

It Doesn't Seem Like Christmas Here Anymore. Local Representations of Migrants and Conflicts in a Neighbourhood of Milan: A Note from an Ethnographic Research*

Alfredo Agustoni

University "G. d'Annunzio" of Chieti-Pescara

Alfredo Alietti

University of Ferrara

Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s, after more than a century-long history of emigration abroad, Italy suddenly found that it had become a country of immigration. In this period daily newspaper and television reports of the illegal occupation by immigrants of abandoned and deteriorated buildings in three large metropolitan areas of Milan, Turin and Rome brought to the public's attention a presence which had hitherto remained hidden. The disorderly settlement of immigrants was concurrent and concomitant with the profound forms of deterioration in some sectors that affected major Italian cities from the last years of the 1970s, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of deindustrialisation that was abruptly changing the face of the old 'Fordist' industrial cities into the much more fluid and ambiguous face that characterises the 'global' city. (Harvey, 1989a; Marcuse & Van Kempen, 2000, 2002; Sassen, 1999, 2007).

Large areas of derelict land, produced by the great urban transformation brought about by the disappearance of industry, were often faced with a choice: either turn into marginal zones characterised by decay, or be absorbed into the circuit of regeneration (the latter often creating the occasion for excessive real estate speculation, sometimes assuming the form of gentrification). In many cases, rather than constituting two cut and dry alternatives, decay and regeneration find themselves taking place side by side, creating the problematic situation of so-called 'social mix', a major theme among contemporary debate about housing policy. The opportunities for settlement in these deteriorated and marginal urban areas had already begun to attract segments of the immigrant population in the early 1990s. The concentration within these areas of foreign populations increased the stigma already attached to them, impacting negatively on their image and on their desirability as living areas. This in turn produced a negative effect in terms of their 'symbolic capital'.

Settlements of foreign immigrants in Milan have typically followed what could be called a logic of what is 'left-over': immigrants occupy those living quarters, generally the most dilapidated, that have been left vacant by Italian nationals. Particularly in the areas where immigrant settlement has been the heaviest (for the most part, old working class neighbourhoods) this has produced a situation of 'spotting': some blocks or streets experience an intensive settlement by immigrants, leading to a population that is almost completely made up of immigrants or other marginal groups.

A similar phenomenon came about in reaction to a somewhat different logic in the case of private and public rent markets.¹ In the case of the former, the tendency of landlords not to want to rent to immigrants creates an opportunity for the exploitation of the immigrant's weak position on the rental market: having an immigrant tenant often means a landlord can get a high rent without having to incur the expenses of upkeep of the property, with obvious consequences for the local area in terms of further deterioration of real estate and an increase in social problems.

*This papershowsthe results of a fieldwork brought forward by the Authors during a couple of years. Alfredo Alietti wrote par. 1, 2 and Alfredo Agustoni par. 3 and the conclusions.

¹ In Milan, in contrast with the majority of other big Italian cities, public housing constitutes a significant portion of city owned property.

As regards public housing [council housing] it often happens that immigrants accept consignment of a habitation in one of the older and more run-down areas of the city that are generally located in a semi-central zone, usually rejected by ‘normal’ Italian nuclear families who apply for public housing. As a result, immigrants find themselves living together with other marginal groups (the elderly, the poor, etc) in what are often problematic situations.

It sometimes happens that the precarious living conditions of foreigners becomes the focus of media attention. The local press never misses an opportunity to pump up the import of these situations, leading to even further stigmatisation and loss of positive image for the neighbourhood, banally referred to in the media as the ‘Kasbah of Milan’. The ‘Kasbah of Milan’, in the jargon of the local media, refers to the Via Padova surroundings, that is, the composite of neighbourhoods that are located within a four kilometre radius of Via Padova, covering a large area of the north eastern outskirts of Milan. Indubitably a case of great interest, it is not the only area of Milan involved in the dynamics of marginalisation to which we will refer in more detail in what follows.

‘Official’ data from the office of vital statistics, although imprecise, describe the Via Padova area as the zone of Milan that is characterised by the most elevated concentration of a multiethnic population – an area in which a variety of ethnic groups come together to construct and reciprocally redefine their identities. The setting for our research, then, is an area that has become an authentic sociological laboratory in which it is possible to observe the dynamic relations between different ethnic groups, the effects that these groups have on the local representations of living conditions and the potential problems in living together. The picture that emerges from an overview of previous research conducted², for the most part, in France and Great Britain, reveals a critical horizon, where there is often conflict, but which nonetheless shows a long process of negotiation of the respective social and cultural identities from which the new forms of inhabiting and of living in the so-called multicultural society arise.

