

“Upscaling diversity? Some reflections on commodification and control of diversity in a trendy multicultural neighbourhood”

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### Extended abstract - RC21 Conference 2015

In a time of growing appreciation of urban diversity, consuming ethnic food, sharing the streets with foreign people and showing estimation for cultural diversity often operate as a means of social distinction. Cultural, ethnic and class diversity are elements able to fascinate the so-called new urban middle classes and are often considered valid assets to foster neighbourhoods' upgrading. In such frame, diversity may become a particular kind of commodity, to be consumed in a safe and clean environment. This endorsement of diversity may actually lead to forms of aestheticization, control and eventually exploitation rather than to processes of social and economic inclusion. Indeed, it has been argued that middle-class' love for diversity is often related to the ability to control it, to decide which kind of diversity is 'good' and should be visible and displayed in public space.

Relying on more than two years of ethnographic research, the presentation focuses on the case of a multicultural, socially mixed neighbourhood of Turin, in which the feature of diversity has been upgraded from source of tension to positive asset to brand and promote the area. The presentation takes under consideration everyday practices and situated narratives through which different actors negotiate, manage and use the feature of diversity. Investigating public spaces, cultural associations, commercial and recreational landscapes, it addresses the tension between ethnic and exotic, expectations and representations, performances and claims, and it underlines the unstable balance between social inclusion, control and commodification of diversity in the everyday life.

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The issue of the spatial concentration of migrants in urban settings has been a relevant concern of urban studies and public policies for long time. The arrival and concentration of foreign-born migrants in specific areas of the city have been often perceived as alarming signs of trouble and decline: the rhetoric that an area might become increasingly dangerous, degraded and unattractive because of migrants' presence is indeed quite popular and it has often been used to support or justify strategies and policies of redlining and speculation, in phases of both neighbourhood decline and regeneration (cfr. for example Aalbers, 2006; Cochrane, 2000; Gotham, 2002; Lees, 2008; Smith, 1996; Uitermark *et al.*, 2007).

In recent times, sharing the streets with foreign and non-white residents has come to be considered an element characterizing the authentic urban experience and the fascination for the diverse and the exotic has become part of the lifestyles of the so-called new urban middle classes (Blokland and Van Eijk, 2010; Butler and Robson, 2003; Ley, 1996; Lloyd, 2006; Tissot, 2014; Zukin, 2010). Diversity has emerged as a feature to bet on to promote neighbourhoods and cities: central ethnic districts and multicultural neighbourhoods have been increasingly marketed to attract visitors and prospective residents, supporting urban regeneration and economic growth (Aytar and Rath, 2010; Hoffman, 2003; Huning and Novy, 2006; Loukaitou-Sideris and Soureli, 2012; Shaw *et al.*, 2004; Zukin, 2008). Such premises would seem to hold

the promise of a greater socio-economic inclusion of those who are the beholders of the features of diversity, such as migrants and foreign-born people: after a period in which the presence of migrants was considered a problem to deal with, the endorsement of diversity in urban spaces seems to open up to new developments.

And yet, the pathway is not so easy and linear as it may seem at first. Cultural, ethnic and class diversity are elements able to attract the new urban middle classes in using and even moving into a specific district (Blokland and Van Eijk, 2010; Lloyd, 2006; Zukin, 2010). However, as studies investigating social mix policies have already underlined, there are very poor evidences supporting the assumption that the presence of middle classes in previously deprived, diverse, areas would improve the general conditions and the individual opportunities of long-term residents, and, moreover, such policies may actually imply processes of gentrification and displacement (Blokland and Van Eijk, 2010; Lees, 2008; Uitermark, 2003; Uitermark *et al.*, 2007). Focusing on everyday interactions, uses, images and representations of diversity may highlight other ambiguities too (Camozzi, 2007; Colombo and Semi, 2007; Hoffman, 2003; Mele, 2000; Shaw *et al.*, 2004; Tissot, 2014; Wise and Velayutham, 2009). It has been underlined that the new urban middle classes' love for diversity appears intrinsically linked to their capacity to control it, namely to control the elements and the features of diversity that are present and displayed in public spaces (Tissot, 2011; 2014). Indeed, diversity can be transformed in a particular kind of commodity, to be consumed in a safe and clean environment (May, 1996; Shaw *et al.*, 2004). In this frame, the elements that are welcomed and emphasized are those able to attract specific (and wealthy) segments of urban population, and to be easily appreciated and consumed (Fainstein, 2007; Semi, 2004). Rather than a genuine interest, the fascination for diversity, the enjoyment of a diverse atmosphere and the consumption of exotic goods by the new urban middle classes often emerge as a means of social distinction (Bourdieu, 1979; Ley, 1996; May, 1996; Hoffman, 2003; hooks<sup>1</sup>, 1992; Johnston and Baumann, 2010; Lloyd, 2006; Tissot, 2011; Zukin, 2010).

