Contested areas: Coexistence, conflict and governance in the districts near the railway stations of Padua and Mestre (North-eastern Italy)

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Abstract

Certain trends underway in our cities today are particularly evident in areas near railway stations, including: an increasing social complexity, and ethnic and cultural diversity; social fragmentation; growing social exclusion; and the construction of material and symbolic boundaries between different social groups. The present article analyses these aspects by comparing the neighbourhoods around the railway stations of two cities in north-eastern Italy (Padua and Mestre – the latter is part of the municipality of Venice). The study investigates the problems experienced by the various urban populations in these areas, the reasons for the conflicts between them, and the actions taken by various public and private bodies mobilised to improve the quality of life in these districts. Adopting a critical criminological approach, the article deconstructs the dominant narratives describing petty crime as the biggest problem of this type of neighbourhoods, and delves into the actual consequences of 'zero tolerance' local policies and those which, on the contrary, seek to move in an inclusive direction.

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Introduction: global dynamics and urban fallout

Cities have always been places where strangers and all sorts of people rub shoulders with one another. Being poles of attraction for individuals and groups in search of opportunities makes them ideal places for the coexistence of people coming from different social and cultural backgrounds, with different life experiences behind them (Turnaturi, 2005; Simmel, 1998). But processes underway in recent decades have tended to alter this coexistence of different people, who are increasingly at risk of no longer living side by side, but on separate islands with no bridges linking them together.

This tendency derives from changes that have been taking place in western society ever since the second half of the 1970s, and attributable to the ongoing processes of globalisation, a phenomenon accompanied by a marked increase in international migratory movements. Since the turn of the new millennium, virtually every developed nation in the world has become a country of immigration (Massey, 2002). The migratory flows of the last 30 years have evolved not only in quantitative, but also in qualitative terms, with an increase in such elements of differentiation as country of origin, gender, generation, human capital, social status, and occupational skills. This adds to the complexity of society in a manner hitherto unknown, even to the point of inducing some well-known scholars to speak of the advent of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec, 2007), and of a 'land of strangers' (Amin, 2012).

Globalisation also coincides with increasing levels of social exclusion and polarisation. The acceleration of modern capitalism and the fiscal crisis of the welfare state model have given rise to a dramatic increase in the inequalities in the distribution of incomes and assets in every industrialised country, and especially in the UK and the USA (Piketty, 2013). Starting in the 1990s, the gradual dismantling of the welfare state has also coincided almost everywhere with an unprecedented growth in states' investment in their apparatuses of repression, a process that Loïc Wacquant describes as the passage from a social state to a penal state (Wacquant, 1999). The State is no longer able to fully exert its sovereignty over economic dynamics, which have become global, so it restricts itself to maintaining conditions of 'law and order' functional to the reproduction of capital, and to legitimising the current mechanisms for the distribution of wealth (Bauman, 1998; Re, 2001; Sim, 2009; Bell, 2011). It is precisely due to the pruning back of social support programmes that once partially abated the very worst forms of hardship, poverty and social conflict that the main focus of institutional policies has been shifting from the fight

against insecurity (i.e. against the conditions that threaten social and economic security) to the fight against *unsafety* (i.e. the insecurity triggered by criminality).[3] The political emergence of the demand for safety against criminality, and the extensive criminalisation of poverty (Wacquant, 2009) are structurally related to the governance of new processes of social exclusion, becoming the most effective way to 'naturalise' the imposition of new social models of exclusion (Pavarini, 2006).

In most countries of the western world, these new theoretical approaches to the management of deviance and criminality have been translated into 'zero tolerance' policies, based on the repression of a behaviour that, though not a crime (or only a minor offence), is considered undesirable and gives citizens the impression of living in a degraded environment. The repressive actions have consequently focused on beggars who make a nuisance of themselves, streetwalkers, drunks and drug addicts who hang out in public places, the homeless, and so on. Furthermore, the spread of so-called 'actuarial justice', that employs concepts and methods similar to actuarial mathematics to evaluate risk and dangerousness of offenders (Robert, 2005), such as 'racial profiling', may lead to an increasing criminalisation of populations that have already been criminalised: the assumption that, within a certain population, the likelihood of catching offenders will be higher, will lead to increasing sections of that population being arrested, convicted and detained, a phenomenon that Bernard Harcourt (2007) calls a 'ratchet effect'.

The repercussions of the global changes briefly outlined above are having visible effects on urban life, posing new challenges for those responsible for governing our cities. Now that it is no longer possible to confine otherness to faraway places, or to reabsorb within the social body those individuals who, within today's 'exclusive society' (Young, 1999), are considered permanently 'wasted lives' (Bauman, 2004), we are seeing that the impossibility of keeping the marginalised and the 'different' out of urban city centers is prompting the construction of material and symbolic walls within the city to defend its inhabitants from the threat, or supposed threat, posed by such people (Bauman, 2005). The tendency underway in western cities – and especially in the United States (where we often see the most extreme version of tendencies that are

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[3] We refer here to Bauman's well-known tripartite interpretation (1999) of the concept of 'security': the Polish sociologist distinguishes between *certainty* (security of a cognitive type, which has to do with the predictability and intelligibility of the surrounding environment and our place in it)*, security* (that has to do with each individual's social and occupational condition, and depends on the stability and reliability of their world), and *safety* (a physical type of security that relates to the threat to an individual's person and possessions).

visible in Europe too) – is to organise the urban space according to a genuine 'ecology of fear' (Davis, 1998), dividing it into ghettos for the poor and 'gated communities' for the rich (Hyra, 2008). As the universal dimension of the public space is eroded, it comes to be perceived as a dangerous place where people passing through are assumed to be hostile simply because they are unfamiliar. Immigrants and the marginalised are held responsible for much of the sense of insecurity generated by the structural changes underway in our society, facilitated by the criminalisation and stigmatisation of migrants in the political public debate and in the media (Maneri, 2013), and our suspicion of and hostility towards criminal 'others' becomes increasingly intensified (Pratt, 2002).