Our research was carried out according to the ethnographic method of the “case study”³. We chose to concentrate on a specific historical-geographical reality and to examine its peculiarities and its dynamics. More precisely, our case study was carried out by associating the observations of and interviews with residents, shopkeepers (Italian and foreign), local stakeholders (leaders of committees or associations, parish priests, local representatives of political parties, workers in the field of social services, workers in the real estate field, etc.). Observation and interviewing were done with both groups and individuals.

1. Biographic Profile of a city with an Industrial Past

In order to better understand the dynamics of settlements that have characterised the urban area of Milan in general (and, more particularly, the urban area known as Via Padova) a brief historical excursus explaining urban development in Milan is required. Beginning with the time of its “industrial take-off” (around the end of the 19th century) we arrive at the deindustrialisation which characterised the last decades of the 20th century, passing through the phase of the “Fordist coming of age” of the two decades that followed the Second World War.

This emphasis on the relationship between industrial development and the dynamics of settlement is not without merit in both the case of Milan and Turin, since they are the two main poles of Italian industrial development, at least up until the 1960s.

In its historical development and in its sociological and urban characteristics, Via Padova had traits in common with other areas of Milan that were traditionally working class neighbourhoods (for example, Bovisa, Bicocca, the area called Rogoredo-Corvetto). Bovisa developed as a working class neighbourhood when, between 1880 and 1900, some of the most important production plants in the Italian chemical industry opened there. Similarly, the concentration of working class inhabitants in the area surrounding Via Padova began in the early 1900s when one of the most important national centres for the chemical, electronic and steel industries began to develop on the periphery and in the outskirts of the city (in areas like Bicocca, Sesto S. Giovanni).

²For a survey of the literature produced by previous research see A. Alietti, *La convivenza difficile*, L. Harmattan, Torino, 1997.

³ For further discussion on this method of research see A. Alietti, “La logica del caso studio”, in A. Agustoni e M. Maretti, *Le metodologie partecipative per lo sviluppo del territorio*, Carocci, Roma, 2008.

At that time, the area which is now the urban centre on which our research is focused consisted of a number of small rural settlements located along the principal network of highways that connected Milan to the new industrial area.

Old rural communities (like Turro, Gorla, Greco, Precotto) now found themselves located midway between the new industrial pole of Bicocca and Sesto and the old suburban area of Milan, Lazaretto, that at the time had an industrial reality of its own that offered job opportunities.

As a result of these factors these old communities became very attractive to populations from other parts of Lombardy (and, beginning in the first decades of the 1900s, also from other regions of Italy) who could take advantage simultaneously of the precarious job opportunities offered in Milan and in Sesto. This explains the ongoing migration of a working class population into blocks of flats (built by private construction companies or by workers' cooperatives) that crowd the margins of the principle highways, hiding the old towns from view, but not completely eradicating the urban and social fabric of the area.

As early as the 1960s some acute observers had already noted the contrast between the life of the 'old town' inhabitants, that revolved around the parish church, and that of the inhabitants of the new working class settlements, organised around cooperatives and political and union circles, which had rapidly reorganised themselves in the 1940s, following the fall of fascism.

On the whole *borders, distances and links*, to use the terminology of "formal sociology", constitute the most interesting key to a reading of these areas that grew together with Milan's industries. One of the first borders, which has been astutely dealt with by Elias and Scotson (1965) in a study carried out on an urban area of Great Britain, is the one just described between the old and the new populations. From this point of view Via Padova, like Bovisa, was subject to in a constant flow of population attracted by the opportunity for work. Both areas witnessed the reconstruction, from generation to generation, of new boundaries: boundaries between old and new inhabitants but also boundaries between the various segments of the newly arrived population (up until recent years when the neighbourhood came to assume its current "multiethnic" identity). Some of the oldest people who were interviewed, speaking of Via Padova in the 1950s, recalled how different dialects constituted barriers between the inhabitants: walking down certain streets (where immigrants from other regions of Italy had rented rooms, often in the same overcrowded conditions in which non-European immigrants live nowadays) one heard unknown dialects.

