

The struggle to belong
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

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The case of Torpignattara, Rome: an Italian *banlieue* or a place of multi-ethnic coexistence?

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Abstract

The mainstream European debate on ethnic exclusion has been so far dominated by a focus on spatial segregation and residential neighbourhood. Mono-class, mono-tenure, mono-ethnic neighbourhoods are seen at the basis of the exclusion processes, and, as a consequence, mixed neighbourhoods are encouraged as a panacea that fosters social cohesion. This discourse originated in North-West Europe but it is largely applied also in Mediterranean countries where the phenomenon of urban immigration has shown different characteristics. The risk is that interpretative models deriving from other contexts end to actually obscure the real nature of problems.

An interesting case in this sense is that of Torpignattara, a neighbourhood in the periphery of Rome, which has recently hit the attention of the media inside the national debate on immigration: it was described as an ethnic enclave at risk of becoming a *banlieue*. However, a deeper look shows great discrepancies from the French model, first of all if Paris' peripheries were produced by public policy action, Torpignattara was produced by a lack of it. Furthermore, there is a strong demographic dissimilarity: immigrants are around 15% of the total population, a much lower percentage in respect to Paris' counterparts.

The paradigm of spatial concentration and segregation which fit in the *banlieues* case seems to be inappropriate to describe, understand and consequently intervene in Torpignattara. If the neighbourhood is not exempt from critical features, in terms of urban fabric, social realm and in terms of 'living with diversity', however, urban policies developed inside the *banlieues* debate are not the most appropriate to face them: neither control policies nor inclusion ones, those thought to promote *mixité*. Thus, in order to understand and to take action in Torpignattara a new reflection is necessary, bringing into discussion classic categories that spatially analyses immigration: segregation and integration.

Torpignattara, a changing neighbourhood

Torpignattara is a neighbourhood located in the oriental periphery of Rome. It is historically a working class neighbourhood, which during the Fascism and the post-war era hosted many immigrants from southern Italy, employed in the industries of the area.

The building fabric is fragmented, grown in a spontaneous and de-regulated way through subsequent additions: firstly appeared the informal *borgate*¹, then the working-class estates of the first post-war period, then the expansions impressed by the speculation during the second post-war period, and finally the more rare and recent infilling. The lack of a masterplan is mirrored also in the scarce quality and general lack of public space. The building environment, mainly poor, shows today signs of decay, such as the unkempt open spaces.

The configuration of the urban fabric tells something else. The variety of building types, the presence of neglected industrial areas mingled with the dwellings, the functional mix which characterises the ground floors of main streets: all these elements contribute to shape Torpignattara as a “mixed porous territory” (Lanzani, 2003). This porosity, enhanced by the residential, commercial and productive emptying that took place during the '80 and '90, allowed with more ease the insertion of immigrants and the transformation of meaning of the urban spaces.

Today, the percentage of foreign residents in the *zona urbanistica*² Torpignattara is around 15%³, coming from all the different continents, mainly from Bangladesh, China, Philippines, Romania, Egypt and Peru.

Immigrants from these countries are predominantly males, because of the job types that characterise the area, such as commerce, services, building sector. The high percentage of minors (around 21%, while the Council average is 16%), suggests that these populations are settling down, demonstrated by the high numbers of family reunions and the access to private housing (Pompeo e Priore, 2009). The presence of families in Torpignattara implies a kind of problems that are different from those typical of single males who arrived during the first wave of immigration which characterised Italy so far⁴.

¹ Borgate were traditional self-built neighbourhoods, grown in the periphery of Rome in the first half of the XX century.

² The administrative perimeter that more or less corresponds to the extension of the neighbourhood.

³ This and the others data on the foreign population are referred to the registry office in date 31st December 2009, source: Ufficio Statistica Comune di Roma.

⁴ Second and third waves of immigration (White, 1993) are quite recent in Italy.

Furthermore, since 2000 in the oriental area of Rome (in which is located Torpignattara) a growing ethnic economy is flourishing, predominantly managed by Bangladeshi and Chinese (but not only), in the field of peddling, wholesale and retail market (grocery stores, barber shops, money transfer and “phone center”⁵, home centres, bar, restaurant and fast food).

Torpignattara is then a complex territory. The fragmented, varied and partly blighted urban fabric; the industrial past, testified by the running down factories and the blanks of meaning; the ambiguous localization of a central periphery in a changing context; low estate values: all these elements shape the neighbourhood as particularly suitable to receive the transformations impressed by the incoming of new populations.

