

“Domestication” of Space Arab Migrants in Milan

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The first mosque of Milan was established twenty-five years ago in the area of via Padova, situated in the northeast of Milan, a working class area characterized by traditional Milanese courtyard flats. The area has progressively transformed into a neighbourhood inhabited by numerous Arabs. During the last ten years Arab shops, halal butchers, and restaurants have sprung up, replacing the traditional small groceries and bakeries.

Muslim students who founded the mosque acted as mediators between Arab immigrants and apartment owners, to lend assistance in the difficult search for housing. Arabs, often turned away from landlords in better areas, were forced to rent apartments in the via Padova area which became a place where mainly young and unmarried male immigrants could easily find accommodation. This started a chain reaction: new Arab immigrants found it easiest to find apartments in the via Padova area since they had contacts with other Arabs who already lived there. Apartment owners started to consider it more and more convenient to rent flats in poor condition to groups of immigrants. A correspondence was created between an immigrant group, a social class, and a spatial area, as often occurs in urban areas.

Amongst others groups, petty criminals have also found it advantageous to live in via Padova. For this reason, and because of the fact that many immigrants get drunk in the evening, via Padova, without becoming a real slum, is considered an undesirable place to live in, both by immigrants who live elsewhere, and by Italians. The image of the area and the value of its property have also decreased because of the high number of male immigrants.

Those Arabs who live in poor housing conditions consider via Padova as a temporary residence. Very often they do not trust other immigrants living in the area, and prefer to have Italian neighbours. They can always find and visit Arab friends and relatives in other areas. The young Arab males try to accumulate enough money to buy or rent a home in the hinterland of Milan, and finally to marry or to have the possibility of bringing their wives and children to live with them. They want to adopt the same life-style as Italian middle-class families. Therefore, instead of remaining confined in their area, in their spare time Arab migrants move extensively in other parts of the city.

During weekends families tend to go shopping in the centre of Milan. In their free time they also like to go to out-of-town hypermarkets, even if at the same time they might prefer to buy certain kinds of food from Muslim shops. They enjoy passing the day in the public parks and leisure areas spread throughout the city. They also move continuously outside the city to visit friends and relatives. Through their movements, these immigrants accomplish an act of liberty and resistance. Refusing to live in via Padova or leaving the area to go to more bourgeois or agreeable places, they demonstrate their wish to improve their social status; and as they cross urban spaces, they declare their desire for a better lifestyle, different from both that of their country of origin and the present one. Despite their forced residences in an undesirable area, immigrants construct their own routes and residential strategies. Instead of marking a specific area of Milan with traces of Arab-Muslim culture, Arab immigrants, through their diffuse establishment of mosques and shops selling halal meat and imported Arab foods, mark the entire city with places which constitute stopping points in the urban routes of immigrants. The new foreign inhabitants hybridize the pre-existing urban spaces, making new spaces for not only themselves, but also for the existing inhabitants. This process of hybridization and “multilocality,” as Nadia Lovell notes, serves to “mobilize loyalty to different communities -and ... to different places—simultaneously.”¹

Arab immigrants in Italy, forced to live in a rough area of Milan, try to enlarge their territory through urban routes. They cross social and spatial borders in their attempts to move to less ethnic areas and to improve their social status. They combine and position pieces and signs of their original culture throughout the city. Their residential, leisure, and consumer spaces contain elements of resistance and hybridity.

How important is a religious centre?

Scholars often take for granted that a religious centre plays a strong role in the choice of residence.² This assumption risks hiding other social dynamics and factors of attraction for immigrant groups. The mosque in via Padova, for instance, constitutes a point of attraction mainly for people who come from other parts of Milan and the suburbs. It

is well known that among Muslims it is largely the men who go to the mosque to pray on Fridays and other days, whilst women pray at home. Men can pray in different masajid, according to their desire to meet other people, and to their preferences for particular imams. The women who go to the via Padova mosque on Fridays and other occasions are few in number and know each other. They travel to via Padova from distant areas to meet friends, and to make arrangements about jobs such as hairdressing or clothes selling. For these women, the mosque represents a space of sociability, even if they do not go there every Friday. Similar to the men, it is not their only space for meeting and prayer. They often also meet at homes to visit each other, even if they live in distant localities. For those women to whom the mosque does not represent a main reference point in the area, they find a sense of belonging in everyday practices. Therefore, a religious centre serves as part of a wide network of religious and also secular places that symbolically and culturally mark the city.