These dynamics are typical of modern cities, but are somehow exacerbated in districts near railway stations. The areas around the station of any medium-to-large city often have much the same characteristics: a strategic position in terms of the local communication and transport routes, large flows of people in transit, and the availability of certain low-threshold services. Hence the usually sizeable presence (and visibility in the public spaces) of migrants, social drop-outs, and more or less blatant drug-dealing and/or streetwalking activities. These areas are often described by the local media as 'degraded' and unsafe, and it is not unusual for episodes of urban conflict to occur due to the concomitant presence of social groups with contrasting needs (regarding the usage of these public spaces, for instance). Focussing our research on these particular areas makes it easy to identify tendencies and problems that affect western society generally (albeit less severely), such as the resident population's growing complexity and diversity in terms of their country of origin, social status and lifestyles, increasing social exclusion, the fragmentation of society, and the construction of material and symbolic boundaries between different groups.

For the study presented here,[4] we judged it interesting to analyse two districts containing the railway stations of two different cities, Padua and

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[4] This article summarises the main findings of a research project entitled *La partecipazione di autoctoni e migranti alla vita della città come fattore di sicurezza urbana: due casi studio nei Comuni di Padova e Venezia* [Participation of the autochthonous and immigrant populations in city life as a factor of urban security: two case studies in the municipalities of Padua and Venice], designed and conducted by Claudia Mantovan and presented by Prof. Giuseppe Mosconi for a competition for projects of excellence 2009/2010 organised by the Fondazione Cariparo, which selected and funded the project. The research was conducted from January 2011 to January 2014, based on a composite method: review of background data on the districts under analysis; press review of the daily newspapers *Il Mattino di Padova* and *La Nuova Venezia*; ethnographic observation in the public spaces and retail shops in the districts; 50 semi-structured interviews with politicians, spokes-people from the citizens' committees, exponents of the autochthonous associations and cooperatives, and of the

Mestre.[5] To be more precise, in Padua we considered the *Stazione* and *Arcella* urban units, and in Mestre the so-called 'Piave district'. The areas considered in the two case studies lie less than 40 km apart in north-eastern Italy, and have numerous elements in common, particularly regarding the rapid demographic changes that have taken place in the last 20 years, and the problems reported by residents and traders. Some interesting differences emerge between them, however; one of these concerns the profoundly different approaches taken by their local authorities in an effort to deal with the problems of these 'critical' districts, even though the two administrations shared the same political orientation (at the time of our study, they were both administered by the center-left).

This research project was inspired by a critical criminological approach as it adopted a deconstructionist methodology which also takes into account the dimension of power. According to Alessandro Baratta, 'when, besides the dimension of "definition", the dimension of "power" is sufficiently developed, the minimum conditions in order to qualify as "critical" a theory of deviance and criminology are realised' (Baratta, 1991: 55, *my translation*). The focus on the dimension of power is also central to critical urban theory, that 'emphasizes the politically and ideologically mediated, socially contested and therefore malleable character of urban space – that is, its continual (re)construction as a site, medium and outcome of historically specific relations of social power' (Brenner, 2009: 198). This methodological approach resulted in the adoption of a multidimensional analysis model that, on one hand, analysed the neighbourhoods near the railway stations of Padua and Mestre in relation to economic and political dynamics at a higher territorial level (such as the reflections on the urban repercussions of global phenomena, described above, show). On the other hand, this study looked to the city as a 'result of collective action and constant transformation, a city whose evolution is produced by alliances, conflicts, active networks of individuals and their contending interests' (Ruggiero, 2000: 8, *my translation*). This has led to an analysis of 'urban security' reconstructing which social actors foment the 'securitarian alarm' and why, and a demonstration of the real effects of local policies inspired by 'zero tolerance' (i.e. their being harmful to the 'security' they claim to protect).

More in detail, this study aimed mainly to analyse:

associations of immigrants; analysis of the documentation produced by the local administrations, district councils and other organizations considered. The full results of the research were published in Mantovan and Ostanel, 2015.
[5] Mestre forms part of the municipality of Venice but, unlike the islands of the city's historical centre, it is on the mainland.

1. the problems encountered by the different urban populations living in the areas examined (residents, workers, and people who neither live nor work in the district, but who frequently visit its public spaces) and the reasons for any conflict between them. This part of the research shows that simply representing these neighborhoods as unsafe conceals a situation where the problems experienced by residents and shop-owners are much more complex and diverse than the mere presence of crime: factors such as environmental and social incivility, low levels of interpersonal and institutional trust, and the poor quality of the urban spaces are very important in exacerbating the perception of insecurity;

2. the action taken in the districts (be it organic or only extemporaneous) by the various actors mobilised to improve the quality of life in the area, i.e. local authorities, non-profit and profit-making organisations, immigrants' associations, and citizens' committees. In addition to the content of their interventions, we also analysed whether their schemes were implemented separately or coordinated by any of the various actors involved, for which reasons, and with what results. This part of the analysis highlights the importance of a local authority that guides, coordinates and orients the efforts made towards the goal of an inclusive city, where the rights of all its inhabitants are protected.

The first aspect is discussed in section 2, the second in sections 3 and 4, then some conclusions are drawn in section 5.

Deconstructing the protest against the districts' 'urban decay': the multi-dimensionality of the problems experienced by residents and traders

In both case studies, some of the residents and traders complained that their districts had become unsafe and 'degraded'. This malcontent has prompted the creation of *comitati di cittadini* (citizens' committees), which protest against what they see as the deterioration of their area; they feel abandoned by their institutions, and the media describe their districts in horrific terms as an epicentre of criminal activity. Such forms of resident mobilisation, which have increased considerably in Italy since the 1990s – focusing especially on issues of safety and the environment (Della Porta, 2004) – are partly due to the decline of the traditional channels of social and political representation and mediation

affecting the country as a whole.[6] As mentioned in the introduction, the 'safety' issue is the way in which society today interprets the problems deriving from the changes underway as a consequence of globalisation and the welfare policy crisis (Pavarini, 2006), and current trends of social control see growing public participation in the process of punishment (Pratt, 2002). In Italy, the decline of politics has led to it gradually being substituted by a 'moralist' type of logic, a debate in which a confrontation between the 'good guys' (those who portray themselves as honest and law-abiding) and the 'bad guys' (those who are depicted as deviants and criminals) has replaced the conflict between the social classes (Pitch, 2013). The creation of residents' committees to protest against the micro-criminality on their streets thus becomes a way to attract the attention of the local administrators – especially since the introduction of direct elections for Italy's local mayors in 1993, which has led to citizens making increasing demands on them.

