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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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Propositions

The silenced paradoxes of urban renewal.

Morality, welfare reconfiguration and precarious labour in Collective Food Procurement in Turin

by Maria Vasile

1. Citizens' direct engagement in urban renewal initiatives is to be critically analysed as it might involve them (unremunerated) in the transformation work, while confining their ability to intervene to a limited level of decision making. In other words, contemporary forms of citizens engagement, such as volunteering, do not necessarily represent new opportunities for local inhabitants to own urban projects nor forward their right-to-the-city.
2. In Turin, non-profit organisations are central agents of urban renewal and the delivery of services in marginalised urban areas. They fill the gap left by welfare state withdrawal and increasingly represent intermediaries between the public administration and citizens. However, their work is to be problematised as it might reproduce marginalisation, labour precarity, recast people's rights into needs, normalise neoliberal reform from the bottom-up, and contribute to gentrification.
3. Silenced confrontations represent a central dimension of urban renewal processes. While developed in the name of progress and participation, these interventions do not come without power relations and are often charged with a moral redefinition of what is an appropriate citizen behaviour or a beautiful urban space. The moral imperative of renewal contributes to hide differences across local inhabitants' visions, downplay their expectations, attenuate social conflict in all its forms, silence dissent and delegitimise social anger.

4. Sustainability (as forwarded in contemporary urban renewal, greening and local food projects) is often based on hegemonic understandings and images of this notion. Sustainability often goes hand in hand with neoliberal urbanism, urban aestheticization and growing privatisation. It might also further exclude marginalised groups and delegitimise their practices and skills.
5. Food aid can reproduce existing inequalities, among other in terms of access to appropriate food. On one hand, the quality of food distributed reproduces a categorisation of citizens following existing social inequalities. On the other hand, it is through food packages that citizens experience welfare state retrenchment and the normalisation of the conversion of their right-to-food into aid.
6. In the Italian context, during COVID-19 pandemic, the emergency response to the socio-economic crisis highly relied on the intervention of non-profit organisations and volunteers (in continuity with the pre-pandemic approach). This extends the question of “biopower” beyond the state administration and contributes to its invisibilisation behind the non-profit apparatus, making it more complex for citizens to expose their claims and make anyone accountable for their rights.
7. Anthropology is important to read the contradictions and injustices that are often part of contemporary urban planning practices. It can also support the transformation of urban planning in the direction of a more participatory approach by bring class back in the analysis of urban needs as well as account for, appreciate and work with the diversity of visions of urban dwellers.
8. Anthropology offers important tools to conduct comparative research in an innovative manner. In particular, comparing different contexts allows to anchor the researcher’s understanding of the issue at stake in its social, cultural and

political history thus provide in depth explanation of similarities and differences. In this way, differences across case studies become as important as similarities, as they symbolise key entry points for an in depth understanding of a social phenomenon.

9. Visual anthropological analysis can be used to reflect in a comparative manner not only on practices, people and places, but also on the moral apparatus as part of which what we observe is premised and which it reproduces. Among other, visual analysis can enrich our understanding of changing notions of civic participation and allows for comparison starting from their materiality and details up.
10. “Anthropology at home” does not automatically imply that the researcher can have an insider status in the field. Shared national origins and language does not say anything about differences in conditions and privileges. Reflexivity (and paying attention to research participants’ perceptions of the researcher and their relations) is key to critically account for the role of the anthropologist and its contributions.