



QUADERNI

#13 Anti-gentrification nelle città (Sud) Europee

Anti-gentrification in (Southern) European cities

Edited by Sandra Annunziata
Commentary by Loretta Lees

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**Anti-gentrification
nelle città (Sud) Europee**
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Nodi teorici ed epistemologici

Theoretical and
epistemological challenges



Resisting Gentrification: the case for Diversity

Resistenze alla Gentrificazione: note sulla Diversità

@ Lidia Katia
Consiglia Manzo |

Planetary
gentrification |
Resistance |
Urban diversity |

Gentrificazione
planetaria |
Pratiche di
resistenza |
Diversità urbana |

La predilezione per spazi urbani caratterizzati da “diversità urbana” è sempre stata un segno distintivo della gentrificazione. Questo paper esplora questo aspetto e mette in evidenza come le pratiche di resistenza alla gentrificazione che sostengono una versione idealizzata della ‘diversità urbana’ non siano necessariamente inclusive dal punto di vista socio-economico di chi le pratica, né producono tolleranza. Infatti, proprio quell’ambigua coalescenza tra produzione e consumo della diversità mentre ci fa assistere ad un miglioramento del pluralismo urbano, molto spesso può dare origine ad una molteplicità di interessi ed obiettivi contrastanti. Una lettura, questa, che si inserisce in un quadro di ricerca urbana interessata ad analizzare criticamente gli effetti della diversità sullo sviluppo dei processi di gentrificazione e sugli esiti delle sue pratiche di resistenza. Nel caso di Milano gli imprenditori cinesi sono stati in grado di passare dall’essere “dominati” dalle politiche revanchiste del governo locale ad essere gli attori “dominanti” nel processo di rigenerazione di un quartiere multietnico mercificato, avvalorando la tesi che gli interessi o lo stile di vita di un gruppo sociale non dovrebbero essere favoriti semplicemente perché si trovano in una posizione svantaggiata o marginalizzata. Da qui la necessità di porre sotto osservazione eventuali processi di espulsione a carico di altri gruppi sociali. Le conclusioni sottolineano esattamente questa ambiguità della diversità, che se da un lato caratterizza il fascino urbano, ne favorisce la creatività, generando tolleranza, dall’altro può comprometterne la democrazia, quando gli interessi corporativi trascendono quelli per il bene comune.

The articles result from the editor suggestion of exploring the limits, ambiguities, and power of resistance to gentrification and anti-displacement practices in Southern European cities. In this contribution, I will elaborate on this debate by examining the specific role of urban diversity in redefining inclusion and exclusion in contemporary cities experiencing urban revitalization. The endorsement of diversity has always been a hallmark of gentrification that reveals gentrifiers’ lifestyle in terms of “distinctive” (Bourdieu 1984) consumption habits and cultural patterns (Zukin 1982; Ley 1996; Lloyd 2006). Thus, my view is that practices of resistance that advocate for an idealized version of urban diversity *per se* do not produce socio-economic



Fig.1 Via Sarpi during the Chinese riot of 2007. Source: author.

inclusiveness and tolerance. Rather, it is the ambiguous coalescence between the production and the consumption of diversity (Fainstein 2005; Manzo 2016) that, while enhancing a diverse plurality of dwellers, can give rise to a plurality of interests and goals that are often in conflict.

Meanings and Implications of Diversity in Southern Europe

Ensuring diversity within society, the economy, and the built environment has become a major planning and policy goal of state-led interventions in many countries in Western Europe and North America. Diversity is considered the key to stimulating growth and achieving equity. However, this contemporary trend certainly does not support Jane Jacobs' vision of a "close-grained diversity of uses" (1961, p.14) to nurture great social interaction and support cities created, first and foremost, for people. On the contrary, the scale and scope of current market developments is driving cities towards "blueprints" (Lees et al. 2016, p.111), strategic imitations resulting from "impulses within the global economy" (Fainstein 2005, p.6) that undermine the local idea of a diverse urban milieu. Although "planning for difference" is acknowledged as essential to promote social cohesion rather than fragmentation, as Burayidi asserts, "this fibre of inclusion has yet to weave its way into every fabric of planning practice" (2015, p.4) in creating the just city.

In gentrification research, diversity is context-dependent (Maloutas 2012), holding different meanings depending on different political frameworks. For example, in North America, diversity today refers to a touristic, multicultural, urban village. The same term in Western European cities continues to be used to describe "undesirable" ghettos or stigmatized enclaves (Slater 2017). According to Zukin et al., "a strong 'ethnic' or 'immigrant' presence in Europe is feared as a sign of fragmentation or even 'ghettoization' which the state feels responsible to prevent" (2015, p.200). Despite having become rapidly more diverse, Southern European cities continue to be less segregated than Northern European ones¹ (Musterd 2005; Arbaci 2008).

1 Which takes the structural differences of southern and western societies as explanatory factors.



Fig.2_ *Via Sarpi during the Chinese riot of 2007. Source: author.*

In Southern European cities, urban dwellers experience diversity every day on local shopping streets: a “global urban habitat where differences of language and culture are seen, heard, smelled, felt, and certainly tasted” (Zukin et al. 2015, p.1). Ethnically distinct shopping streets provide a window into the globalization and commercialization of local communities – where the diversity they produce becomes local attractions. The reciprocity between gentrification, diversity, and the territorialization of difference is undermined by changes in lifestyles, commerce, culture, and resistance to these changes. Diversity tied to multi-ethnicity can be understood as a “spectacle” for consumption tied to celebrations and festivals that are easily marketable.

