into the approach for gaining a comprehension of a contentious participatory dynamic. The reflections are related to a specific theme and context to which the authors refer. However, as explained earlier, these do not seem to take into account the concepts of the mimetic theory of human behaviour. We here present an alternative approach to understanding the contentious nature of participatory planning processes in the *Brugse Poort* neighbourhood. The aim is to provide insights for promoting active mobility and offer suggestions that would complement those advanced by the authors, rather than contradicting them. The objectives of the mobilisation of the case study are different from those of the original authors.

Specifically, we will attempt to (1) establish a theoretical framework for exploiting the heuristic value of mimetic theory in the reconstruction of behavioural and social levers on modal choice, (2) demonstrate how the novel interpretive tools provided by the Girardian perspective can contribute to broadening the range of theories used in the multidisciplinary field of urban studies, by assimilating insights derived from previous research, (3) illustrate, through the central concept of mimetic desire, how individuals engaged in a specific contentious participatory planning process can solidify their commitment to using active mobility as a permanent choice.

The following section provides additional insights to highlight the implications for the fields of travel behaviour and transport planning, with a particular focus on how mimetic theory can contribute to the development of essential tools that can guide individuals to make choices that are beneficial to themselves and the community. Finally, we will observe how the progression of the microphysics of mimetic desire may promise future research developments useful for outlining an operational proposal for the empirical study of such processes.

RE-ANALYSIS OF THE CASE STUDY USING THE GIRARDIAN PERSPECTIVE

This re-analysis reconstructs the case study in a way that differs from the framework used by the authors. Building on the general description of mimetic theory provided in this volume and earlier in this essay, this

section provides a more detailed and specific concept of mimetic desire that can help relate to the case study and illustrate its potential implications for transport planning.

When exploring the evolution of mimetic entanglements, René Girard focuses primarily on interactions between individuals. In his well-known elementary triangle of mediation of desire, the following reciprocal relationship is structured: Subject – Model – Object. The thesis of Girard is quite simple: the desiring Subject always imitates their desires from a Model or a relevant source²⁵. Desire is based on a three-place relation in which the two parties, Subject and Model, are directly involved in the evolution of their desires and reciprocal rivalry, while the Object indirectly receives the effects of the clash between the first two. In this passage, Girard argues that the Object initially serves as a pretext to trigger contention between the Subject and Model. Paradoxically, once the two contenders are engaged in the dispute, the Object slips into the background, stifled by their desire to dominate each other. It is only after the dispute has been resolved that the Object reappears, but with a completely new appearance and value in the eyes of the disputants. In other words, Girard argues that the development of desire is not related to the intrinsic value of the desired Object, contrary to common belief. Individuals tend to model their desires on the desires of others, and in a continuous reciprocity of imitative drive, they produce opportunities for conflict that produce the Object of desire. In this way, it is emphasised that violence is not only what arises from the convergence of desire on the Object, but also what produces and feeds its value.

In this sense, Girard's hypothesis of mimetic desire is prodromal to the dynamic processes of the evolution of desire. If the genesis of desire is indeed mimetic, in Girardian thought it is only the spark that ignites a whole interindividual dynamic, the *primum movens* of an evolution that, depending on how it progresses through the complex inter-individual microphysics of desire, may in due course lead to rivalry, conflict and violence, but can also bring about changes in behaviour. Let's now return to the case study and re-analyse it using the above claims and concepts.

The Girardian perspective seems to be a useful tool for uncovering the hidden reasons that led to the emergence of the two social groups involved in the revaluation of the *Brugse Poort* neighbourhood. The transformative gesture of the Living Street experiment, which can be traced

25 Cfr. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Tr. Yvonne Freccero, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1976.

back to gestures such as the spreading of artificial turf mats – Figure 3 –, would mark the streets involved as urban objects no longer available to the whole community.

The Living Street experience in the neighbourhood, arousing feelings of envy and jealousy, would first create and then trap two factions in the following infernal circle: the more ‘supporters’ want the street, the more ‘opponents’ want it, and vice versa. According to Girard, this is «the primary role of mimetic behaviour in human conflict. Reciprocal violence is an escalation of mimetic rivalry, and the more divisive it is, the more uniform its result»²⁶.