If we analyse the problems raised by the people interviewed for our study in more depth, it soon becomes clear that they have very little to do with criminality proper. Instead, they tend to confirm the importance of factors identified in the relevant sociological literature as being related to the perception of insecurity. Among such factors, what stand out are so-called 'environmental and social incivilities' (Chiesi, 2004: 130): what people complain about most is the presence of individuals perceived as deviant in relation to their own standards for the care and maintenance of public spaces, and the coexistence of people using them. The residents object to noisy groups of people sitting and drinking beer on the pavements, abandoning their rubbish on the ground, relieving themselves in public, begging, sleeping in doorways or shadowy corners, and so on. The people we interviewed complained about phenomena of genuine micro criminality too (streetwalking, drug dealing), not because they saw them as a source of real physical or economic danger to themselves, but because they listed them among the previously-mentioned 'undesirable' types of behaviour. It is worth mentioning at this point that none of the committee members interviewed had personally been the victims of any criminal actions in their districts; and they said that their own area was actually

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[6] As Agostino Perillo notes, beginning in the 1990s there has been a semantic shift within the Italian language and culture, where the meaning of *degrado* (urban decay) begins to move away from an architectural-urban planning sphere to a socio-political one. These are the years when newly formed anti-immigrant citizen groups, as well as the new, openly xenophobic political party *Lega Nord*, focus on immigrants the brunt of their political protest, as the period known as the First Republic winds to a tumultuous close (Petrillo, 2013).

not as dangerous as the local media claimed, or as it seemed to their acquaintances who lived elsewhere.

Another important element that emerged among the problems reported by residents and traders was the poor quality of urban space. Both the areas analysed have a high density of residential and other buildings that have saturated the physical space, leaving little room for people to meet and socialise. This is particularly true of Arcella in Padua, a district described as 'claustrophobic', where the lack of public spaces where young people (and immigrants in particular) might meet is the reason why some spaces are put to a variety of uses (like the car park outside a supermarket used as a skate park). This increases the young immigrants' visibility in the district, however, and their perception as a 'disturbing' presence, adding to the original residents' sense of insecurity, especially among the elderly, who are particularly numerous in the districts analysed, in both Padua and Mestre (they account for about one-third of the resident indigenous population).

The areas analysed also suffer from a lack of trust in the institutions and from weak social relations, additional factors that have a bearing on how secure people feel. As regards the institutions, there is evidence of a generalised perception that the local authority is inactive and/or inefficient in dealing with the problems that the locals experience on a daily basis. As for social relations, the two districts analysed are profoundly fragmented, highly heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, age group and social class, with a rapid turnover of residents. These features give rise to a sort of 'mosaic' of groups and spaces, often consisting of 'tiles' that are spatially juxtaposed but disconnected from one another in relational and communicational terms. The physical proximity of different social classes or groups does not necessarily reduce their social distance, and it may even dilate the gap between them (Chamboredon and Lemaire, 1970). It is not enough to be neighbours in order to establish relations, unless they are based on a common identity, and this also depends on people's occupations, family ties, geographical origins, or economic relationships that can be shared and serve as a reference, because 'there is nothing more intolerable than the physical proximity (experienced as promiscuity) of people who are socially very separate' (Bourdieu, 1993: 259, *my translation*).

Particularly when it comes to places for socialising, we find evidence in our two case studies of a 'rupture' between the original residents and workers on the one hand and the immigrant residents, workers and city users on the other. The former withdraw to the private spaces of their own and their friends' homes, and a handful of restaurants and bars. The latter, as mentioned earlier,

occupy the district's public spaces in order to meet, socialise, and exchange information[7]. The original residents' withdrawal into their private spaces is only partly because of the presence of 'undesirables' in the district's public spaces. Rather, it has much to do with the changes in social habits that have characterised Western societies, where free time is increasingly spent in private spaces that often coincide with places of consumption. Moreover, it is tied to the demographic makeup of these neighborhoods, specifically to the fact that a large percentage of residents are senior citizens. Many of the people interviewed also emphasised that these districts lack appropriate meeting places, such as community centres for the elderly.

In the end, we could say that the main factor behind the 'crisis' taking place in these districts, as experienced by some of their inhabitants, can be reduced to powerful processes of change that have overwhelmed them in the last two decades These changes mainly relate to the macro-variables discussed in the first section: the acceleration and globalisation of international migratory movements, and an ever greater social exclusion. As already mentioned, these phenomena are showing their visible effects in our cities, with increasing numbers of migrants arriving from various countries and people living on the margins of society, especially in the parts of the city that afford them more opportunities, such as the areas around the railway stations forming the object of our study. Cities thus provide the stage where the effects of globally-originated changes are enacted (Bauman, 2005), and this poses a major challenge to the city administrations. For a start, they have to respond to calls for the 'removal' of migrants, the marginalised, and 'deviants' from public spaces coming from the members of citizens' committees, who see themselves as the district's legitimate users, entitled to lay down the rules of behaviour for the other urban populations, often simply by virtue of their prolonged presence in the area as residents or traders. These dynamics are not new. The importance of the temporal dimension in processes of community closure, and its use as a symbolic resource in the exclusion of others was already brought to light many years ago by Elias and Scotson (1994). Furthermore, as noted by Alessandro Baratta, 'the power of definition and the possibility of being given a deviant

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[7] It is however important to emphasise that there isn't a strict boundary line between the behaviour of immigrants and those of locals. Immigrants using the public spaces of districts near the railway stations are mainly newcomers and/or have a precarious economic and employment situation. Some immigrant residents and workers that are well-integrated into the social and economic fabric of the town show, during the interviews, a similar attitude to that of many local residents and workers in stigmatising those who frequent the public spaces of the station area.

social status are distributed unequally among individuals and groups, and this inequality corresponds to that in the relations of power and property' (Baratta, 1991: 55, *my translation*). In addition to the temporal dimension, therefore, in interpreting the processes of criminalisation of the persons using the public spaces of these districts by the citizens' committees we must also keep in mind the power differential between these two categories of persons, as members of the committees are Italian citizens who often own a house or some form of business in the neighborhood.

