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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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Summary

This dissertation takes the reader around different Collective Food Procurement networks in Turin (Italy). It discusses the case of urban gardens (part one), open-air food markets (part two) and food aid initiatives (part three). In the different chapters, I analyse related sites, people, practices and narratives and I call for diversifying our outlooks on urban peripheral areas and moving away from incautious optimism around widespread understandings of urban renewal and sustainability.

To critically engage with these themes, I focus on civic engagement and morality, which represent red threads throughout the text. In particular, I highlight continuities between urban transformations and changing notions of civic engagement. As revealed through several examples, Turin urban renewal interventions occurred through the circulation of new understandings of the role of citizens and related practices, such as volunteerism. Engagement often happened thanks to the intermediation of non-profit organisations. I argued that these forms of mediated engagement should be problematised in relation to the way in which they might silence discontent, exclude marginalised practices and limit citizens' possibilities to be part of actual decision-making, ownership and governance processes. I use morality as a common denominator to investigate the similarities and differences between the various cases - and examine their linkages with broader processes such as welfare reconfiguration, precarious labour and gentrification. I highlight how, through morality, certain working cultures, such as low remuneration as part of the non-profit sector, are justified - and became interrelated with contemporary understandings of urban sustainability. In this way, practices considered as sustainable might be embedded in mechanisms of discrimination, dismantlement of the welfare state, dependency from private funding and reinforce a shift away from a right-based approach to the city and welfare provision.

This dissertation builds on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2019 and 2020. The fieldwork was based on longitudinal, native language and multimodal ethnography, following the methodological framework of the project "Food citizens? Collective Food Procurement in European Cities: Solidarity and Diversity, Skills

and Scale” (2017-2022). Through participant observation, I followed closely and, in most cases, became part (as a participant, volunteer or collaborator) of eleven collective food procurement networks. The research output included fieldwork notes, fortnightly field reports, 75 semi-structured interviews, mostly audio recorded, as well as the (co)production of audio-visual material such as cultural maps and a considerable amount of video footages and photos.

In the first section of the dissertation, I discuss the transforming management and use of a peri-urban green area called Parco Piemonte (Mirafiori Sud neighbourhood) – and, in particular, the development of an urban gardening project called Orti Generali (General Gardens) led by the non-profit organisation Coefficiente Clorofilla. The transformation of the area represented a privileged arena to study 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. In chapter one, I explore the ways in which local inhabitants and workers were directly involved in the transformation of the area. I point to the premises of such participatory approach, which I contextualise as part of a broader genealogy of urban renewal plans in the neighbourhood. I argue that while the new users of the area are key actors of its transformation, their ability to intervene remains confined to limited levels of decision making. In chapter two, I explain about the diverging visions that emerged during 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. 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 errant shepherds. I focus on their skills to explain how their forms of right to the city (such as land self-appropriation and itinerant labour) 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 nor with the production of hegemonic images of urban sustainability.

In the second section of the dissertation, I continue to discuss how urban renewal is interrelated with changing notions of citizenship, sustainability and welfare, proposing further reflections based on my ethnographic investigations at open-air food markets. Markets represent interesting entry points to look more specifically into other complex forms of labour precarity and citizens engagement. Chapter four revolves around the traditional open-air food market of Piazza Foroni (Barriera di Milano neighbourhood). 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 experiences as well as their collective organisation and engagement in local social activities and various forms of political contestation. Chapter five reports on 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 perspectives of asylum seekers and refugees involved in these activities as workers and volunteers in Aurora and Barriera di Milano neighbourhoods. I contextualise their experiences as part of socio-cultural interactions that characterise 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 workers and volunteers' different perspectives on their labour and power relations. As part of the latter, I show how the idea of urban dwellers' deservingness of rights is entangled with structural racial disparities and precarious working conditions.

The third and final part of the dissertation discusses institutional food aid during the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, it examines its premises, organisation, agents and representations. I focus my analysis on the food aid hub which was developed at the Via Agliè community centre (Barriera di Milano neighbourhood). I propose to step back from the normalisation of the Italian welfare mix and the growing role of non-profit organisations in the delivery of social services. In particular, I advance a detailed investigation of the morality upon which it is premised and that it reproduces. In chapter six, I retrace the genealogy of the Via Agliè community centre to unpack the social and cultural

features that brought to a specific set of responses during the pandemic. I also introduce other forms of solidarity that emerged during COVID-19, explaining the various responses to urban poverty and food insecurity that were put in place. Chapter seven explores the functioning of the food aid hub, delving into the description of its materiality such as the food managed and distributed. I discuss decision-making around how to compose the packages, highlighting the ways in which food aid can reproduce a stratification of citizenship. I problematise how the figures of the volunteer and the food recipient were constructed through internal and external accounts of the hub's activities, extending previous discussions around the concept of deservingness. I conclude with an analysis of the evolution of the organisation of food aid at Via Agliè over time and the changing levels of intervention of the municipality.

I conclude that unpacking how people mature their understanding of their rights and duties as citizens and urban dwellers is key to examine contemporary urban transformations. I suggest that it is important to investigate the social, cultural and civic dimensions which create consensus around these processes, and the role of the non-profit sector in this sense. It is important to keep a critical eye on the widespread rhetoric of participation (e.g., but who participates in decision-making and how?), ownership (e.g., who owns and who has access to these renewed spaces?) and the context of the intervention (e.g., meanwhile are public goods and services available, accessible and maintained?). In particular, I suggest to further investigate why these transformations do not generate (if not to limited extent) critical debate or reactions, while they represent open conflicts over resources and space use. Among the many potential reasons, I mention the intermediation of the non-profit sector because, while it holds a vital role in welfare provision, it also reinforces the stratification of citizens. Such stratification occurs through the normalisation of the transition from an entitlement to a need-based approach to welfare. As part of this shift, it becomes increasingly difficult for citizens to reconfigure city space as a right and self-organisation as a potential. At the same time, the presence of the third sector contributes to the invisibilisation of the public administration and its responsibilities in the social realm.