Populations that in their insertion are following different strategies. Chinese and Bangladeshi are settling combining home and job in a wider scale system which involves all the oriental area of the City of Rome. In this way they are developing synergies among their commercial trajectories and they are sewing economic, social, religious and political networks that show their rooting in the territory. Then, there are small Senegalese communities that all live and work concentrated in a few buildings, isolated from communitarian and welfare networks: they represent the “last poor” of the neighbourhood. Furthermore, there is a varied multiethnic population which insertion strategies can be understood only in the wider council framework, and even beyond. Finally, there are old Italian inhabitants who leave houses and shops to move elsewhere, and new ones (students, young couples) who start moving in, attracted by the affordability of the area (real estate values are aligned with those of the extreme periphery).

The residential composition of Torpignattara is then complex. However, it is still not clear if all these populations, different for ethnicity, class and lifestyle, are living as independent islands, or if the local urban space is producing a system of integration (Simon, 2000)?

Imaginaries...

Although the percentage of foreign residents is not significantly above the Council average, the media start to mark Torpignattara as an emergency area, an ethnic enclave, at risk of becoming a *banlieue*:

“According to our research this neighbourhood is one of those more at risk. There is a *banlieue risk* because of a second generation of immigrants, seeking its own identity. They

⁵ Kind of cybercafés which offers internet and telephone services.

are youngsters suffering tyrannies, and sooner or later they will respond. It is possible to feel, to touch the *malaise*, which can become a tinderbox” (Meletti, 2010)⁶.

Furthermore, newspapers talk about several situations of tension linked to the immigrants’ presence: in particular concerning the substitution of Italian shops with those managed by immigrants, or concerning the littering and the urban blight often associated with them.

Finally, Torpignattara is well-known for the Primary School Pisacane that has been defined a ‘ghetto’ inside the ‘*banlieue*’ itself. This School shows a very high percentage of pupils with non-Italian citizenship⁷: 82,7% in the school year 2008-2009 (Caritas, 2010), while the Rome average is 8,2%. The Pisacane’s figures are particularly high also in comparison with neighbouring schools, and they do not reflect the demographic composition of the area.

The Pisacane School became object of a recent national debate on the presence of “foreigners” in Italian schools, and it was used as an example to sustain the *Circolare Gelmini*, a new national law that imposes an upper-limit of 30% of foreigners in public schools. Some of the inhabitants of Torpignattara (the ‘mothers for the integration’ committee) and some local politicians (the town councillor for education policy, Laura Marsilio) interpreted the problem of the School as a problem of “students getthoization” (citing Marsilio in *Immigrazione Oggi*⁸) or of a “ghetto school” (the ‘mothers for the integration’ committee in *Tgcom*⁹). Consequently, the solution they aspired was rebalancing the ethnic composition, dispersing immigrant pupils in other schools.

From the descriptions the media gives of Torpignattara, it is possible to draw some negative imageries of the neighbourhood, linked to the issue of immigration. Firstly, the neighbourhood is compared to a *banlieue*. Clearly not for its historic, economic and social characteristics, that strongly differs from the Parisian peripheries, which are the outcome of a precise policy action, while Torpignattara is the result of a lack of it. The image of the *banlieue* could recall instead the process of stabilization of many immigrants’ families that implies a process of use, appropriation and transformation of the territory, which increases

⁶ Translation from the Italian of: “Secondo la nostra ricerca questo quartiere è fra quelli più a rischio. C’è un pericolo banlieue perché c’è una seconda generazione di immigrati che è alla ricerca di una propria identità. Sono giovani che subiscono angherie e prima o poi reagiranno. Il disagio si sente, si tocca, e può diventare una polveriera”.

⁷ Many of these children are born and bred in Rome, however, legally they are not Italians.

⁸ http://immigrazioneoggi.it/daily_news/2008/ottobre/10_1.html

⁹ <http://www.tgcom.mediaset.it/cronaca/articoli/articolo440741.shtml>

their visibility. This process is still scarcely known in the Italian panorama, and the problems linked with it are lacking of a clear solution.

Secondly, for many inhabitants the presence of immigrants in the neighbourhood is associated with the urban blight. In particular, the traditional retailers are denouncing the incoming of ethnic businesses as the symptom of a process of economic and environmental decay (Broccolini, 2010). Inhabitants and retailers do not stand the proliferation of 'troublesome' businesses such as *phone center*. These shops have a function for ethnic communities that goes beyond the simply commercial one, sustaining uses of gathering, socializing, and even information and assistance (Sempredon, 2010). The special and fundamental role of ethnic businesses for immigrants' everyday life is yet hardly accepted by Italians that have got a different residential and commercial perception of the urban space. Many of the new businesses of Torpignattara are addressing an immigrant clientele, or include wholesale trading: in other words are not directly accessible to traditional inhabitants. This, and the fact that similar activities are concentrated in the proximity, leads the Italian residents to misunderstand the phenomenon and to hardly accept the transformations that are occurring in the neighbourhood.