The citizens committees' demands are simply impossible to meet, however, using the means available to city governments alone. This is self-evident, given the 'global' causes behind the phenomena described, as frequently emphasised by the local administrators themselves, and by the exponents of the police forces of the two municipalities, whom we interviewed or heard speak at public meetings. Their explanations have focused on the fact that the type of behavior the citizens complain about is impossible to repress for legal reasons (prostitution is not a crime, Roma people arriving from Romania are EU citizens and entitled to circulate freely, etc.). The authorities often complain that the weapons at their disposal are blunt, and call for changes to the legislation that would enable them to take more appropriate action (such as revisiting the current law on prostitution). Officials have also emphasised that mere situational prevention is not really effective; it only has a 'displacement effect', shifting the problems and the undesirable presences elsewhere, often only temporarily.

It is the pressure exerted by the citizens' committees on the exponents of the local institutions to deal with these problems (an impossible task in many ways) that lies behind the latter's adoption of policies that are often purely 'symbolic' (administrative orders are issued, the police make their presence felt, and so on). Their purpose is merely to provide reassurance, and their declared objective is only to take action on the citizens' 'perceived security'. The effect of such measures is actually counter-productive: as the annual report drawn up by the operators of the *Accoglienza invernale* [winter shelter] project for the homeless in Padua[8] has emphasised, the intensification of the police checks in the area around the city's railway station in recent years has had the effect of making the low-threshold service-providers lose contact with the most needy,

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[8] The *Accoglienza invernale* project, managed on behalf of the City Hall by an association called *Noi - Famiglie padovane contro l'emarginazione e la droga* [Us - Paduan families against marginalisation and drugs], is activated during the winter months in order to supply sleeping quarters to the homeless in city structures.

including undocumented migrants and Roma people, with a negative fallout not only on these people's personal security, but also on the safety of local citizens. It is in nobody's interests, not even of the collectivity at large, to increase the presence of individuals with many problems – including health issues – who find no answers or solutions of any kind. Measures involving an intensification of police presence have completely failed to improve the 'objective' safety of the townspeople, or even their 'perceived' security. The promoters of the citizens' committees that we interviewed said themselves that they sometimes had the opposite effect, raising the sense of social alarm and people's perception of living in a 'state of siege'.

Faced with these same scenarios, the two municipal administrations in Padua and Venice have adopted very different policies. In the next section, we examine in more detail what action they have taken in the two cities, and what effects they have had.

Mestre: a 'kaleidoscope' of schemes coordinated by the local authority

On 19 May 2006, some residents of the Piave district in Mestre called a meeting at the community centre in via Sernaglia to complain about their area's problems. What triggered their concern was the fact that the pedestrian zone in San Francesco square had become a meeting place for people with drug problems, but the issues they discussed were broader, including the rapid demographic and commercial transformation underway in the district as a result of the rising numbers of immigrants. The tone of the meeting was 'inflamed': the citizens protested loudly, calling for a stronger presence of the police in the district.

In response, the local authority tried to enlist these individuals and involve them directly in organising action to deal more constructively with the problems they reported. In particular, the then Alderman for Social Policies appointed the Venice local authority's ETAM *Animazione di Comunità e Territorio* [Community and Territorial Animation] unit to take action in the Piave district. As an ETAM operator explained, entrusting an action of this type to a service that forms part of the local administration is an unusual approach in Italy[9], which makes it possible to take action with greater efficacy and continuity:

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[9] The Italian welfare system is traditionally characterised by a high degree of delegation to third-sector organisations (Caponio, 2005).

> Our service is part of the Venice Local Authority's social policies department. We deal with community animation. Among other things, we promote the citizens' participation in the life of the city […] We're probably the only institutional service concerned with community animation in Italy, which goes to show a particular characteristic… the fact that the Venice local authority decided already at the end of the 1980s to create a service of this type and to make it a permanent part of its staffing plan, with its own educators (R.G., ETAM educator).

What this operator told us confirms the findings of a previous study comparing the work of street educators in Venice and Padua, and that is the fact that, unlike what happens in Padua (and many other Italian municipalities), the work done on the streets of Venice is a service that forms an integral part of a local authority service sector; it is implemented by about 100 educators working for the local authority's various social services. This has several important positive effects, one of which is to ensure the loyalty and autonomy of the operators, and another concerns the continuity of their activities (Butticci *et al.*, 2006).

Soon after the above-mentioned angry meeting, two ETAM educators were assigned to a project for the Piave district that began in 2006 and that might be defined as an 'integrated prevention' scheme, with a distinct focus on community crime prevention programs. The latter contemplate the involvement of area residents in an effort to decrease feelings of insecurity and perceptions of criminality, and encompasses a large variety of measures, of a defensive nature (such as neighborhood watch programmes) or those which are more attentive to the rebuilding of social relationships (Bennett and Graham, 1995). The measures that the City of Venice promoted for the *quartiere* Piave are of the latter kind: consistent with the community animation approach, the ETAM educators promoted activities that were to be organised by small groups of residents. This gave birth to the *Gruppo di lavoro Piave* [Piave working group], which currently has as its spokesperson one of those angry people who had helped to organise that first meeting and became a member of a committee established to protest about the problems in San Francesco square. This working group has chosen to remain informal, and is loosely composed of about 15 people, almost all of them local residents with medium-to-high formal education.

In cooperation with ETAM, the group organises a number of micro-activities and micro-projects that all serve the general purpose of promoting mutual understanding, social harmony and cohesion in the Piave area. The group's

actions range from improving the urban furniture to social animation, to economic regeneration.