The interest for (a certain kind of) diversity can also activate processes that may result in forms of exploitation, if not of displacement, of long-term residents. Neighbourhoods that are celebrated for their multicultural and ethnic atmosphere may become sites of further exclusion and be progressively emptied of their long-term residents and users, displaced by the transformations occurring because of their new popularity (Hae, 2011; Hackworth and Rekers, 2005; Zukin, 2010). Still, while some scholars argue that processes going towards the

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<sup>1</sup> This author does not capitalize the initial letters of her pen name by choice.

commodification of diversity might revalorize deprived neighbourhoods only at the expense of long-time residents and businesses (Zukin, 1995; Shaw *et al.*, 2004), others underline the need to recover the agency of migrant entrepreneurs and to consider the chances of empowerment that may emerge from these dynamics (Aytar and Rath, 2012; Rath, 2007).

It seems therefore relevant to investigate whether and how the promotion and endorsement of diversity is concretely translated and acted in specific, situated settings. Moreover, whether and how migrant's life, their everyday practices and socio-economic inclusion are affected by these dynamics. To say it differently: diversity has come to be considered as an attractive feature, actively sought by a specific segment of urban population, and as an asset able to support urban regeneration and economic growth. But what does this concretely imply for migrants and foreign-born people, who might be considered the beholders of such feature in the first place? What does it change for the foreign-born and migrant population of a multicultural, mixed neighbourhood when it comes to be considered attractive for its diverse atmosphere?

The neighbourhood of San Salvario in Turin (Italy) offers an interesting setting where to investigate these issues. This dense district, just outside the historical city centre, is comprised between the central railway station of the city and its main park, which runs along the river Po, resulting in quite a narrow and well-defined area of few blocks hosting both residential and commercial functions. It is an historically mixed area in terms of provenience, class and religion, first beachhead for successive waves of immigration, that in the mid-Nineties became nationally known as a symbol of urban crisis (Allasino *et al.*, 2000). Media and public discourses especially drew the attention on the presence of foreigners, considered as linked to issues of public safety, drug dealing and general decline of the neighbourhood, which came to be described and perceived as dangerous and unsafe (Belluati, 2004). In recent years, however, its diverse composition has come to be considered an asset to bet on to promote the neighbourhood's regeneration, and the area has been brought as an example of successful integration and positive socio-cultural mix. Its gritty, diverse and authentic atmosphere has made it one the new hot spot of the city, particularly popular between university students and the young representatives of the so-called new urban middle classes, who now go there to spend their free time.

Investigating the concrete translation of this endorsement of diversity into situated images, narratives and practices, three fields have been examined, namely 1) the commercial landscape, 2) streets and public spaces, and 3) the associative fabric of the neighbourhood.

The analysis relies on almost two years of ethnographic fieldwork (2011-2012) and some follow ups carried on in summer 2013 and in fall 2014. Different data collection methods were adopted during the fieldwork, mainly participant and naturalistic observation, in-depth interviews, archival and media research. The participant observation took place in neighbourhood's public spaces, commercial activities and public events as well as within some socio-cultural associations. Qualitative in-depth interviews have been recorded with four different actors: local authorities (4), association representatives (15), residents (11) and commercial and recreational entrepreneurs (43).

The emerging picture is controversial at least. The hostility and opposition against foreigners in general, that was allegedly present during the crisis of the mid-Nineties, do not characterize the neighbourhood's atmosphere anymore, and there are examples of social and economic inclusion of foreign-born people. A few successful businesses run by migrants, also capitalising on the new fame of the neighbourhood, are present in the area and the coexistence between nationals and foreigners is mostly peaceful.

And yet, there are shadows too. The diversity that is welcomed and legitimized in public spaces, commercial landscape and everyday life is a sanitized, pre-fixed and normed version which is shaped much more by the tastes and expectations of Italian residents and users rather than by those of the foreign-born population or by an interactive negotiation. What is perceived as different from such fixed images is often dismissed as problematic, wrong or not ready to integrate into the local society. Ethnic shops catering to migrants have been closing down, often replaced by exotic restaurants targeting Italian middle classes and run by Italian owners that rely on the multicultural atmosphere of the neighbourhood to promote their business. The foreign-born people's use of public spaces is increasingly clustered in the area immediately next to the railway station, while new terraces and sidewalk cafés are taking over bigger portions of the neighbourhood's public space, displacing previous uses and routines. It is indeed possible to note an increasing displacement pressure in the commercial, residential and everyday uses of the neighbourhood.

On this base, the case of San Salvario draws the attention on the side effects that the fortune of the feature of diversity may have for the neighbourhoods' characters and migrants'

lives. But it also highlights more subtle forms of labelling, reification and categorization that risk to freeze the definition of diversity, and of the kind of diversity that is 'good' and allowed to be present in public spaces, entrapping migrants and foreign-born people in prefixed roles and performances that might create new, different forms of exploitation and social exclusion.

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