In the decades that followed the Second World War, the capital of Lombardy already had a well-established network of social organisations (unions, political organisations, religious associations with their recreational facilities) that, to some extent, facilitated the assimilation of the newly arrived. As Gianfranco Petrillo (2004: 41-43) has written: "*That great wave of immigrants did not take Milan by surprise as it was already a city of immigration, a city that for over a century had become used to welcoming populations coming from outside [...] particularly in two significant periods: in the first decade of 1900, when the big factories became established; in the 1930s with the strengthening of the factory system and the development of the modern service sector*". The local context that we are considering here was born of just such an historical experience in which, as Petrillo observes "*the city and its surrounding suburbs [...] had become used to functioning as a compensation chamber between different origins and mentalities [..] where the presence of already established nuclei acted not only as a magnet, but also as a shock absorber for those who would arrive in the future*". All of this contributes to reducing the distances and to creating (especially among the younger generations) new links between different segments of the population that are easily synthesised into the framework of the more general links associated with "social class".

At this point other, more subtle boundaries emerge that distinguish different social conditions: the streets inhabited by the working class are distinguishable from the streets inhabited by the lower middle class: a certain difference in salary adds up to a strong inclination to maintain "social distance". This is particularly visible in the case of Via Padova, but is also clear in the case of Bovisa. The latter, a working class neighbourhood that grew in the proximity of Dergano, a rural settlement that eventually ended up as the site of accommodations for the clerical staff of the same industries where the workers were employed.

In the referendum on the form of government held on June 2, 1946⁴, in Bovisa there was a landslide victory for the republic, while in the lower middle class Dergano there was a landslide in favour of the monarchy.

2. *The Foreigner as a Problem*

Deindustrialisation, the progressive urban decay, the beginning of a process of urban rezoning that had little or no consensus on the part of the inhabitants and the constantly increasing presence of foreigners all combined to give the impression that a process of transformation was underway (“things aren’t the way they used to be”).

This also contributed to the redefinition of the identity of places and the people who lived in them: the “urban experience”, to use the words of David Harvey (1989b), demonstrates, at the same time as it masks, the contradictions of the global society. The main aim of the analysis that follows is to discuss, in synthesis, the narratives collected from the “established” (Elias & Scotson, 1965) and to understand some of the typical perceptions that condition the form and content of their relations with foreigners. At the end of the 1960s Via Padova found itself involved in the process of deindustrialisation of Milan’s urban fabric- a process that profoundly altered the neighbourhood’s aspect. Many of the old residents, whose improved economic conditions had allowed them to move away, rented their homes in the old neighbourhood to the new populations of foreigners, whose presence at first was rather silent but later on, particularly towards the mid-1990s, became much more consistent and visible.

In a similar context, the day to day experience of a “multicultural society”, not lacking in analogies with immigration in that past, manifests itself in a multiplicity of forms: the frequent co-habitation in the same block of flats of different ethnic groups, the presence in the neighbourhood of services aimed at a target market of foreigners (for example, international telephone centres), the subleasing of commercial activities (bakeries, clothing stores, bars, dairy products stores, hairdressing salons) to immigrants. Even if the native inhabitant were to prefer to avoid this “multiculturalism of day to day life” it would be very complicated for him to do so. This “multiculturalism of day to day life” is no longer simply folkloristic but rather has increasingly assumed the traits of a Schutzianness *familiarity* – a familiarity that is, nonetheless, very problematic and which often emerges as a hardship.

The narratives collected, although different depending on the role and function of the interviewee within the neighbourhood, all develop along a specific script characterised by a description of the neighbourhood as decayed, both from a physical and a social point of view. In most of these testimonies the responsibility for this situation is attributed, with varying degrees of emphasis, to the presence of immigrants.

This equation assumes the form of a commonplace ‘truth’ – a framework through which the various daily experiences of multiculturalism are perceived and articulated. The immigrant in himself, with his stigma of material poverty and rootlessness, and the immigrant for what he does, his “inappropriate” behaviour, become the symbols *par excellence* of decay in the collective imagination of the neighbourhood. A brief synthesis of the discourse in which local beliefs about the main responsibility of immigrants for the worsening of living conditions is articulated, will be useful at this point. In the first place, there is evidence of a perception of excessive visibility and interference of the foreigner in public spaces, further intensified by the growing number of ethnic stores. The metaphor used in one interview, “it doesn’t seem like Christmas here anymore” clearly and synthetically expresses a difficulty in recognising as one’s own the space in which one lives. The transformation of the urban landscape, experienced on a symbolic level, is decisive in creating the cognitive preconditions through which the reality of deterioration is read. One’s living space, occupied “problematically” by a foreigner, seems, in one way or another, to alter its identity; more and more that place assumes the idealised connotations of “the good old days” of the community, produced by a transfiguration of memory. In some accounts the image of the past, and of living together with “interior strangers” (that means people migrating from rural zones of southern Italian regions), emphasises the myth of great social cohesion– a reciprocal giving and receiving of help, in spite of the cultural differences – a situation which would be impossible to recreate in the present day. The changes that are taking place nowadays appear, in the eyes of the native residents, to be too great to be integrated into and accepted in their daily lives.

