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The silenced paradoxes of urban renewal: morality, welfare reconfiguration and precarious labour in Collective Food Procurement in Turin

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Part 1.

**Growing food in the urban periphery.
Transforming space, transforming
citizenship**

Introduction

The urban public park Parco Piemonte is situated at the southernmost point of the peripheral neighbourhood Mirafiori Sud. One can arrive to the park from the city centre using public transportation, heading south for a 40 minutes journey on the tram number 4. This way, as the tram travels along Corso Unione Sovietica (Soviet Union Avenue), one stops in front of several buildings, which are representative of the industrial history of Turin. Among these, the fifth entrance to *FIAT Mirafiori Sud* factory plant, the Salesians School Agnelli (*Istituto Salesiano Agnelli*), named after *FIAT*'s founding family, and the 19th century former Hospice of the Poor Elderly (*Ospizio dei Poveri Vecchi*), where in 1993 the University of Turin moved its faculty of economics (now called School of Management and Economics). Switching perspective, one can also arrive at the Parco Piemonte from outside the city. The area represents a green frontier, along the river Sangone, between smaller municipalities on the outskirts of Turin and the city itself. When arriving from the south, one passes by the edges of the park, first thing when exiting the highway and entering the city. Looking out from the car, moving along the street, one first sees some high trees, a Roma camp⁶ made of white temporary housing containers, and then a large agricultural field. What one sees are just parts of what composes the complex landscape of Parco Piemonte.

In this chapter, I present the case of this public park, focusing on its 2019-2020 partial transformation into an urban gardening project called Orti Generali (General Gardens). Orti Generali offers 160 individual allotments for rent (for between 25 and 45 euros per month) as well as shared gardening and recreational spaces, including an educational farm and a café. Orti Generali also organises several courses around sustainable agriculture, apiculture as well as yoga, film screenings and creative activities for children (Orti Generali n.d.). The aim of the project is to create a sustainable environment, where urban

⁶ In Italy, the *campi nomadi* (literally nomads camps) are precarious encampments of Roma population most often situated in the urban margins. These can have different legal status: informal, authorised or developed by the public administration.

dwellers can reconnect with nature while enjoying and taking care of the space through gardening, volunteering or simply consuming quality products. The project also collaborates with local NGOs and is part of the neighbourhood solidarity networks.

Based on my participant observation during the setting up of the project, I discuss the transforming management and use of this peri-urban green area. I shed light onto the perspective of its occupants to analyse visions and narratives of urban gardening which, ultimately, speak of urban renewal and citizenship more generally. More precisely, the transformation of the park represented a privileged arena to study the changing nature of citizens engagement - in the context of urban renewal - and the ways in which specific visions and moralities of a “good urban space” (e.g. open and beautiful) and of a “good citizen” (e.g. active and obedient) are articulated together. More specifically, this case allows to engage with the following questions: what forms of civic engagement are practiced in the context of urban renewal? How are these forms of engagement entangled with welfare state retrenchment and the emergence of non-profit organisations as new mediators of state-citizen relations? Which citizens, practices and forms of knowledge remain excluded by such forms of engagement and urban renewal processes?

Scholars have investigated similar questions around urban renewal in other post-industrial contexts similar to Turin such as the city of Detroit. Turin and Detroit shared similar industrial histories, shaped by the FIAT company and General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, respectively. Historical similarities invited for comparative investigations around, for example, the organisation of labour, during the Fordist era (Signoretti 2015). Scholars have also focused on the consequences of the industrial crisis and the necessary redefinition of these cities’ economies and overall identity. As highlighted by Castellani and Damiano (2011) and Berta (2019), the crisis of the car industry has provoked in both cities rapid social changes such as growing unemployment and poverty. Rethinking the economy of these cities also meant rethinking the use of many of their areas, and food often played a central role in these transformations. As shown by Yung and Newman (2014) in relation to Detroit, food can represent an

interesting entry point to analyse a city in crisis and local approaches to inequalities and urban governance.

Particularly relevant to frame my reflections on the transformation of Parco Piemonte is the work of the anthropologist Andrew Newman, who explored the making of a public park called *Jardins d'Éole* in a post-industrial and peripheral area of northeast Paris (Newman 2015; 2020). Throughout his work, the author examined the ways in which “parks materialise changing notions of citizenship and belonging” (Newman 2020, 61). Newman argued that the construction of the park - and the green turn in urban policies common to many cities - can be analysed as a “broader reimagining of what nature, the city, its citizens, and political contestation mean at a fundamental level” (Newman 2015, xv). Contributing to the discussion around the “right to the city” approach⁷, Newman started from a simple question: “how do people - from residents to planners – create “vibrant” urban spaces, and how are such places reproduced in everyday life, and for what political end?” (xviii). I will particularly engage with three ideas discussed by Newman (2015).