Finally the last imaginary is that of the 'ghetto', overlaid to the reality of the Pisacane School. The rhetoric in this case is double: on the one side it is claimed that the immigrant children cannot "integrate" in the hosting society if they stay among themselves (a themselves that is ambiguous, if considered the number of nationalities represented inside the School); on the other side it is feared that in such an environment the Italian pupils are disadvantaged in the learning and socializing processes. The real problem is that the spreading of the image of the ghetto throughout the neighbourhood, finally led to an open hostility against the School and against the Italian neighbours who enrol their children there. That triggered a vicious circle that lowered further the enrolment of Italian children, and enhanced the isolation of the School.

... and rhetoric

These three imageries – *banlieue*, environmental and economic decay, ghetto – have something in common. They all imply a configuration of the immigration question as an issue of concentration and segregation. In fact, these are the paradigms which have been predominantly used to read and tell the problems linked to urban immigration in the European literature and policy.

Such rhetoric draws a picture in which the city and its neighbourhoods are at the heart of processes of ethnic exclusion and inclusion. Immigrants, having limited resources, tend to concentrate in certain disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Concentration, poverty and decay increase a process of social exclusion and spatial segregation that limits their possibility of successfully integrating in the host society. Therefore, if the problem is one of segregated neighbourhoods, in which are separately located the different ethnic and social groups, the solution are neighbourhoods which integrate the different groups under the umbrella of a cohesive community, with the same vision on the territory and the same ambitions. It is the myth of mixed neighbourhoods, which guide many strategies of local authorities across Europe (see Galster, 2007 and Kleinhans, 2004 in Blockland and van Eijk, 2010).

Rhetoric of concentration and segregation produced mainly policies that go in the sense of people displacement, implying a criticisable assumption: the concentration of the same ethnic or social class is a *per se* negative factor (for a critic see Bolt. et al. 2010; Bolt, Burgers e van Kempen, 1998; Murie, 2005). Also the myth of mixed neighbourhoods, passing through reductive simplifications, ends to coincide with a questionable equation: the cohabitation of persons belonging from different classes and ethnicities in the same space leads to an enhanced upward mobility of the disadvantaged, that is to say that the spatial proximity leads to the creation of bonds, even interethnic, and increases social capital (for a critic see Blockland and Savage, 2008).

In reality, Torpignattara is neither a *banlieue* nor a ghetto. There are phenomena of concentration, and in some cases of segregation, but they have dimensions and meanings that differ from those of Paris or US peripheries. The rhetoric of concentration still permeates the imagery of inhabitants and politicians, often without leading to a serious reflection upon the risks of social exclusion and marginalization that effectively exist in Torpignattara. On the contrary this rhetoric mainly materializes itself into the fear for the stranger, and for the transformation that he brings with himself.

Politics of control and displacement in Torpignattara

There is a very weak public action on the territory of Torpignattara. On the one side there are sectorial interventions (social, economic) of the Council that does not match any specific territorial dimension. On the other side the territorialized action of the borough (Municipio VI) lack of financial and human resources. A lot is delegated to the will and the power of other actors: private and third sectors, neighbourhood associations.

In the specific field of immigration, concrete urban policy that addresses this issue does not exist. However, it seems that the imageries through which the phenomenon of immigration in Torpignattara is described end to have an impact in terms of policies that goes in the direction of control and displacement.

The clearest case is that of Pisacane School: the town councillor Laura Marsilio declared that the Council of Rome would have been very strict in applying the *Circolare Gelmini* to solve the problem of students' ghettoization.

But the School is not at all low profile as the image of the ghetto suggests: the performance of pupils is good, and during the classes important paths of intercultural growth are experimented. The Pisacane instead of a ghetto is a multicultural school that receives children coming from different traditions, in the majority of cases born and bred in Rome. The application of the law would have only damaged the right of immigrant parents (establish by the Italian law) of choosing where to enrol their children, and it would have also risked to entail to the closure of the school, reducing dramatically the number of enrolment. Finally, the upper limit of 30% was not enforced thanks to the protest of teachers and parents, Italians and immigrants together, who constituted an association and obtained a dispensation for the School.