⁴ It was in this referendum that Italy, after the fall of fascism and the end of the Second World war, chose the republic as its form of government, bringing to an end the period of monarchical rule that had begun with its unification.

The prevalent perception that there has been an invasion appears in two particular references: on one hand, in *public spaces*, and on the other, *commercial spaces*. With regards to the latter, we have already observed that a large number of stores, or other commercial enterprises managed by foreigners, have opened. In some cases these stores are open to the public at large (restaurants, clothing stores), in other cases the services offered are more specifically aimed at the immigrant population (butcher's shops, grocer's, telephone centres, and even real estate agencies). One striking example of the perception of invasion, that appears in the interviews with one of our informants, is that the neighbourhood coffee shop ("the one where you paid fifty cents for a coffee"), that closes for its summer holidays, then reopens under the management of Chinese: the *shock and amazement* experienced at the morning breakfast ritual when you are served by the new owners, seems to reinforce the perception of being invaded.

Moreover, this occupation of commercial spaces also arouses suspicion of "irregularities", above all with regards to the source of the capital (although oftentimes the capital is Italian) but also with regards to the supposedly low remuneration of these types of commercial activities that would appear to be insufficient to keep them in business.

The excessiveness of the presence of foreigners shows itself in an even more visible way with regards to public places. The gathering together of small groups of immigrants, in most cases men, on the sidewalks or near commercial activities, like bars or Internet points, has become a generalised icon that feeds into the perception of invasion by the foreigners. We could use the term 'differentiated appropriation' of collective space to describe this situation; it produces in the original resident a feeling that he is being deprived of the place in which he belongs. The category of excessiveness constitutes, therefore, the foundation of the discourse in which public behaviour is judged as inadequate to the established standards of normality, tending towards disorders and lacking in respect for the rules of cohabitation.

As a consequence, there is a feeling that an abuse of the rules is going on ("they do whatever they want to on the public streets") and a growing intolerance of the perceived improper use of public space. The streets, the parks and the shared areas of buildings are the public places where these behavioural excesses are perceived as the most typical and relevant problems of the neighbourhood. Accounts of litter being left in the park after a party, or empty bottles left along the street are examples of this negative characterization. The actual untidiness which is the consequence of the public behaviour reinforces the perception of the difficulties in living together, a perception that is expressed in the classic "assimilationist" refrain "they should learn our way of living".

In cases in which the behaviour recounted has even greater negative connotations, this heightened negative perception tends to lead to the notion of a cultural difference of the immigrant group that is so great that the group will never be able to meet our own behavioural standards. This type of affirmation functions as a 'soft biologisation'ⁱ, in other words, each of the facts in whatever type of narration utilised to describe the foreigner, refers us to a rhetoric that is modelled on the naturalisation of the behaviour he exhibits: "that's the way they are, it's their culture". The process of 'naturalisation' of one's native culture, which has been discussed at length in literatureⁱⁱⁱ, denies a priori the possibility of sharing the same social space. The perception that co-existence is experienced unilaterally comes from the pedagogic sphere: "We're the ones who have to adapt" is the slogan that legitimises the rationales behind a discourse of prejudice. A further rhetorical device is built here, reinforcing the unfavourable image of the immigrant through his lack of willingness to accept dialogue and to conform to our model.

Returning to what has been said above, respect for "our rules of co-existence", cleanliness, orderliness in public spaces and discretion become the bases through which to evaluate the experience of proximity. However, there is also a link between this 'excessive' presence and the hardship that is an integral part of being an immigrant – we are referring, by way of example, to the 'additional hardship' that characterises the situation of an immigrant who rents living accommodations as opposed to an Italian in the same situation. The testimony of diocesan parish priests explicitly demonstrates this aspect. The pastor of a Termopili neighbourhood parish recounts that he is only able to enter the living quarters of his immigrant parishioners at Christmas, and for the purpose of giving the Christmas blessing.

⁵ On the process of cultural naturalisation see A. Ong, 1996, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making" in *Current Anthropology*, vol. 37, n. 5.