At the 'heart' of the measures implemented by the Piave working group and ETAM there are, above all, actions that focus on socio-cultural animation and the promotion of intercultural encounters. In this setting, there have been both one-off projects and schemes that have become a stable and/or regular feature of community life. Among the latter, one of the flagship undertakings is undeniably the multi-ethnic choir *Voci dal Mondo* [Voices of the World] created in 2008 by one of the ETAM educators, and consisting of approximately 50 members from both the local and the immigrant populations. Other activities have become well established too, like the 'barter markets' for children and adolescents up to 13 years old organised every third Saturday afternoon of the month in the San Francesco square pedestrian zone[10], or the *cena di quartiere* [street party], which has been organised in June in the same square for five years now. As for the more extemporaneous community animation schemes, these have been implemented partly by bringing events normally organised elsewhere in the city to the Piave district and, vice versa, by 'taking' the Piave Road into the heart of Mestre, with an artistic installation called *Via Piave in Piazza* set up in Mestre's central Piazza Ferretto, and prepared by Piave Road's commercial businesses.

Another aspect of the complex and multifaceted kaleidoscope of measures for the Piave district concerns the work done on the topic of communication, perceptions and representations, undertaken mainly through the medium of the figurative arts. A periodical entitled *Le voci di via Piave* [Voices of Piave Road], first published in October 2007, aims to challenge the distorted and alarmist pictures of the district painted by the local press, making space for other voices that are usually not represented in the mass media. The periodical also reports on the activities and the public debates organised by the Piave work group, in an effort to 'nurture a new way to think about the Piave Road' (R.Z., ETAM educator). Various public meetings have been organised on the topics of security, and on the changes underway in the district. Several photography exhibitions have been held too, showing old and new citizens of Mestre and the Piave area, also with a view to providing food for thought on the social phenomena underway in the district. This is a crucial area of intervention, partly

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[10] Children bring objects (toys, books, etc.) they no longer use and expose them on tables; other children who visit the market can bring their toys and books and barter them for those of the children organising the market.

because a recent study on coexistence and conflict in districts of immigration showed that the local community's ability to produce coherent narratives about the area in which they live is an important integrating factor. There is

> a specific social capital (proportional to the degree of dynamism and the propensity for cooperation of the political actors and associations in the district) that becomes manifest in the capacity to combat the distorted representations of intergroup relations in the district, and to convey authentic representations successfully, to the townspeople and further afield (Pastore and Ponzo, 2012: 303, *my translation*).

In today's society of communication, this 'narrative autonomy' is 'a key factor of social cohesion' (*ibid*).

The fact that so many coordinated and coherent schemes have been implemented in the Piave district is largely thanks to the local authority's role as 'director' and coordinator, through its ETAM unit. On several occasions during our interviews, the founders of the Piave working group mentioned how important the ETAM unit's support had been to the success of their undertakings.

The action that is being taken in the Piave district has also had an effect on the immigrants' participation (or some of them at least). Consistently with the picture seen elsewhere in Italy (see Mantovan, 2006 and 2013), so too in Mestre, the immigrants have been forming associations, mainly consisting of members of the same nationality. Although it is not easy for them to find the time and the resources they need to spend on their participation, there are nonetheless clear signs of a network of associations of immigrants active in the area, and of the public visibility of several of their leaders, particularly those who cooperate with ETAM and the Piave working group. It is therefore safe to say that one of the effects of the projects begun in the Piave district has been to pinpoint those immigrants with a stronger desire to commit themselves to the territory, to join forces and develop a network, and to emerge on the public stage.

Several exponents of a citizens' committee called *Un impegno per la città* [A commitment to the city] (established in October 2005 by a number of Piave district residents and traders living or working nearest to the railway station to protest against the area's 'degradation') have quite often been involved in activities promoted by the Piave working group. Relations between these two groups of citizens feature a certain degree of ambivalence, and they are sometimes frankly critical of each other. The Piave working group accuses the committee of fomenting alarmism by emphasising only the negative aspects of

the area, and of giving priority to their protest rather than to a more constructive commitment. The committee retaliates, saying that the Piave working group tries to gloss over the district's problems, partly because it works so closely with the local authority. But there are also examples of them interacting and cooperating. In fact, the active presence of the local authority in the district assured by the ETAM has another, crucial function: it builds a bridge between the townspeople and the institutions – an important factor in times like the present, when the former have trouble finding appropriate channels for communicating with the public administrations because of the decline in the traditional mechanisms of mediation and representation (such as the political parties and the trade unions). As mentioned in section 2, and already illustrated in other studies (see Petrillo's investigation on the citizens' committees of the 1990s in Genoa, 2003), the citizens' protests and calls on the police to deal with matters that, strictly speaking, have nothing at all to do with their safety are really a way of voicing their frustration because they feel abandoned by the institutions and lack other, more appropriate references. As mentioned earlier, a loss of trust in the institutions is one of the variables that increases people's perception of insecurity. The work done by the ETAM educators thus also involves listening to the citizens (and especially to those taking a more confrontational stance), making them feel that the institutions take an interest in their needs, and helping them put their problems in the right perspective. It is therefore no coincidence that, as research has shown, the residents' perception of insecurity, and of ineffectiveness/absence of the institutions, though registered in all the neighborhoods studied (see section 2), is a lot lower in Mestre than in Padua. Consequently, the creation of citizen committees that protest against urban blight and against the local government perceived inability to manage the issue, is more prevalent in Padua: in the Piave neighborhood in Mestre there is only one group (the aforementioned *Un impegno per la città*), whereas in the *Stazione* and *Arcella* neighbourhoods in Padua, several have been created, as illustrated immediately below.

Padua: the spontaneous and fragmentary activation of the private social sector

Unlike the situation in Mestre, the local authority governing the city of Padua has, in a sense, preferred to ride the wave of its citizens' discontent. In crucial areas like the districts containing the railway station, it has adopted a policy based on a massive use of administrative orders, and on an intensification of

police presence, even with cooperation from the Army. Other measures for the area around the railway station have focused merely on urban regeneration, while much less attention seems to have been paid to investing in social schemes. If anything, the latter have been even further reduced in recent years: the operators working on the *Accoglienza invernale* project have reported, for instance, that a street education scheme abandoned in 2008, notwithstanding its positive outcomes, has had the effect of reducing the number of people in difficulty being taken into care.

