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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 2.**Working at the food market. Austerity,
labour precarity and engagement at the
marketplace**

Introduction

In the previous part of the thesis, I discussed the issue of transforming urban space in Turin, its renewal and changing occupants starting from the case of a public green area. I highlighted how urban renewal is interrelated with changing notions of citizenship, sustainability and welfare. In this second part of the dissertation, I continue to discuss these transformations, proposing further reflections based on my ethnographic investigations at open-air food markets. As I will highlight next, markets represent interesting entry points to add to the discussion and look more specifically into other complex forms of labour precarity and citizens engagement.

Contemporary food markets around the world have been studied by many anthropologists (e.g. Gell 1982; Bestor 2004; Black 2012). These scholars often focus on interactions at the marketplace and, among these, Black (2012) specifically investigated the market of Porta Palazzo in Turin. The author analysed the market as a space of social exchange, in a context of decreasing urban social spaces and social life (Black 2012). Scholars who studied food markets in relation to urban transformations and civic engagement often focused on farmers markets and quality food: their work is to be contextualised as part of the literature on the (re)establishment of direct relations between producers and consumers (e.g. Bubinas 2011), ethical consumption (e.g. Orlando 2012), and farmers' movements against neoliberal agendas (e.g. Leslie 2017). Authors such as Bubinas (2011) have approached the civic and political dimension of farmers markets from the perspective of consumer behaviour. The scholar argued that farmers markets in the U.S can be analysed as sites where middle-class citizens build on their consumer power to develop new, class-based economic behaviours and form a community. Among others, Leslie (2017) investigated farmers markets and the ways in which related practices and regulations both challenge and reproduce elements of neoliberal ideologies in Argentina. In the Italian context, an example of anthropological work in this sense is the recent research *The Peasant Activism Project* (2016-2018), which is an ethnographic study of neo-rural activism. Going beyond farmers markets, it investigated forms of political activism related to local food production and food sovereignty (The Peasant Activism Project n.d.).

In these scholarly works, the emphasis is put on farmers markets, local food activism and social movements. This can make them class-biased, as it can be argued about literature on Alternative Food Networks more generally - see for example the critical reflections by Guthman (2008), Orlando (2012) and Tregear (2011). Moreover, markets' civic and political significance is most often approached in relation to (what are regarded as) innovative, sustainable and activist-like forms of engagement (*the Peasant Activism Project* being a good exemplification of such approach). While this body of research provides important analyses of grassroots movements around food and new marketplaces, it also tends to overlook what happens within and around more conventional food markets. I use the term conventional to refer to the official open-air food markets which mostly occupy Italian (but not only) urban landscapes. These revolve around the work and organisation of vendors, who resell fresh products purchased through wholesalers often procuring food from the national or global market.

In Turin, these markets are called neighbourhood markets (*mercati rionali*) and these corresponded to a total number of 33 markets (as per 2015), open daily all around the city (Mangiardi and Altamura 2015). While the continuation of such markets is partly jeopardised by demographic and habit changes, the economic crisis, competition of supermarkets and high-quality food stores, these continue to play an important role in the urban (food) landscape⁵⁵. I will show how, by analysing these sites in relation to the following questions: how can conventional open-air food markets be regarded as urban spaces in transformation? What are the shapes of labour, civic engagement and contestation in these spaces? What processes of citizens (trans)formation can occur in such environments? What can the analysis of everyday life at these markets reveal about urban renewal, recession and austerity, diversity and marginalisation?

Chapter four revolves around the market of Piazza Foroni and my participant observation as helper of a market vendor in that context.

⁵⁵ Information based on five in-depth interviews with market vendors, participant observation and informal conversations at open-air food markets. These issues are also pointed out in news articles such as Coccorese (2013). I did not find any scholarly literature on the recent trends of these markets.

Piazza Foroni is situated in Barriera di Milano, which is a neighbourhood discussed in the literature as an urban ‘emiphery’ meaning “geographically close to the city centre, but at the same time marginal and far away from the social and public representations standpoints” (Ciampolini (2007) in Cingolani 2018, 95, translation is my own). Focusing on the perspective of long-term market vendors, I present the market life in relation to the history of immigration in the area as well as its current transformations, among which the impacts of the economic crisis and the globalised market economy. I discuss some of Piazza Foroni vendors’ diverse background and experiences as well as their collective organisation and engagement in local social activities and forms of political contestation. I mainly connect my investigation with Susana Narotzky (2020)’s anthropological analyses of “ordinary people” in Southern Europe and their ways of making a living under economic recession and austerity.

Chapter five discusses the case of an initiative for food surplus collection and free redistribution at open-air food markets, coordinated by a non-profit organisation called Eco dalle Città. I particularly focus on the case of asylum seekers and refugees involved in these activities as workers and volunteers at the markets of Porta Palazzo and Via Porpora, situated in the neighbourhoods Aurora and Barriera di Milano, respectively. I contextualise their experiences as part of socio-cultural interactions that characterise these diverse and low-income neighbourhoods at the intersection between unemployment, austerity, the promises of urban renewal and risks of gentrification. I also delve into the organisation of Eco dalle Città activities: I report on the workers and volunteers’ different perspectives on labour, and on the (power) relations between asylum seekers, the project manager and Italian workers. I explain why these linkages reflect complex dynamics. As part of these, the idea of urban dwellers’ deservingness of rights is entangled with structural racial disparities and precarious working conditions. I mainly build on the work of Aihwa Ong (2003) and her conceptualisation of “deserving citizenship” which reveals how such initiatives also include a moral production of deserving citizen-subjects.

Based on two very different cases and perspectives, these two chapters are interconnected by their attention to labour, most often in its most

precarious forms, and the analysis of the context-specific meanings of diversity and austerity, based on these research participants' everyday life. Labour (and related conditions, rights, commitments, challenges, opportunities) being one of the most recurring themes emerging from the fieldwork, it also became a particular lens through which I analyse everyday life at the market but also problematise the actual sustainability of non-profit operations in the social and environmental realms. Moreover, both chapters describe disparate forms of civic and political engagement at the marketplace. In continuity with the previous part of the dissertation, this second part highlights a series of interconnections between urban renewal and transforming citizens' practices and sociality.