On other occasions his parishioners are extremely hesitant to allow him to see what, in the words of Goffman, we could call the ‘backstage’ of their lives. The quick glance he is able to take at Christmas gives a strong impression of an extreme overcrowding and a continual turnover of tenants (from one year to the next, it is unlikely to encounter the same people). The pastor of a parish in Turro became actively involved in dealing with the problems of living accommodation for immigrants in general, not just those of the Catholic faith. He acted, for example, as the intermediary in the real estate transaction that involved the owners of a former hotel that had been divided into separate living units. Naturally, the presence of foreigners in search of accommodations meant a significant business for the new owners, who were able to rent flats (oftentimes one room flats in deteriorated conditions and without any of the basic utility services) for prices that were ‘over market value’. In this regard, other testimony has posed the classic problem of the perverse logic of the local rental market where it often happens that immigrant families pay high rents to live in small flats in the oldest and most run-down buildings in the neighbourhood.

In the description of the events that occur in daily life, an emphasis on the difference between the various populations of immigrants who reside in the area clearly emerges. Immigrants from the Philippines are usually characterised as being discrete, hard-working (“they wake up in the morning and come back home in the evening”) not excessive and not visible (“you hardly ever see them on the street”), in other words, they possess those qualities of the good immigrant that are seen as indispensable for co-existence. In contrast, most of the negative characterisations are concentrated on South Americans, particularly in relation to their tendency to make certain irregular behaviours visible, for example, standing in the street and drinking in small groups, sometimes playing music at a high volume⁶. The motivation behind the growing attitude of rejection towards South American immigrants can be understood from a few episodes of open conflict over inappropriate use of community spaces, like Martesana park, the misuse of which eventually led to the fencing-in of the park.

As regards the other immigrant populations, the discourse is articulated with another level of complexity: Africans are seen as hard-workers and more predisposed to co-existence, while the north Africans appear to move in contexts which are quite ambivalent, and that involve the stereotype of a culturally distant group, characterised by an identity that is hostile (or is perceived to be so). The presence of North Africans evokes a feeling of concern in some of our interviewees, who see them in groups in public spaces, speaking their own language and comment “you can’t understand what they are talking about...” (the image of 9/11 and the clash of cultures appears to be sufficient to do the rest).

3. Insecurity, Participation and the Process of Local Integration

At this point, however, the discussion shifts its focuses onto the perverse mechanism used by local and national politicians in their discourses connecting diversity and the lack of safety. Without wishing to hide the difficulties inherent in co-existence in the local areas, it is nonetheless necessary to emphasise to what extent the interaction of the media with politicians favours the perception of the immigrant as a threat and consequently promotes the diffusion of a certain discourses on “safety”, which in turn fuel the feelings of fear and increase xenophobic behaviour. As a result an overshadowing occurs in local areas in which the reality of daily life, where conflicts between native residents and immigrants are of minor import, is covered over by negative representations of social otherness that support the rejection of that real daily experience.

The work of Jonathan Simon on “governing of fear” (2007) is particularly useful to our own analysis here. In his original interpretation of American history of the 1900s, Simon emphasises the difference between “governing of crime” and “governing through crime”. The American expert on politics uses the former term to refer to the normal measures used to subdue criminal phenomena. When, on the other hand, he speaks of “governing through crime” he means to emphasise the use – but also the active construction of- the alarm provoked by criminality as a tool in the management of political consensus, and in the redefinition of the balance of power between the different branches of government⁷.

⁶ We use the categories Philippine, South American, African and North African obviously with no intention to stereotype people but rather to reproduce the spontaneous language of the local residents who tend to use these categories in a general sense.

⁷ Typically As regards the situation in the United States, in the framework of the center-periphery cleavage (Rokkan, 1976), with particular reference to the conflict of powers between the governors of single states and Federal authorities like the President and the Supreme Court. In the extent to which, using once again the language of American politics, “the war on

It is principally at the outset of the 1970s that this “governing through crime” begins to acquire a strategic importance, above all in the U.S., but also in Europe.

Some of the most esteemed analyses (Castel, 1994; Bauman, 2000; Wacquant, 1999, 2004) interpret this renewed attention to crime as part of a more general phenomenon of a crises of legitimacy. Among the many causes of this phenomenon there is the inability of the traditional forms of politics (branches of the government and political parties) in generating feelings of belonging and affiliation in a context of accelerated globalisation in which they no longer appear to be able to keep the promises of social inclusion and a continual betterment of living conditions that had constituted the foundation of the social consensus of the ‘thirty golden years’ 1944-1971 (Hobsbawm, 1994; Harvey, 2003, 2005). Consequently, identity and safety end up being bound together as a pair that has an elevated legitimising potential. The media’s emphasis on safety acts, once again, as a bridge between the desperate attempt to gain a national and local political consensus and the equally desperate attempt of urban dwellers to acquire safety.