A second example is the case of the Senegalese community who cohabit inside a few buildings showing precarious hygienic and physical conditions, where they installed businesses of import-export and craft which fuel a circuit of peddling. These buildings are the only veritable pockets of segregation existent in Torpignattara, where it is possible to find either housing (building abasement, rent speculation) and economic marginalization (informal jobs, with scarce possibility of occupational progress). The institutions envisage an intervention that goes in the direction of control and dispersal through the tools of roundup (to stop illegal commerce) and eviction (to free the flats).

Lastly, the final case is that of ethnic businesses, that have recently flourished in the declining commercial fabric. Many of these new shops are implementing strategies of hybridization between the ethnic and the traditional range (Broccolini, 2010), and are successfully accepted from the Italian clientele. However there are other situations that are perceived as more problematic. In fact, several businesses are criticized by Italian inhabitants and retailers, mainly because they are considered too many. Their visibility produce images and spatial grammars (Semi, 2007) difficult to be understood by Italians (it is the case of the Chinese wholesale stores, more similar to warehouses than shops).

In Torpignattara, specific policies aimed at controlling these businesses do not exist. In other neighbourhoods such as Esquilino¹⁰ the Council promulgated very strict regulations for *phone center* and Chinese wholesale stores, which finally lead to their displacement in the outskirts of the city. Now, in Torpignattara there are some potential situations of conflict that could push it in that direction. In the last five years, an incredibly high number of Chinese shops, that mixes wholesale and detail commerce of accessories, have come up around the Almagià gardens, forming a sort of small Chinese district of commerce. However, the Almagià gardens are one of the only green spaces of Torpignattara and are therefore very important for its inhabitants. They already express the will of contrasting the deterioration of this public place, sending away unwanted practices, and unsafe spaces that prevent the park to become a special gathering place for children.

Urbanity policies: this territory we share

The negative imageries – the *banlieue*, the urban blight, the ghetto - that weight down on Torpignattara are based upon problems that really exist, even if they are distorted. The more interesting experiences of urban policies in Torpignattara start from these very same problems; however, they don't interpret them as problems of spatial concentration, but as issues of territory sharing.

The problem of the Pisacane School is recognised by the Parents and Teachers Association, who don't see the School as a ghetto but on the contrary as an important resource for the neighbourhood. In fact, the School is one of the rare welfare spaces of Torpignattara, which is highly lacking spaces for gathering, socializing and for culture: there aren't a square, nor a cinema or a library. The Pisacane School is a symbolic building both for the traditional inhabitants (it is the historic school, cited also in Pasolini writings) and for the newer ones (it hosted several social services for the inclusion of immigrants, such as a School of Italian language for immigrant women).

For this reason the Parents and Teachers Association, the Torpignattara Neighbourhood Association and other no profit organizations are carrying forward the idea that the School can become a social centre not only for pupils and parents but for the whole neighbourhood, hosting in its spaces cross-section initiatives that address the different categories of inhabitants. The idea is not to displace the pupils belonging to the ethnic minorities, but on the contrary to open the School to the territory, in order to break the

¹⁰ The historically multi-ethnic neighbourhood in Rome.

distrust and the bias that strongly reduced the enrolment of Italian children, and to spread the intercultural processes that are already taking place in the School.

In the case of the Senegalese community as well, a counter-policy exists. Last October the Senegalese community who lives in Via Fanfulla da Lodi received the eviction, because of the insalubrity of the apartments. Some inhabitants and local committees thought that the displacement of the Senegalese would have fuelled the process of gentrification that has recently hit the Pigneto, the confining neighbourhood to Torpignattara. According to this perspective the Senegalese represent the most marginal strata of the Pigneto population who are expelled in a process of increase of the real-estate values, and attraction of a wealthier population.

The cause of the Senegalese and that of the local committees became the same: to defend the territory from the speculation of private actors and to keep some affordable spaces for disadvantaged categories. Starting from that, a joint action of self-restructuring of the dwellings of Via Fanfulla da Lodi started, bringing them up to code. Furthermore, the Senegalese could obtain the suspension of the eviction thanks to the legal counselling of a local agency that acts as help-desk for migrants (Progetto Diritti).

Finally, even the problem of urban decay, which many inhabitants associate with the presence itself of immigrants, is seen through another perspective. The belief of representatives of Torpignattara Neighbourhood Association is that the decay is caused by the scarce quality of the territory, which depends on the historical lack of public facilities, infrastructures, and services. According to this viewpoint, immigrants are no more seen as scapegoats but become allies who are interested such as all other inhabitants to the upgrading of their living environment. In particular the Bangladeshi community, through the Ital-Bangla Association, together with the neighbourhood associations and other local committees, supported the fight for the “denied public spaces”: potential resources that are not viable because they are unkempt, or under construction (some of them since years) or promised but never realized.