The first is the idea of moving boundaries between planners and users of the park. Newman (2015) built on the work of Henri Lefebvre and, more particularly, his critical approach to capitalist urbanisation. In his important contributions to the study of the city, space and politics, Lefebvre (1968; 1991) highlighted the power relations and inequalities that characterise the production of the urban space. Among other things, he theorised the “semiology of the city” namely its messages, meaning and values, as well as the different dimensions of space (namely the perceived, conceived and lived spaces, Lefebvre 1991) which explains its centrality in all people’s life. Particularly relevant here is the difference he drew between the powerful and the weak in terms of their access to and appropriation of urban space, and their participation in decision making. Newman (2015) revisits such sharp

⁷ The concept of “the right to the city” was theorised by Lefebvre (1968) and more recently Harvey (2008; 2012). It is also being used by grassroots initiatives and social movements as a working slogan and political vision to reclaim citizens’ right to co-create the urban space in the context of growing spatial inequalities and the commodification of the urban space.

contrast between these two groups by unravelling how, at the *Jardins d'Éole* different roles and positions are often mixing, arguing for a complexification of these categories. The author analyses the perspectives and the “creative agency” of all the people such as urban planners, politicians, neighbourhood activists, local immigrant youth therefore also including “nonexpert residents” who reimagine and reshape places in ways that might not always correspond to the understandings of authorities (Newman 2015, xx). The case of Parco Piemonte further complexifies these advancements towards a more profound understanding of contemporary urban renewal. In chapter one, I explore the ways in which local inhabitants and workers were directly involved in the transformation of the area through their voluntary contributions and gardening practices. I point to the premises of such participatory approach, which I contextualise as part of broader genealogy of urban gardening and urban renewal plans in the city. I argue that while the new users of the area are directly involved in and key actors of its transformation, their ability to intervene remains confined to certain levels of decision making and specific forms of civic engagement.

The second and related element of Newman's analysis which I want to discuss is the idea that the park can be an arena of engagement, confrontation and political activism, despite the increasingly privatised and exclusionary definitions of public space. More generally, anthropological and geographical literature on urban gardening has also engaged with these themes, looking at urban gardens as sites of urban power relations. Authors such as Crossan *et al.* (2016) questioned the extent to which urban gardens become sites of “neoliberal construction of citizenship” (937). Tornaghi (2014) and Certomà and Tornaghi (2019) called for a critical analysis of urban gardens as political spaces, unravelling their forms and functioning in the context of neoliberal urbanism. The case of the development of Orti Generali adds to this literature by revealing how gardens can also become sites of legitimisation of certain practices over others and silenced confrontation between different visions of urban public space and its (need for) renewal. In chapter two I explain about the engagement of new volunteers and gardeners as well as the diverging visions that emerged in the park transformation process. I point to the issue of silenced confrontations to argue about what I analyse as a key

feature of urban renewal guided by local non-profit organisations. Their intervention, while being participated by the local population, does not come without power relations and becomes a way of redefining, based on moral standards what is appropriate, legal, beautiful, in need of renewal and what is not.

The third element that I take from Newman is, ultimately, the problematisation of the meaning of sustainability and renewal of urban green spaces. The author argues that the early twenty-first-century green turn in urban planning and the narrative of the “ecocity” can facilitate gentrification and exclusionary practices. He explains how in the context of northeast Paris sustainable redevelopment has taken the character of a civilisation-based project:

Tensions that run across ethnic, class, and gendered lines are particularly visible in the Jardins d'Éole: when the city itself (and not merely the park) is viewed as a “project”, the stakes behind the political life of even small green spaces such as this one become quite visible. (Newman 2015, 129)

My ethnography speaks to these broader reflections on the premises and implications of greening projects by including the analysis of practices which existed at the Parco Piemonte before and beyond its renewal. In chapter three, I report on the perspective of citizens who remain partially excluded from such process of renewal namely the long-term occupants of the area: spontaneous gardeners and a family of shepherds. I focus on their skills to explain how their forms of “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1968) (such as self-appropriation and itinerant labour) and related knowledge do not find a space for legitimisation in the new configuration of the park. In fact, these do not align with neoliberal visions of the urban space (e.g. Guano 2020) nor with the production of hegemonic images of urban sustainability. This chapter of the dissertation contributes to its overall aim by emphasising the linkages between new practices of urban renewal (and gentrification), widespread understandings of civic engagement at its basis and problematising hegemonic visions of urban greening and sustainability.