The Paduan administration invests little in social policies and tends to delegate social activities to the third, not-for-profit sector. In doing so, it relinquishes the chance to have a role in coordinating and orienting these activities, and that is why any action taken in Padua to deal with the numerous problems of the areas around the railway station has been scarcely systematic. There is no global project of the kind adopted in Mestre. The local authority has limited itself to acting as a partner in projects promoted by others. It is because of the local institutions' evasion of their responsibilities and/or inefficacy (something that all our interviewees mentioned) that many other actors have become involved in efforts to deal with the problems of the district around the railway station – and with more or less democratic nuances. In other words, there are signs of a number of schemes being implemented by various committees and associations to 'occupy' the public spaces: some have aimed to include all the people gravitating around the station; others have been seen as a sort of 'war' waged against other people to regain possession of the public spaces rather than an effort to improve relations between all the parties concerned. The large-scale project promoted by *Banca Etica* and undertaken by the *Associazione Mimosa*[11] in cooperation with the University of Trieste, which goes by the name of *La città partecipata* [The shared city], was certainly a scheme of the former type. This project consisted in an action research conducted in the square outside Padua's railway station. Alongside *Banca Etica* and the *Associazione Mimosa*, various private and public subjects were partners in the project, including Padua's local authority, the *Confesercenti* (confederation of traders in commerce and tourism), the Italian State railways, several hotels in the area, the *Fondazione Cariparo*, and the *Cooperativa Adriatica* (a supermarket chain that financed the project, together with *Banca Etica*). The project involved activities intended to satisfy the demands of local

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[11] The Associazione Mimosa (Mimosa Association) operates in Padua, specifically in the area around the train station, in the context of an effort to improve social integration of those in a state of social exclusion and disadvantage (http://www.associazionemimosa.org).

residents and traders (analysed as part of the action research), which were mainly to restore the district's image and to organise more cultural and social events in the area. The project succeeded in having much less impact and territorial visibility than the projects undertaken in the Piave district in Mestre, however, as illustrated by the interviews with area residents and shopkeepers, and by the press review that was undertaken as a part of our research (the Piave project is much better known among those interviewed and visible in the press, than what can be said for Padua's *La città partecipata* project). This seems to be at least partially due to the fact that it was not the local administration that was promoting and coordinating the project in Padua. In an interview, an operator of the *Associazione Mimosa* made it clear that social processes need a 'director', and it is difficult to achieve this without the decisive contribution of the political decision-makers:

> What is needed for the area around the railway station is a sort of 'control room', someone to govern the changes that are already underway and cannot be stopped […]. We are unable, physically and economically, to guarantee certain processes… because it's not just that we need money, we also need decisions, a political management of the matter […] It is a rather shortsighted approach to manage things without a founding concept, a final idea about how we aim to handle an area, a district… and not only from an architectural standpoint […] When it comes to social issues, Padua abounds with associations and voluntary workers and, because it is so rich and the third sector has provided numerous solutions, this may have led the politicians to sit back instead of developing their own ideas and choosing a course of action; perhaps it is because there is a lot of wealth on this side that the other side has kept to the sidelines. If you look at Venice, it is rather the other way around: the local authority is very strong from the social standpoint, and there is a third sector that is probably only about a third of the size of ours, or even less (A.P., *Associazione Mimosa*).

The final words of this interview seem particularly interesting, and not only because the interviewee spontaneously draws a comparison with the situation in the municipality of Venice. The hypothesis that emerges is that it is because of a very strong third sector that the public administration has failed to act as a far-sighted 'guide' in orienting the processes of change underway in its territory, leading them in a direction that will promote social cohesion and interaction between all members of the population (traders, residents, people using public spaces), safeguarding the rights of all the parties concerned. In actual fact, other

studies that we have conducted in areas where we identified the same phenomenon encountered in Padua (such as Treviso and Vicenza – two municipalities that, like Padua, are in the Veneto region, in Italy's North-East) have given us the impression that it is the local authority's evasiveness/inefficacy in governing the social phenomena in its area that has induced the third sector to take a leading role. In other words, faced with unresponsive political decision-makers, lay organisations and Catholic voluntary groups see themselves as being invested with the task of providing solutions and services (Mantovan, 2007). Returning to the present research, it therefore seems reasonable to say that the need for socio-cultural animation in public spaces is strongly felt by the local populations of Mestre and Padua alike, but in the latter city it is the private social sector that is trying to meet this need, and in a manner that is unavoidably more fragmented and without an organic goal.

For instance, several groups have taken action independently to organise activities designed to revitalise the public spaces in the area behind Padua's railway station too. To give a couple of examples, several traders organised an event called *Viale Arcella in festa*, a sort of trade fair with activities for children, and a group of opposition councillors on the local district council arranged a reading near the Borgomagno flyover.

Various *antidegrado* ('anti-degradation') citizens' committees have also sprung up on both sides of the railway station. These groups all consist exclusively of Italian residents and traders (see our earlier comments in section 2 on this type of organisation), and they are rather self-centered, each concerned only with their own particular part of the district. In addition to their sole interest in their own, very limited neighbourhoods, another reason for such fragmentation lies in the diversity of their strategies: several of the spokes-people for the most proactive of these committees (those doing more than just protesting) have told us that they do not always approve of the others' methods. Their activities include drawing up petitions, taking action to improve awareness, and organising public meetings. But the committee spokes-people interviewed were also loudly demanding that the institutions take steps to implement a commercial and social revitalisation of their areas. In some cases, they themselves promoted community animation schemes, though usually only for the benefits of the autochthonous population. This is the case, for instance, of the burraco card game tournament promoted by the '*Comitato Stazione*' [Railway Station Committee] in 2011 and held on the so-called 'boulevard' outside Padua's railway station. As the brochure describing the event explained, the tournament was seen as 'the last card against urban decay' and its purpose

was to induce 'drunks and drug dealers who hang out and sleep here day and night' to move away from the area, and 'to draw the attention of the Paduan people to this area for the organisation of cultural and recreational events that would have a positive return in terms of the area's social regeneration'. The goal, therefore, was not to facilitate communication and interaction between the different members of the community gravitating around the railway station (between Italians and immigrants, for instance), but to repossess this public space for 'Paduan people' (where Paduan naturally means only the autochthonous population, the only people considered as legitimate citizens), and to oust any other 'disturbing' occupants.