‘Folk devils’, evoked by repeated media reports of “moral panic”, are easily formed in the collective imagination of those urban dwellers (Cohen, 1972). It is through the use of a similar logic that our citizens understand the image of their neighbourhood – for example, through stories reported also in important national newspapers (such as *Corriere della Sera*) – diligently purchased every morning. Often the occasion is supplied when some figure of authority takes a position on an issue (the police commissioner: “more resources for safety in the areas at risk; 4,000 controls in Via Padova”; the mayor: “I took a look around the city at night: here is the map of the areas at risk”) or from ambivalent representations of interethnic coexistence (“Via Padova, kebab and clandestine immigrants: the multiethnic frontier of the city”).

Similarly, in the narrations of some of the local exponents of political parties who we interviewed, a mixture of strange ‘constructed’ borders trace the outline of interethnic coexistence in Via Padova. On one hand we find ‘borders’ between ‘immigrants’ and ‘locals’ that are rather authoritative. The immigrants, considered as a whole, are the problem; it is them that “must adapt to our rules, to our way of life”. Naturally, a representation of this type totally ignores a number of factors which Robert Castel (1995) summarises very astutely when he says that marginalisation never originates in the marginal spaces themselves. It is, instead, necessary to observe, above all, that the disorderly practices in the lives of immigrants are, for the most part, a response to the problems that exist in the context into which they are being introduced. Like a serpent biting its tail, the disorderly living arrangements of foreigners are both the cause and the consequence of the resistance that they arouse in Italian home owners.

Once again we find ourselves faced with the construction of cognitive boundaries and once again we are faced with a number of questions regarding not only ‘how’ those boundaries are produced, but also ‘why’ they were produced in precisely that way.

Although it responds to the cultural essentialism of common sense, we could consider the distinction between Christian and Islamic immigrants proposed by a member of the local Council of the area⁸, misleading. The cultural proximity of the former, whose membership in the same religion as the native residents is a sort of guarantee, constitutes the premise for an easy and successful integration. For the latter, naturally, exactly the inverse reasoning prevails: the latter’s being ‘culturally distant’ makes his assimilation difficult. In this way, belonging to a religion is transformed into an extraordinary device for ‘reducing complexity’, an excellent marker of a cultural diversity which would otherwise be ungraspable as well as being extremely useful on the political level. Just as time is reified inside the space of the quadrant of our clocks, ‘diversity’ is reified in ‘cultural distance’ which is presumed to be somehow measurable. Then, almost magically, we see the geopolitical issues that currently convulse the world descend onto the ‘familiar order’ of everyday life. These global issues find their most significant political manifesto in Samuel Huntington’s (1995) awkward attempt to identify a well-defined number of ‘civilisations’ characterised by visions of the world that are compact and coherent as well as incompatible with changes- visions that are characterised by clear and definite confines as well as by an inescapable tendency to conflict.

poverty” of Johnson was substituted by Nixon’s “war on criminality”.

⁸ The city of Milan is divided into nine neighbourhood councils. These are urban subdistricts that have the responsibility for minor administrative activities.

It is, however, the crime news in particular which constructs the media image of the zone. In the first months of 1999, TV news cameras were pointed on a series of robberies, one of which ended in a homicide. On June 14, 2000 a Moroccan man was shot in the legs by his fellow nationals for unknown reasons. In May 2004 the driver of a car was killed and another person was injured for futile reasons by an Albanian man who had sometime previously received an order of expulsion. In March of 2006 a North African man was accidentally killed in the course of a scuffle with a security guard. In September of 2006 the police stopped some North African men for a routine check; after they let them go they found themselves faced with the furious reaction of a group of local residents who had been watching the scene (“they’re drug dealers: arrest all of them...”). In February 2010 Via Padova was once again in the spotlight of the crime news. This time the problem was relatively unusual, but it was one that had been seething under the surface of the community for some time: the conflict between two groups of foreigners. A brawl between some Egyptians and a group of young South Americans, who seemed to be connected with the Latin Kings gang, ended in the murder of an Egyptian young man and in a series of episodes of vandalism. All of this once again called the attention of the media back on to the presence of foreigners in the area, their living conditions and the possibility for integration and coexistence.

In the mainstream media representation the external element is the ‘foreigner’ and, as such, it is he who is the source of the uneasiness and fear; ‘people’ are forced to live with this uneasiness that, at a certain point, will explode in forms of protest (which will then be sensationalised by the media). The political world has no choice but to react with severity, through decisive, safety-orientated and repressive policies that seem to address the ‘people’s’ uneasiness as well as their needs (naturally, this is true also for the more progressive political groups, since they too are ‘responsible’). It is easy to see how for members of the city government a ‘time bomb’ always ready to explode, perhaps on the eve of the next elections, can be more useful than any incisive action of urban renewal, or the revamping of local services or the implementation of standards in living conditions (all essential, according to what has been said above, to any prospect of integration).