Gendered spaces and paths

Arab immigration in Milan has stabilized in recent years, and 47% among them have a full-time or stable job generally requiring a low-skill. Most Arab workers are men. Women usually come after their husbands. Nevertheless, some 9.2% of Arab women arrive in Milan alone and 7.2% demand the help of friends and acquaintances.³ As is well known, male spaces and female spaces are not quite the same. Their paths, their cognitive maps, and their manoeuvring and appropriation of space differ. Men, when they arrive in the city, already have social networks, find jobs very quickly, start to learn Italian, and find help to orient themselves in the city. The rapid learning of the local language allows them to move around more easily.

Women with or without a family, on the contrary, often get lost in the first year after their arrival in Milan. They often lack social networks or occasions to listen to or speak Italian, because they do not start working immediately and tend to remain at home for a long time. They often fear, in the first period, to go shopping in non-Arab shops. The space is perceived as hostile and somewhat dangerous. Some of them told me that they suffered agoraphobia and panic attacks their first time out in Milan. The women who adapted more quickly to the new environment had the help of their husbands who showed them the main places of Milan and how to get around, such as how to use public transportation. Further help was provided by the Italian Language courses.

Female spaces are defined by daily tasks. Even if they have a job, they always have to buy food, to take children to school and to the park, to prepare food, and to attend to other domestic tasks. The space of via Padova is ambivalent to them. On one hand they dislike it, on the other hand it is a space of belonging, the space of daily life, where they feel at ease. They are familiar with the best places to do their shopping, and the best places where they can bring their children to play. The situation of women, who live alone, without a family, is quite different. Generally they do not move without a definite purpose, and only go out if they have a specific task to perform. They avoid public places during their free time and tend to stay at home on the weekends. For them, moving around the city alone is not morally correct. Male public



Via Padova,
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spaces are also gendered spaces; they include the Sunday market of San Donato, or the cafes that are often frequented by people of the same nationality.

To understand the spatial behaviour of Arab Muslim immigrants, it is important to consider both cultural hybridization and personal choices, independent from the place of residence. Even when we observe the choices concerning shops and food purchase, it is important to make a distinction between those who pray and those who do not. The former always go to Muslim butchers to buy halal meat. The latter buy meat according to their personal tastes, and to the desire of finding familiar tastes from home. They might go to the halal butcher just to buy spices and mint for their tea, and then buy their meat in the supermarkets. In both cases, people do not always choose butchers close to home. They choose their butcher according to trust, based on his (or her) nationality, or because of practical reasons, such as the closeness to the mosque or to the place where they work. Moreover, Arab immigrants often go to supermarkets and hypermarkets outside Milan, carefully evaluating the merchandise, prices, and preferences. The places of shopping vary according to the situation.

Moving identities and wide spaces

The perspective generally adopted in social studies about the meaning of space in immigration is that immigrants tend to recreate as far as possible the same milieu of their country of provenance, building religious centres, establishing commercial activities, and developing the same habits and temporalities. People would continue to reproduce the same cultural habits of their country of origin. In totally accepting this point of view, we inherently accept the idea of an unchangeable culture. But, as we know well, "pure products go crazy."⁴ The habits of the country of origin hybridize with those of the country of immigration. The result is a hybrid citizen who adds urban Italian habits to the ones s/he owned before. They produce, through a bricolage, mixed identities and new social positions for themselves, creating new meanings in space. Immigrants' routes, and their importance, are not limited to the borders of the city. Their spaces go further, as far as they have social relations. Arab migrants do not always dream of returning home when they have free time. They also like to spend their weekends in other cities or regions, and their holidays in other European countries,

where they can find friends and familiar people living there. Their world is not an in-between world, but a wider one.

Many scholars consider immigrants as people who always tend to recreate a circumscribed and definite space as close as possible to that of the country of origin and strongly anchoring themselves to it. By doing so, they risk acquiring a limited perspective about the ways in which immigrants live their space. Similarly, attributing a central importance to religious centres in the determination of places of residence can contribute to the idea of a closed and homogenous culture. They risk not seeing the processes of cultural hybridization and thus may generate a rather ethnic reading of immigrant settlements in new contexts, whilst not showing enough awareness of the phenomena of cultural change.

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Notes

1. Nadia Lovell, ed., *Locality and Belonging* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.
2. See Kathy Gardner, "On Bengali elders in East London," *Oral history*, no. 27 (1999).
3. Data collected by the ISMU Foundation, www.ismu.org.
4. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).