In the districts bordering on the railway station in Padua, we thus see a number of separate situations in which groups of individuals take action independently to deal with what they identify as the area's main problems, and their objectives are often rather heterogeneous and uncoordinated. What is missing is a 'director' in the form of a local authority capable of intercepting, adding value, creating a network and focusing the energies of those who are taking action, or are potentially willing and able to do so. Among the latter, for instance, there are the immigrants' associations. The picture that emerged from our research is one of immigrant associations that have withdrawn behind closed doors, becoming scarcely visible in the public sphere. This seems to be partly attributable to the failure of the local institutions (the district councils and, to some degree, the local authority too) to take effective steps to establish genuine communication channels and interfaces with the exponents of the variegated world of the immigrants' self-organisation. Even some anti-racist associations,[12] as well as citizens' committees, find it quite difficult to establish communication channels with Padua's local government.

Conclusion

The comparison drawn between the two cases considered in this study provides some useful food for thought in the light of our reconstruction of the elements of conflict between the different urban populations living in the districts concerned, and our analysis of the work done by public and private actors to

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[12] Such as *Razzismo Stop* [Stop Racism] association, guided by a radical left ideology, which provides services and legal support to immigrants regardless of their possession of a residence permit (i.e. helping the undocumented too), and is therefore much appreciated by them.

deal with the problems identified, helping to inform the critical criminological imagination and current debates in critical criminology.

On the first aspect, the outcomes of the project described in section 2 are consistent with other reports in the scientific literature on the topic. Almost every study on the issue of insecurity has reached the conclusion that people's fear of crime does not stem from any direct experience of violence and criminality (Lagrange, 1993). It has already been demonstrated that the perception of insecurity depends more on factors that have nothing at all to do with crime, such as the quality of the urban spaces in which people live, their social vulnerabilities, social networks, their trust in others and in their institutions. Regarding the lack of care for public spaces, it is particularly obvious that an important factor that contributes to making people feel insecure and abandoned by the institutions relates to a whole array of common 'incivilities'. They are a symptom of peoples' difficult relations with one another, and they hinder the chances of living in harmony alongside individuals who have other habits and customs, and seem to be unable to accept rules that others see as fundamental to a civil coexistence (Chiesi, 2004). This issue is closely linked to the matter of interpersonal trust: one of the sources of insecurity studied by ethnomethodology is the violation of communication rules, which leads to a suspension of the trust a person places in another as a dependable and competent agent, consequently undermining elements that are normally taken for granted in our daily lives, and introducing existential anxieties that take the form of suspicion and hostility (Garfinkel, 1967).

It is therefore hardly surprising that analyses of the motives behind the sense of insecurity and the complaints of citizens living in districts of the type described here (which all feature communities with a marked ethnic heterogeneity and very different social classes) consistently acknowledge the enormous weight of what is perceived as a violation of the rules of coexistence (see, for instance, Pastore and Ponzo, 2012; Germain, 2012; Giovannini and Vezzali, 2011; Selmini, 1997; Giacomozzi and Selmini, 1996; Merry, 1981). As one of the best-known voices among the scholars of urban insecurity in Italy put it, 'what concerns people in the vast majority of Italian cities is not the violent, bloody crime, but the cracks appearing in the essential dependability of daily life' (Amendola, 2011: 13, *my translation*). The emergence of this issue is certainly partly attributable to the growing *super-diversity* of western societies. The new influx of immigrants characterised by numerous elements of internal differentiation clearly makes negotiating rules of civil coexistence more complex

and increasingly gives people the feeling that they are living in an unpredictable, unfamiliar world.

These impressions are confirmed by the interviews that we conducted with the spokes-people of the 'anti-degradation' citizens' committees, who wanted those individuals that they saw as undesirable 'removed' from their district. Here again, we can see the important contribution of environmental and social incivilities to the townspeople's sense of insecurity and demand for action. This call for the 'removal' of certain undesirable types, often associated with a request for the closure of poles of attraction for such people (such as the soup kitchens in Padua, or the so-called 'ethnic' shops), is partly due to changes underway in the model of social control, and to the consequent criminalisation of poverty (as discussed in the Introduction). The outcome is a mainstream way of thinking that associates the whole grey area of incivilities and 'urban disorder' with the criminal domain. Worse still, as a result of this process, numerous social problems (such as begging) are attributed a penal dimension by linking them with the issue of urban degradation and antisocial behaviour (Selmini, 2014).

In this scenario, however, the citizens' committees (or the more proactive among them, at least) have some elements in common, and one of these is the strong call for the institutions to revitalise the districts around the railway station commercially and socially. Their demand goes to show, once again, that these committees are driven not only by a sense of insecurity, but also (and possibly even more strongly) by other needs, such as the need to retrieve a sociality of proximity. It is fundamentally important for public decision-makers to hear these voices and respond to these needs – also to prevent such self-appointed organisations from drifting in an increasingly anti-democratic direction. As Tamar Pitch, one of the key voices of critical criminology in Italy, wrote:

> The decline of the mass political parties, of their forms of association and participation, has left a void in which various different, more or less ephemeral forms of association take shape. What the latter lack, however, are reliable channels for communication and mediation with the local and national institutions of political power. I suggest that the curvature taken by many of these mobilisations therefore depends largely on this ephemeral relationship with the institutions, on the limited authoritativeness of the institutions, and even on the instrumental use made of the former by the latter. It is up to the institutions to provide a procedural framework capable of protecting individual rights against moral majorities, while making room for negotiation and confrontation between cultural diversities. This

> means that citizens' mobilisations can be prevented from having privatising consequences if their organisation and commitment proceed along clearly regulated lines that assure representation and transparency. So it is not a matter of demonising these mobilisations – quite the opposite. They bear witness to a desire for civic participation, which is essential nowadays to produce an inclusive governance. It is more a matter of focussing this desire for protagonism and participation towards non-privatising, inclusive, 'democratic' goals (Pitch, 2001: 153-54, *my translation*).