On the Italian political scene it is the mayors⁹ who are in first place when it comes to playing the safety card to gain legitimacy and consensus - oftentimes presenting themselves as ‘sheriff-mayors’ in the style of New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani. In the spring of 2007, the mayor of Milan called for a demonstration to ask for a greater commitment by the government in fighting crime. This initiative sparked considerable controversy, but then controversy is very useful to attract media attention to the episode and to contrast the image of the mayor with that of other political groups who are afflicted with a chronic “crises of confidence”.

As has been observed, there was no lack of controversy but, according to the media version of events, the controversy seems to have been of interest only to the political ‘caste’, while substantial approval of the initiative was expressed by the ‘people’, especially the residents of the so-called ‘areas at risk’, particularly the local store owners who are the group most under threat. Whether there is a similar unanimity of feeling in the public at large remains to be seen. The contacts which we developed in the course of our research, in fact, do not appear to demonstrate any such uniformity of opinion: even among the famous store owners of Via Padova, the weak link par excellence in the ‘jungle’ of newspaper and television coverage, some perplexity seems to emerge over the initiatives taken by the government. In the summer of 2008 the newly formed third government of Berlusconi initiated a collaboration between the armed forces and the police in the ‘areas at risk’ (“army troops in Via Padova and in front of the Embassies” is the headline used by the local media to once again put emphasis on the situation): wouldn’t it have been better to invest in redeveloping public spaces, like the square in front of the Trotter? – is the question asked by some of the merchants in the area when contacted by the coordinator of one of the local committees. Once again, the controversy is staged under media limelight, placing the measure at the centre of the lethargic attention of the mid-August holiday news chronicle.

The following spring a proposal of debatable scope, which would probably have been impossible to apply, but which is nonetheless indicative of the political climate, finds its way before the City Council. It concerns the creation of carriages of the metropolitan train system reserved for the exclusive use of native residents of Milan. Although this grotesque proposal goes nowhere, the local press does not miss the opportunity to solicit comment from the ‘people’. The reaction of incredulity of those who thought it impossible to return to the Alabama of the 1950s was contrasted by the approval of others who lamented that the underground was used exclusively by immigrants, and that, especially at night, “there was good reason to be afraid to use it”.

⁹ The election law of 1993 introduced direct election [of representatives] gaining immediate consensus of the electors.

But is fear really the predominant feeling of Milan residents who take the underground in the evening? Or is it that natives of Milan desert the underground because “there is good reason to be afraid”? A newspaper (admittedly of progressive bent) recounts the case of a toothless fifty-year-old Pakistani with a long beard. As soon as he takes a seat in the underground, all of the places around him are vacated and even mothers stop their children from sitting near him. Notwithstanding its sympathetic tone towards the Pakistani, in the context of the controversy over reserved carriages, the article seems to confirm the image of the native citizenry as being unanimous in their desire to ‘maintain a distance’- to the point that they feel extraneous to the supposed common sense as if they were an elite, positioned at a distance from the problems and worries of the ‘people’, who react with understandable consternation to the proposal.

Local problems, often created or blown out of proportion by politicians in search of legitimisation, have provoked different forms of reaction on the local level; they have led in some instances to the formation of citizens’ committees. In fact, it is the report of the urban blight and the increasing number of foreigners, closely associated at the level of common sense, that led to the birth of most of these committees.

The relationships which they have with the local identity is easily readable through the dichotomy “resistance identity” vs. “project identities” (Castells, 1997); on one hand we have ‘single cause’ committees that are born with the immediate objective of defending the territory ‘against’ something in particular; usually their requests are dealt with in a petition calling for repression and controls. They are generally very short-lived, and not infrequently, directly connected to an ‘electoral cycle’. On the other hand, we have committees that not only speak out against actual material deterioration but also carry on continued activity aimed at promoting the area; this guarantees their ‘mission’ a continued existence even after the single problem that has mobilised them has been solved. This second type of minority committee has a relationship of continuity with the political issues of the “old, civil society of the neighbourhood”.