The Ital-Bangla Association underlined the importance of common struggles that address issues different from those strictly linked to immigration, such as those concerning the quality of the built environment, of public spaces and services that are particularly relevant for the everyday life of the family. This mobilization is aligned with a more wide awareness campaign on the new needs of immigrants, arising from family reunions and second generations.

Conclusions, the space at the heart of policies

Torpignattara, then, is not the typical neighbourhood described in classical European narratives concerning the problems connected to urban immigration. It is not a ghetto neither a *banlieue*. On the contrary, it is possible to say that the absence of policies and planning produced spontaneously a social and ethnic *mixité*. However this *mixité* by herself does not turn out in social cohesion.

Torpignattara is not a cohesive community but is a neighbourhood rich in social capital, and this is testified by the abundance of proactive local organizations and social networks. If the neighbourhood by itself does not necessarily produces social bonds, however certain urban spaces have got an important role in sustaining the formation of immigrant social networks (public spaces such as parks, worship places such as mosques). In certain cases, such as the Pisacane School, urban spaces can also act as means of contact and dialogue between parallel networks that otherwise risk to never cross.

Torpignattara is not a segregated neighbourhood, nor a cohesive community; it is a neighbourhood where a variety of realities cohabit in a sort of truce, that only sometimes can be broken by conflict or by cooperation, both triggered by questions related to space.

The frictions embedded into the cohabitation process can be read according to different perspectives. The public authorities, mainly absent, seem to embrace the perspective that tend to ascribe problems to the presence of immigrants, in particular when is concentrate and visible. Such a viewpoint brings to policies of control and displacement, which cannot have as final aim the social inclusion of immigrants.

On the contrary, the inclusion happens thanks to those actions, brought about by the civil society, that consider immigrants as allies in the struggle for commons, in the conquer of welfare spaces. Immigrants, regardless of their permit of stay, are recognized as inhabitants, because they live or work in that territory and share the responsibility of its care. In this case it seems that immigrants acquire a sort of urbanity right, which differs from the citizenship right which acts on the legal and political level. In respect to the citizenship right, the urbanity one has got a surplus value, because it contributes to the triggering of inclusion pathways.

However, there are some criticalities in that process. Actions undertaken by local committees tend to intercept only more structured ethnic communities, such as Bangladeshi, or long term residents (Senegalese arrived 20 years ago), and in general those migrant networks that are more open. The dialog seems to be hardly opened with those communities who have got a weaker local presence (Filipinos, Rumanians), or who

are more introvert (Chinese). The cited case of Almagià gardens, which is hosting the Chinese wholesale district, is a potential conflict situation precisely for the lack of contacts between Chinese vendors and Italian residents.

Another problematic point can be seen in the unbalance of the local network towards strongest Italian associations: mobilization of immigrants pass through these associations which set the priorities for the neighbourhood. The role of immigrants in the decision making process is still marginal, and there is never a direct contact with the Local Authority.

Finally, the nature of actions is episodic, they have a protest attitude more than a constructive one, and lack of mainstream resources to carry on long-term projects. In the case of Pisacane School it becomes evident the need for consistent resources to realize the proposed projects for the School. The very pro-active associations that are working inside the School are carrying on mainly short term actions, and this can compromise the final result of more complex processes. Furthermore, the numerous proposals coming from various actors (the Parents and Teachers Association, the Torpignattara Neighbourhood Association) risk remaining just wishes instead of concrete projects.

The role of the local administration should be, then, that of sustaining those 'urbanity' policies that seems to be born from a self-regulatory process of the civil society. Firstly, fostering the participation of a widest arena of stakeholders. To do that the local authority should learn from incoming processes the need to lower "the level of formalism and institutionalism of networks"¹¹ (Crosta et al. 200, p.1268) and should recognize as important stakeholders also non-organized actors.

Furthermore, the institution could have a role in terms of mediation of the conflicts which happen when the visions of different inhabitants upon certain spaces do not coincide. The local administration should, then, overcome a static and particularistic vision of the inhabitant as a resident, and should embrace a more plural one that considers also other users of the urban spaces.

Reasoning in terms of networks instead of places, matching the focus on housing to the one on urban spaces could help the local administration to sustain migrant networks and regulate potential conflicts, accompanying inhabitants in the changing process that is hitting strongly multiethnic neighbourhoods. Learning from those spontaneous practices which are already ongoing in the territory could take the public administration out from the dichotomy between control and integration policy, and let it embrace the perspective of

¹¹ Translation from the Italian of: "il livello di formalismo e istituzionalità delle reti".

urbanity policy which focuses not on immigrants, but on the territory inhabited by them: the urban spaces of immigration.

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