As an activist-scholar I have been engaged in ethnographic research within the multiethnic community of Milan Chinatown after the 2007 riots in response to revanchist tactics (Smith 1996) that have been informing urban renewal policies “against minorities,” in ethnically diverse neighborhoods of the city (Manzo 2012; Verga 2016). The 2007 riot (figures 1 and 2) was the Chinese entrepreneurs’ response to the “zero tolerance” municipal policies that were adopted to discourage the development of Chinese commerce and promote the speculative urban renewal of the neighborhood. Following the rebellion, I produced an ethnographic documentary with the community (and for the community) to “challenge consolidated social imaginaries and define a counter narrative to the hegemonic idea of urban living” (Annunziata & Rivas-Alonso in press; see also Lees & Ferreri 2016 on counter-narratives).

At the time, in 2008, this practice was understood to be a channel of resistance where both ethnic entrepreneurs and Italian residents collectively produced public space to avert the threat of embryonic gentrification (Manzo 2017). The case of Milan Chinatown and its main shopping street *via Sarpi* is a focal point of this discussion. In the nine years between 2007 and 2016, I observed the fundamental conflation between anti-gentrifica-



Fig.3 *The pedestrianisation of via Sarpi in Milan Chinatown, November 2014. Source: Cecilia Chiarini.*

tion practices rooted in the value of diversity and the use of diversity as a new form of “commodification of the culture of resistance” (Naegler 2012, p.157). Direct regulation – the implementation of a pedestrian-only zone – and indirect regulation – delivery regulations that targeted a specific type of commerce – were used by the local government as planning tools to re-develop via Sarpi and ‘sweep away the undesirable’ Chinese entrepreneurs from the neighborhood. The gentrification strategy of the city government, in fact, promoted “good quality” Chinese shops and restaurants to attract a ‘desired diversity’ of residents and users of via Sarpi. However, in the attempt to upgrade their shops and resist commercial displacement, Chinese entrepreneurs played a key role in the multi-ethnic ‘aestheticization’ of the Chinatown. Driven by the commodification of ethno-cultural diversity, via

Sarpi became an increasingly attractive place for the creative and entertainment industries. The commercial recovery of the area improved the visibility of the neighborhood, as one storeowner noted:

Now people come here also because it is an innovative place, for the fact that it is a 'Chinatown'.

Neighborhood entrepreneurs have driven the commodification of diversity in the production of a new image of the neighborhood (figure 2). The neighborhood's image is now tied to the consumption of diversity, creativity and entertainment:

The goal is not only to improve the street and give it a commercial vestige that is more in sync with Expo 2015 but also to launch the entire area that will very soon become a strategic pole (Sarpidoc entrepreneurial committee member).

However, the tempestuous intersection of such practices with the economic and political interests of investors and local authorities have driven the displacement of small established, local, Italian-owned businesses that did not "fit" the leisure economy, putting pressure on the habits of long-term residents. New tensions and forms of displacement could emerge from the process of commodification that would reinforce the uneven development that gentrification implies. Interestingly, the non-direct practices of resistance produced by Chinese entrepreneurs (in the business capacity) that mitigated the displacement of ethnic commercial activities become increasingly sanitized. In the last nine years, in fact, the anti-revanchist political outlet of the riot lost its subversive power, blurring into a commodified form of resistance ready to be incorporated into the last wave of gentrification of Milan Chinatown.

Critical urban research involves examining the effects of diversity on the development of gentrification processes rather than simply assuming that the results of its practices of resistance will be beneficial. According to Tissot, gentrifiers' endorsement of diversity is ambivalent, as their exclusionary practices of distinction go hand in hand with tolerant perspectives and policy efforts.

"Gentrifiers not only claim to be open, they try to implement their values notably by socializing newcomers to diversity and promoting a 'good neighbor' ethos that they hope can generate peaceful relations among different groups. But this commitment to diversity is intrinsically linked to the gentrifiers' capacity to control it" (2014, p.1192).

In particular, gentrifiers desire for diversity (Annunziata & Manzo 2013) in mixed communities (Bridge et al. 2012) is indicative of a changing mechanism of domination in which gentrifiers have a "limited and controlled proportion of 'others' in their residential area. 'Diversity' epitomizes a new kind of social distinction, which does not rely on segregation between homogeneous residential areas, but on strict control of spatial mixing within residential areas" (Tissot 2014, p.1193). Controlling diversity is one way of reducing what wealthy gentrifiers may view as the frightening dimension of "otherness."

Conclusions

Ambiguities exist in both the production and consumption of diversity in the process of gentrification and resistance. The ambiguities of diversity therefore involve “the conflation of social inclusion with economic competitiveness” (Fainstein 2005, p.12). When diversity is commodified by making space for more high-end shops and celebrating them on a symbolic level, as in the case of Milan Chinatown, we risk to neglect “the real social diversity on the ground that needs a different approach and sensitivity” (Zukin et al. 2015, p.122). We must be critical in our acts of resistance, especially when we can take into account the temporalities of gentrification processes. According to Annunziata and Rivas (in press), time is a crucial variable for the dynamics of resistance. One must understand the evolution across time of the positions that different actors take and the narratives they draw.

The interests or lifestyle of a group should not be favored simply because it is at a disadvantage. This occurred in Milan, where Chinese entrepreneurs were able to move from being dominated by the revanchist policies of the local government to being the dominant actors in the rise of a “commodified” multiethnic neighborhood. Understanding the implications of diversity is necessary to investigate if a “multicultural” approach would eventually displace other groups, or if an intergroup coalition would organize to combat displacement (see Annunziata & Lees 2016 on interclass forms of resistance to gentrification in Southern Europe). This is exactly how the ambiguity of diversity emerges: on the one hand it defines urban appeal, fosters creativity, and breeds tolerance, while on the other hand, it can undermine democracy if individuals’ loyalty to group interests or symbols is greater than their interest in the common good.

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