The uniform result in this case is the effect of increasing the value of the street involved in the Living Area for both parties precisely because of this escalation of mimetic rivalry. The action of laying the long artificial turf mats, concretised by the hands of the adherent of the Living Street initiative, signals that the dynamics of appropriation of streets are taking place. The responses of the ‘supporters’ interviewed clearly indicate that they perceived the act as invasive. Here is a significant sentence collected by the authors:

«And now with these Living Streets, they really make me crazy. You settle in a neighbourhood, a working-class neighbourhood, an authentic neighbourhood and then you say “and now we’re going to make it liveable”. [...] what an arrogance, to say ‘we just lay some artificial turf mats, and we put ourselves in the middle of the street [...]’. [...]. How arrogant can you be to do such a thing? (respondent 19, non-initiating resident of Living Street, 2016)»²⁷.

The drive of the ‘opponents’ to own the Object – here the streets – is inextricably linked to the desire to take it out of the hands of the ‘supporters’, who appear happy and prestigious now with the Object in their hands – see Figure 4. For both parties, the real objective is to gain exclusive possession – ownership – of the material object, which in this case are the streets involved in the Living Street experiments, in order to maintain or acquire prestige. Girard points out,

«The value of an object grows in proportion to the resistance met with in acquiring it. And the value of the model grows as the object’s value

26 R. Girard, et al., *Things Hidden*, cit., p. 12.

27 E. Van Wymeersch, et al. *The political ambivalences*, cit., p. 371.

grows. Even if the model has no particular prestige at the outset, even if all that ‘prestige’ implies—praestigia, spells and phantasmagoria—is quite unknown to the subject, the very rivalry will be quite enough to bring prestige into being»²⁸.

According to Girard, the value of objects of desire is reciprocally nourished through the production of an image that replaces the physical good. This process leads to conflict between the parties involved. The value of streets is recognised by both ‘supporters’ and ‘opponents’ beyond their market value as land or their instrumental role in conventional political functions. The contested good assumes characteristics that Girard defines as metaphysical²⁹, wherein the desired good becomes eclipsed by the drive to eliminate the rival part in the conflict³⁰. According to one of the organisers of Living Street, the conflict has fostered cohesion and new forms of solidarity between neighbours who had previously never spoken to each other³¹. From a Girardian perspective, this is a normal outcome of the dynamic processes of evolution of desire.

The dispute in the streets of *Brugse Poort* neighbourhood presents an opportunity for residents to establish a new relationship with space and its uses. This phenomenon is precisely due to the mimetic convergence of appropriative drives. It enables an alternative interpretation of the behavioural trajectories underlying the contentious dynamics of citizen participation in spatial planning.

28 R. Girard, et al., *Things Hidden*, cit., p. 295.

29 Cfr. R. Girard, et al., *Things Hidden*, cit., pp. 294-299; pp.364-367.

30 *Ibid.* pp. 382-388.

31 Cfr. E. Van Wymeersch, et al. *The political ambivalences*, cit., p. 371.



Figure 3. Preparations for the opening of Living Street, with the necessary materials being assembled by the residents of Pussemierstraat street. Source: Lab van Troje, <www.leefstraat.be>. Image by Dries Gysels.



Figure 4. An example of the results of a Living Area on Kozijntjesstraat street in the city centre of Ghent. Source: Lab van Troje, <www.leefstraat.be>. Image by Dries Gysels.

Girard argues that what may appear as a desire *to have* is, in reality, a deeper and more powerful desire *to be* ‘somebody’ through the possession of ‘something’. The objective of both parties involved is to overpower the other by taking away what he possesses. In the case of the Living Street experiment in Ghent, residents can assert their status without physically occupying the streets of *Brugse Poort* neighbourhood. They can achieve this by imposing a use that the community can easily recognise and associate with the social group. The artificial turf mats, picnic tables, flower boxes, street furniture, and pop-up bars are physical manifestations of the desire to assert social status and prestige, similar to how a flag represents a political or military victory. According to Girard, success is often associated with the removal of the adversary, resulting in their defeat. Notice, once again, how the characteristics of the good serve as a mere conduit for celebrating the triumph of one individual or group over another. The ‘opponents’ view the ‘supporters’ as rivals who threaten their status. The authors report that prior to the Living Street experiments, pedestrians were «easily squeezed out or – literally – pushed to the margins by car use»³². During Living Streets experiments, the opposite phenomenon is observed with the exclusion of those who prefer to use cars. This exclusion is produced by rules, signs, and boundaries erected voluntarily by the residents involved in the project. Both ‘supporters’ and ‘opponents’ do not reduce the Living Area to its physical materiality, but instead, they construct a new spatial consideration of the streets involved in the project. This new consideration is based on rival drives. The temporary transformative dynamic aimed to encourage the feeling of togetherness in the streets and to create more urban greenery in the neighbourhood. It has contributed to the emergence of new identity concepts that are closely linked to the developments of the Living Streets. Part of the community that rejects the Living Street project begins to speak using «identitarian terms to describe their adversary – and themselves»³³. On the one hand, new forms of solidarity are formed between the groups of ‘opponents’, reinforced by a polarised hatred towards a common enemy identified in those «who ‘attack’ car usage»³⁴. On the other hand, as the authors note, «the usage of a car determines the ‘constitutive outside’»³⁵. The dispute can only be resolved by the exclusion of the