We can therefore see the huge importance of a local authority capable of orienting and guiding the processes of change in the territory it governs, of listening to all the organised actors (even the more conflictual) and ensuring their involvement, in order to focus their energies on the objective of creating an inclusive city where the rights of every inhabitant are respected.

These considerations are sustained by the findings of the second part of our study, conducted to produce a map of the public and private actors that have been committed to improving the quality of life in the districts forming the object of our research. What emerges from our analysis is that, faced with much the same problems, the administrations in Padua and Mestre have adopted two very different policies, which could be briefly described using the formula 'delegated participation' as opposed to 'guided participation'. The local authority in Padua has basically opted to ride the wave of protest voiced by its citizens, implementing a policy based on law and order, and urban regeneration, while making no effort to take action organically on the numerous problems in the areas around the city's railway station. The administration in Mestre, on the other hand, has sent its own specialised service for the mediation of conflict and community animation into the Piave district. Its operators work in cooperation with a group of residents to accompany and guide the processes of change underway in the district, also intercepting the more conflictual members of the community and striving to involve them in proactive and constructive schemes. The resulting 'kaleidoscope' of measures is having a number of positive effects on the territory. For a start, the local citizens' loud appeal for the public spaces of their district to be 'repossessed', brought back to life with fun and cultural events, and socially and economically requalified, has been amply satisfied in Mestre, but left unfinished in Padua. In addition, the Venetian local authority's 'directorship' has also had a positive effect on the development of a network of undertakings, and on ensuring that they are inclusive and promote intercultural relationships. The local authority's proactive approach and guidance have thus succeeded in promoting a governance that adds value, and generates a network

to sustain all the actors operating in the territory – not only the Piave working group, but other subjects too, such as the associations of immigrants and the citizens' committees.

Padua is quite a different story, in which the local authority plays no such part. We find a number of schemes being implemented by committees and associations to 'retrieve' the public spaces, some of which aim to include all the people who gravitate around the railway station (such as the *Città partecipata* project coordinated by the *Associazione Mimosa*), while others take the form of a war to be waged against outsiders to win back the public spaces, making no attempt to facilitate relations between all the parties involved. From this point of view, the comparison between the 'anti-degradation' burraco card-playing tournament organised by the *Stazione* committee in Padua and the annual district dinners organised in Mestre's Piave district offers an emblematic example of the difference between the two cities' approaches: the former is an elitist initiative intended only for the autochthonous population, the latter an event designed to promote intercultural relationships.

What emerges from our research is the importance of a local administration capable of orienting and guiding the processes of change, of promoting and coordinating a network of public and private actors in the various policy sectors – an aspect that has been emphasised by numerous other scholars too (see, for instance, Germain, 2012; Bassoli, 2011; Polizzi, 2011; Bobbio, 2007; Pitch, 2001; Barbera, 2001). Contrary to claims advanced by the rhetoric of subsidiarity that governance implicates attributing less importance to the public actor when constructing public goods, we can therefore say that the importance of the public body tends to become even greater in terms of governance, and this is because the functions of guidance and coordination that subsidiarisation requires tend to increase (Polizzi, 2011). As Carlo Pisano wrote in a recent contribution on the 'governance of security', this is the reason why several authors have proposed the concept of 'State-anchored pluralism' (Loader and Walker, 2007). Used in a normative sense, this concept refers to the role of 'anchor' that the State should continue to play in the production of security goods. In other words, the State is not just a 'node' among many others within a 'network' of actors involved in the local governance of security. It has a specific, fundamental role inasmuch as it has the responsibility and the capacity to coordinate all the various actors involved in the network (Pisano, 2011). This is an important remark because, as argued by John Pratt, public participation – community involvement in punishment – has regularly been seen as the antidote to overarching state power and totalitarian modes of control, relying

on the following idea: remove the State, give power back to the people, and some inherent goodness which they are presupposed to possess will then drive the process of punishment toward a penality that draws on intrinsic community values and is thereby productive and utilitarian (Pratt, 2002: 178-179). In reality, as pointed out by Pratt, 'when state power is removed or weakened, then it is just as possible that new social movements based around the rule of the mob will emerge' (*ibid*: 179), because 'humanity is neither inherently good nor bad, but is capable of being shaped by predominant social and cultural forces and acting accordingly' (*ibid*: 182).

But serving in this role of 'director' requires a vision, clear political and social goals that (as in the Venetian approach) must assuredly be to create an inclusive city where the rights of all the parties concerned are respected. As Alessandro Baratta (2001) suggested in one of his well-known writings, we ultimately need to stop talking about the 'right to security' of the few, and to reiterate the need for the 'security of the rights of everyone' instead. If security is a private good, it will be in short supply and must be competed for, which is why the topic of security for a city's inhabitants 'implicates staging a perennial conflict between victims and offenders' (Pavarini, 2006: 38, *my translation*). We therefore need the political forces to gradually delineate and govern security as a public good, moving towards 'producing a greater security for everyone, and especially for those (the most defenseless) whose rights have been less well safeguarded' (*ibid*).

To reach these goals, social policies and urban policies must proceed in synergy. Concerning the latter, in particular, several highly authoritative scholars have said that, in order to limit the tendency for disaggregation and the construction of material and symbolic boundaries in modern cities, we need public policies and projects that aim to create spaces where 'different' people can come together and experience a genuine exchange by participating in shared practices to restore the public space on a local level (Bauman, 2005; Castells, 2004; De Sousa Santos, 2003; Le Galès, 2003; Harvey, 1999). Architectural and urban planning projects should therefore protect and cultivate *mixophilia*, creating and disseminating open, attractive and hospitable public spaces that all categories of people will be tempted to visit and share because 'the art of living peacefully and contentedly with differences, and of benefiting from the consequent variety of inputs and opportunities, is becoming the most important ability that citizens need to learn and practice' (Bauman, 2005: 33, *my translation*). While fear of contamination and exposure to differences have generated more or less deliberate segregations, our town

centres nonetheless remain the only places where remedies to these ills can be adopted, the only places where the related risks can be converted into individual and collective opportunities on a daily basis, because they are always great social laboratories, the ideal places for experimentation and social innovation (Turnaturi, 2005: 183).

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