Volunteer initiatives aimed at promoting encounters between cultures sprout up around these project committees; these initiatives are often connected to school activities or to the structures in Trotter Park. Specifically, the nursery and elementary schools in the park constitute important resources for neighbourhood integration through institutional encounters of the parents, as well as the parties that are organised for the children and their families¹⁰. The parishes appear to conserve part of their historic role of support for integration, although this support concerns prevalently immigrants of the Catholic faith and oftentimes manages to extend no further than the mere participation in religious functions. While these initiatives are of indisputable value since they lead to inter-faith dialogue and involvement of foreigners, they have, nonetheless, been mainly promoted by one parish. The commitment to a dialogue with the representatives of the local Islamic cultural centre is accompanied, in this case, by ‘representatives’ of the interlocutors who are just the opposite of the ‘paranoid’ ‘conspiracy-obsessed’ interlocutors; these interlocutors are more open-minded (“It doesn’t seem at all to me that we are dealing with terrorists here”) and more inclined to put the emphasis on ecumenical aspects (the imam “is simply a pious man”, “he is a man of God”). The results of this opening and of the dialogue that followed have had positive effects as regards the sharing of responsibility for the neighbourhood; this can be seen in the participation of a considerable number of immigrants in the demonstration promoted by the parish priest in defence of the few park areas available to the public that still exist in Via Padova, but which have been chosen as the site for the construction of a barracks for the policemen.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the problem of dialogue with immigrants at the local level, can be broadly characterised as one of credibility and trust. On the one hand we find ourselves faced with representations of the ‘other’ inspired by feelings of diffidence (Muslims as fanatics and conspirators, Albanians as born criminals, Chinese as untrustworthy and incomprehensible).

¹⁰ Schools assume this value in other multicultural contexts, for example in the neighbourhoods where there is council housing like Stadera, Molise and Calvairate.

One of the aspects which was brought most frequently to the forefront by our interviews, and which we have already highlighted here, is the “deproletarianization” (Wacquant, 2004), or, in other words, the profound transformation of that social fabric, rich in associations (religious, political, union) that had strongly contributed in the past to the construction of a basis for reciprocal trust, amalgamating the local population with the immigrant populations in a social context that has undergone such change, where local society is atomized, it is easy to understand how the presence of immigrants in the territory, even when they have been perfectly integrated into the workplace, is perceived above all as a problem of public order, of safety and of the original residents’ perception of exposition to risk. In the framework of a similar atomization, which is also connected to the crisis of the traditional security policy, that is, to the crises in the welfare system, we can also add a growing tendency towards *territorialisation of the demand for safety* in which we believe it is possible to identify at least three components:

1. territorialisation of representations (criminality seen as a problem of deterioration in the “outskirts” or in the “neighbourhoods at risk”);
2. territorialisation of the pressure (formation of local committees);
3. territorialisation of the issues and the policies (neighbourhood contracts, ‘community’ police).

Let us now consider the first component, that is, the *territorialisation of representation*. From the point of view of the political reformers of the three golden decades, delinquency was produced by social disadvantage that could be addressed through universalised policies of welfare, investing uniformly in territories and in the social fabric of the nation.

Beginning in the 1980s, in the representation of certain problems, the interpretive key is almost always that of territoriality: for example, problems that involve and are of interest to ‘areas at risk’, ‘run-down suburbs’ and so on. The problem of the perception of risk, on the other hand, becomes increasingly related to the psychological relationship between the individual and his spatial context¹¹.

Spatialisation and territorialisation of representations, on the other hand, are becoming more and more increasingly connected with forms of spatialisation and *territorialisation of measures taken*. While a part of the population increasingly conceives of the fight against criminality as one involving control over space (Fonio, 2007) in the other part we find an elevated propensity towards emphasising the role of the community, and the local dimension, as well as community participation in the management of urban problems, not the least of which are those related to safety.

Behind this trend it is possible to identify a praiseworthy form of promoting local participation, but it is also possible to see the tendency of a political class, which is going through a crises of legitimacy, to delegate responsibility (Rosanvallon, 2006). The political class, moreover, finds itself having to confront a *territorialisation of pressure*: since the traditional vehicles for expressing consensus (i.e. political parties) are in crises, grassroots participation is manifested more and more frequently through forms of aggregation that are based on local interest and on solving local problems- for example, through the forming of committees which are often born and developed around problems of urban decay and safety (Agustoni and Rozza, 2005).

These new collectives inevitably come to constitute interlocutors of great importance for a political world that is searching for legitimisation.

¹¹ This is the case in the ‘defensible spaces’ of O. Newman and in the ‘broken window theory’ of Wilson and Kelling (1982). The cause for feeling exposed to risk is increasingly identified with the physical characteristics of an area; as a result, solutions to this problem tend more and more to emphasise the central importance of taking action on the physical appearance of the area.

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