32 E. Van Wymeersch, et al. *The political ambivalences*, cit., p. 369.

33 *Ibid.* p. 370.

34 *Ibid.* p.371.

35 *Ibid.*

rival through the imposition of the use or non-use of bicycles, walking or other forms of active mobility. The mimetic theory of desire provides an alternative explanation for the evolutionary trajectory of voluntary changes in preferences within this specific phenomenon. It allows us to explain why «what was meant to be an ideal speech situation in which residents openly discussed the future of their street – partially – became a battlefield»³⁶.

This re-analysis of the case study cannot be categorised as an attempt to debate the original authors' analysis. Instead, it aims to provide additional suggestions from an alternative perspective in the field of transport planning. The following section will address this issue.

IMPLICATIONS OF MIMETIC THEORY FOR TRANSPORT PLANNING

The above reinterpretation of a published case study was adopted to present and illustrate the mimetic theory of desire and its potential to provide new insights by reinterpreting a given phenomenon. There are at least two operational suggestions for the study of travel behaviours arising from such a reinterpretation. The first is that reasons behind choices cannot only be attributed to affordance, individual perception, availability, and service levels, but also to psycho-attitudinal factors and social conditioning inherent in mimetic processes. The second suggestion is that such preference systems are dynamic and capable of evolving, hence potentially sensitive to policies designed to operate on mimetic processes. This section discusses these suggestions.

The reanalysis of the case study has demonstrated how a temporary intervention can impact an individual's personal sphere by altering motivational factors, judgement, and perception that influence the decision of citizens to use or not use forms of active mobility in an urban area that has been dominated by car mobility for decades. Detecting how the mimetic factors can influence the behaviours of citizens involved in the *Bruges Poort* dispute highlights the role of 'opponents' as a non-instrumental factor that leads 'supporters' to perceive alternative mobility to private motorised vehicles as more convenient. The connection between psychological and mimetic factors allows us to observe the transformative intervention which

36 *Ibid.* p.373.

leads a group of individuals to adopt a certain behaviour in a completely voluntary way, *i.e.* without using coercive measures. During the Living Street experiment, the group of ‘supporters’ no longer expressed their identity, personal values, or sense of self through car ownership as a material possession. Instead, their symbolic motivations were based on the desire to establish their role in society through factors such as prestige, social status, style, distinction, and superiority. The ‘supporters’ may achieve this by appearing in the neighbourhood while using alternative means, such as cycling – see Figure 4. The more opponents claim the streets of *Bruges Poort*, the more the attitudes, values, preferences, identity and affective processes of the ‘supporters’ are consolidated in their choice to use active mobility.

Our re-reading of the case study shows that there is a way to account for the mimetic processes and the ensuing rivalries which “punctures” psychological resistances – e.g. habits – to change the attitude towards car use. What at first appears to be a behavioural evolution aimed at appropriating the streets of *Bruges Poort*, progresses into the appropriation of a new lifestyle, which finds a permanent consolidation in the dynamics of «attachment to place»³⁷, capable of transcending the temporality of the Living Streets intervention. Adherents of the Living Streets voluntarily revise their assessment of the streets. They shed a rare light on the streets involved in the project, idealising and sublimating them to the point of referring to them as «our streets»³⁸.

Applying mimetic theory to the case study allows us to understand the evolutionary trajectory that accompanies the emergence of new actors – the ‘opponents’ – and how this leads to conflicts between parties. The pattern of mimetic desire enables us to observe that voluntary changes in behaviour, along with the subsequent reinforcement of social cohesion, may contribute to the consolidation of that specific behaviour. This is typically evaluated as a normal effect of practices of participatory planning. Planners tend to attribute the benefits of participatory methods purely to the cooperation of the whole community involved in the intervention. However, social cohesion may provide benefits precisely because it results from the rivalry and violence intrinsic in the interindividual evolution of mimetic reciprocity. This Girardian interpretation provides insights into how conflict affects the development of significant motivational factors in travel mode choices.

37 Avery Kolers, *Land, conflict, and justice: A political theory of territory*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

38 E. Van Wymeersch, et al. *The political ambivalences*, cit., p. 370.

The conflict, in the specific case of the Living Street experience, creates the conditions for citizens to develop a positive attitude towards the use of sustainable modes of transport by interrupting the daily routine characterised by the use of the car. The group of ‘supporters’ no longer perceive the unprecedented freedom, flexibility, and comfort, among other instrumental motivations, behind car use. Nor do ‘supporters’ choose sustainable transport mode solely for environmental reasons. The social group is defined by the opportunity to improve their social status, which is linked to the mimetic need to outdo their adversary. In this way, we can hope to reverse with symbolic and affective aspects such as the sense of power, superiority, control, and the thrill associated with driving.

In the case above, the Living Street project in the *Bruges Poort* neighbourhood appears, from a Girardian perspective, as a soft measure that has stimulated voluntary changes in travel behaviour by working on behavioural levers that were previously unrecognised in the field of transport planning. The same behavioural levers that were naturally stimulated by a change that temporarily perturbed the equilibrium of an urban area previously habitual in using the private motorised option of the car. These interpretations further support the idea of other studies³⁹, which have demonstrated how radical or significant perturbative interventions, including substantial changes in the context of choice — often referred to as a ‘shock effect’ — could trigger a shift in people’s psycho-attitudinal characteristics. In this sense, the reinterpretation of the case study gives operational suggestions for the study of travel behaviours related to preference systems and its potential sensitivity to policies designed to operate on mimetic processes. Initiatives such as the Living Street experiment could increase the probability of individuals leaving their habitual choices precisely because they can generate a significant perturbation, inducing a shock effect that could facilitate the process of encouraging individuals to reconsider their habitual travel behaviour. It’s worth noting that such interventions often engage actors in continuous reciprocity of the imitative drive, creating opportunities for disputes and rivalry. Understanding the concepts of mimetic theory, which provides insight into the intricate interindividual psychology underlying these dynamics, allows us to better identify the levers that need to be pulled to promote sustainability. This can

39 María Francisca Yáñez, et al., *Inertia and shock effects on mode choice panel data: implications of the Transantiago implementation*, Presented at: “The 12th International Conference on Travel Behaviour Research, Jaipur, India”, 13-18 dec. 2009.

be a valuable resource for planning disciplines, as it enables us to use the fundamental concepts of mimetic desire as a pattern that can be extended and replicated for other experiments, such as Living Street.

Such effects may likely be encountered in other practices of urban interventions. Consider, for example, actions of tactical urbanism⁴⁰, even the simplest ones, such as the colouring or depaving of some streets with the participation of the inhabitants, who become the protagonists of the transformation activity. This type of low-cost intervention, involving a temporary change in the physical characteristics of an urban area, takes on a different significance when conceived from a Girardian perspective. In this sense, Girardian insight can be seen as a tool to increase the chances of success of replicable protocols that can be applied to different situations and urban contexts. The use of such interventions of “spatial perturbation”, particularly in a contentious participatory planning process, as a valuable framework for deploying other soft measures in different contexts, increases the effectiveness of strategic planning phases aimed at shifting demand from private car use to more sustainable modes for at least two reasons. First, because of their reliance on direct citizen involvement, the success of these interventions can foster strong social cohesion and create lasting change. Additionally, due to their temporary and low-cost nature, the risk associated with failure is minimal⁴¹. The second reason has more to do with the mimetic dynamics. Recognising others as both models and competitors provides an opportunity to develop strategies to promote change towards sustainable travel behaviour. This may include initiatives such as information campaigns, social marketing efforts and other targeted interventions. By identifying reference models within a specific community, such as at the neighbourhood level, we can aim to counter the prevailing trend, which is influenced by the symbolic aspects associated with car ownership.

To summarise, first, the case study provides insights into the impact of temporary interventions on individuals’ decision-making processes, leading to changes in perceptions and behaviours related to active mobility; second, it emphasises the central role of mimetic factors in shaping attitudes and preferences in response to conflict situations; third, it explores how conflict can stimulate positive behaviour change by disrupting es-

40 Cfr. Paulo Silva, *Tactical urbanism: Towards an evolutionary cities’ approach?*, “Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design”, vol. 6, n. 43, 2016, pp. 1040–1051.

41 Cfr. Mike Lydon, Anthony Garcia, Andres Duany, *Tactical Urbanism: Short-term Action for Long-term Change*, Washington, Island Press 2015.

tablished routines; four, it explores the potential benefits and insights that could be gained from the applying mimetic theory to the design of soft measures for sustainable mobility and the development of programs aimed at promoting voluntary changes in travel behaviour.

CONCLUSION

The article has described the mimetic theory and explored the potential implications and explanatory power of mimetic desire hypotheses on the implementation of strategies for voluntary changes in travel behaviour. An overview was then given of the innovative contribution that the basic principles of the hypothesis of mimetic desire can make to the fields of travel behaviour and transport planning. In particular, it focused on how attention to Girardian themes of envy, desire and competition, which reveal the choreography behind human behaviour, can lead to the implementation or reinforcement of the motivational measures that underpin programmes to encourage voluntary changes in travel behaviour. In order to introduce and illustrate the application of the mimetic theory, a secondary case study was employed. The case study described the processes and developments of the Living Streets experiments in the regeneration of the *Brugse Poort* neighbourhood in Ghent. The published case study, well described and supported with evidence, analysed the political ambivalences of participatory planning processes, focusing on the dynamics of contention that arise when public streets are opened up to citizen participation. The impact of the experience described by the authors, and the fact that they did not take mimetic theory into account in their considerations, made the article a good vehicle for describing how mimetic factors influence the behaviour of individuals at a particular time and in a particular situation. The case study was then re-interpreted using the Girardian perspective. The re-interpretation highlights how mimetic dynamics drive residents to compete for the use of a part of the neighbourhood. What may initially appear to be a competition for space evolves into a deeper desire to establish status by adopting a novel lifestyle. This can lead to lasting behavioural changes capable of transcending the temporality of this type of intervention. Such an alternative perspective underlines the potential of viewing contentious participatory planning as an opportunity to implement soft measures that facilitate a voluntary shift to active mobility.

The reflections made in light of the re-interpretation of the case study have been used to demonstrate that the theoretical foundations outlined offer at least two operational suggestions for the study of travel behaviours. The first is that reasons behind choices cannot only be attributed to affordance, individual perception, availability, and service levels, but also to social conditioning inherent in mimetic processes, including its derivatives in terms of status, social demonstration, distinctiveness and demonstrative consumption. The second suggestion is that such preference systems are dynamic and capable of evolving, hence potentially sensitive to policies designed to operate on mimetic processes. In conclusion, the mimetic theory seems to be able to provide stimulating insights also for the construction of project scenarios for the activation of urban policies oriented towards active mobility, included in integrated sustainable mobility strategies.

To conclude, this paper has attempted to provide a useful theoretical basis for the future practical testing of social research methods aimed at the construction of innovative evaluation techniques and tools, analysis and support for the design of policies that can guide individuals to make travel choices that are beneficial to themselves and the community. This conclusion leads to questions that we are exploring in further research. More could be said and learned about how to identify the weight of the influence of the mimetic factor, *i.e.* how much this factor really contributes to the process of changing travel behaviour compared to others – e.g. compared to the weight of the influence of social norms. Empirical research and practical application can help to clarify this issue. By way of inspiration, we believe that after having structured an innovative technique and tools for detecting the variable of mimetic behaviour, it's possible to explore the rationale for incorporating the mimetic behaviour factor in a quantitative survey. Because of the problem related to *la méconnaissance*⁴² and, in general, to the human tendency not to recognise being mimetic, we also believe that only quantitative methods are not sufficient to achieve the purpose. This may require the use of qualitative methods, such as focus group discussions, which ensure the development of existing relational dynamics. Such an approach would allow us to gain additional nuanced insights that would be significant for integrating and operationalising the theoretical foundations already outlined in this paper.

42 Cfr. Paul Dumouchel, *De la méconnaissance*, "Lebenswelt Aesthetics and philosophy of experience", vol. 1, 2011.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to Dries Gysels for generously granting permission to use the images included in this manuscript.

FUNDING

This research and contribution were developed as part of the activities proposed by the research groups of the University of Cagliari. It was carried out in the context of the Sustainable Mobility Centre (MOST) and is related to “Spoke 9: Urban Mobility”. These activities are funded under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP - Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.4.), which is part of the Next Generation EU programme.

