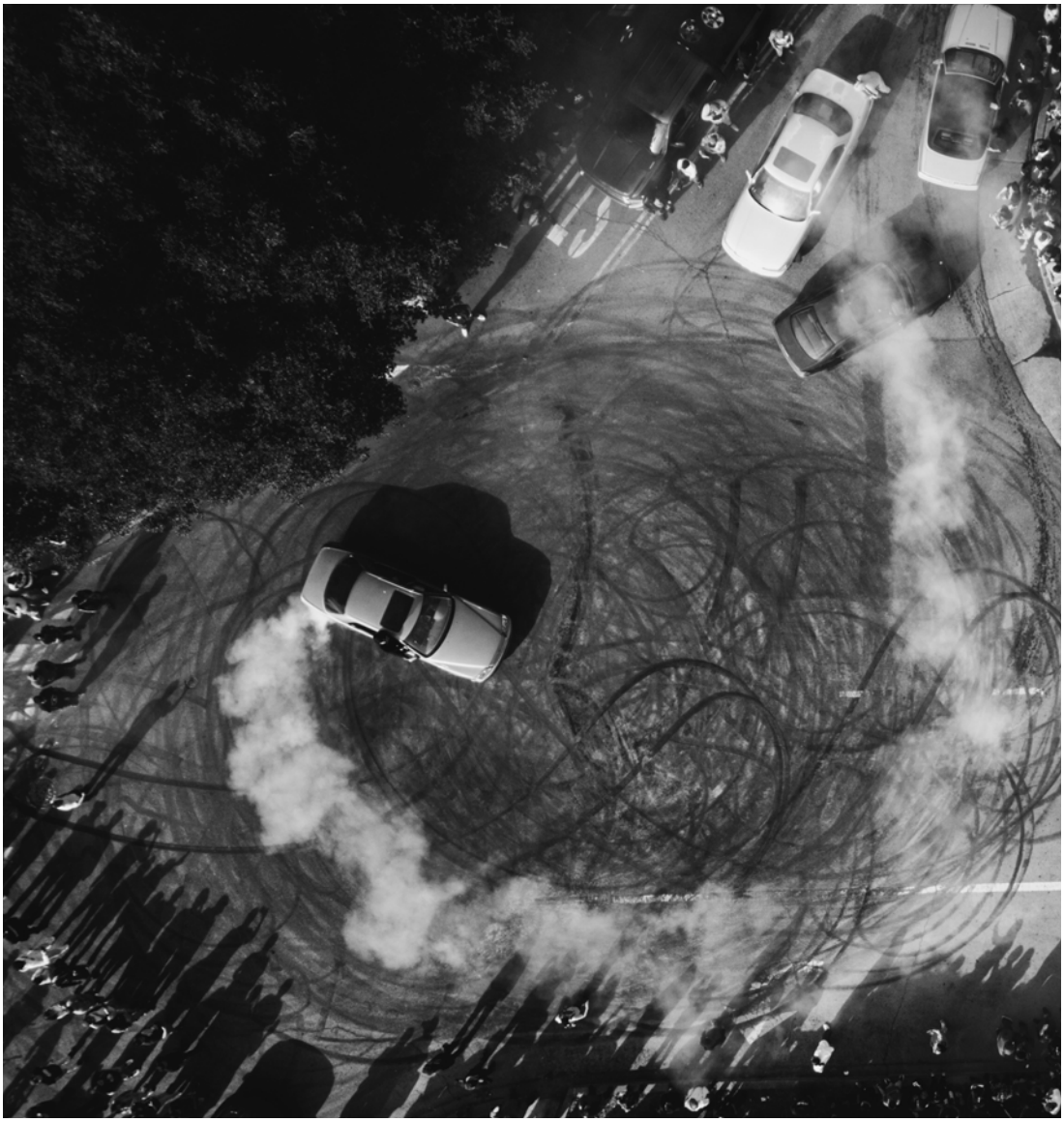

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Loop

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Looping strategies

Moral slippages between the certain and the uncertain in a Roman temporary housing area

Mario Marasco

1. Space

Bastogi is a complex of six four-storey buildings with mini-apartments (25 to 45 square metres) located in the 13th Municipality of Rome[1]. It has been built in the late 1970s and early 1980s by a collateral company of the Bastogi S.p.a. to house university students and travellers in transit. Between 1985 and 1986, the housing rights committee 'Lista di lotta' occupied the area because the builder – having financed the work with public funds – wanted to convert it into private housing. These first occupants were waiting for public housing in a nearby area. Having obtained their dwellings, these people left Bastogi. In 1989, the City of Rome decided to purchase the complex, turning it into emergency housing. The complex has been renamed Centre for Temporary Housing Assistance (in Italian: CAAT) in 2005. Throughout the 1990s, Bastogi housed individuals who were officially located by the Main Municipality while awaiting permanent public housing (ERP). The lack of new public dwellings and the blocked waiting lists for public flats encouraged some people to squat. For this reason, in the 2000s, evictions and police operations took place. At the same time, the media portrayed Bastogi as a centre of high crime and drug dealing. This media description played into the hands of the Main Municipality, which had two objectives. The first one was to evict the squatters, while the second aim was to vacate some dwellings by negotiating with those who had been authorised to live there. Therefore, many of the authorised residents had to accept being relocated to houses that were as far as 70 kilometres from Bastogi, with the consequence of disrupting many lives in the process.

Over time, unequal housing conditions developed, with some families of five or more people occupying just 45 square metres, or even 25 square metres. Those who refused to move out of the city were stuck on the social housing waiting lists. As migration flows have continued over the last two decades, the number of people experiencing severe housing deprivation has steadily risen. The rental prices in the city have escalated to a prohibitive level, impacting even families that previously did not face any housing affordability challenges. From a temporary housing centre, Bastogi has become a permanent reality. Having outlined the evolution of Bastogi, let us concentrate on the connection between welfare policies, practices, and forms of individual and collective agency.

2. Looping effect

Philosopher Ian Hacking has insisted extensively on the notion of the looping effect (1995). In simple terms, categories such as 'squatter', 'homeless', 'people in housing emergency', 'temporary accommodation' are not just ideas. They play a role in shaping individuals' perceptions of themselves. Ways

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1 Rome is administratively divided into 15 sub-cities known as 'municipalities'. In this text, the terms 'Main Municipality' or 'city administration' will be used to refer to the higher administrative level.

of classifying human beings interact with the human beings who are classified (1999: 31). These are 'interactive classifications' that affect the labelled individuals, shaping their choices and experiences. As a result, this produces a further change in knowledge and ways of categorising (34). And the cycle can repeat itself again.

Before Hacking, the *looping effect* was addressed in social studies by Goffman (1961, 14-43) and shortly after by Bergstrand (1979). The former discussed it in his famous work on asylums, also with regards to other "total institutions" such as prisons, barracks, extermination camps, and nursing homes for the elderly. The latter explored *looping* by studying how certain health policies can lead to a shortage of primary care physicians in US rural areas. Drawing on the insights offered by these two scholars, I want to show how, in my research field, *looping* is a process capable of perpetuating the ideology of victim-blaming in exclusionary housing policies in order to obscure the real causes of a structural social problem (cf. Bergstrand 1979, 66).

Bastogi can be likened to a heterotopia of marginality. Unlike utopia, heterotopia is a real place and at the same time is "outside all places" (Foucault 1994, 13). In so-called primitive societies, what Foucault refers to as "heterotopias of crisis" were forbidden places, reserved to individuals experiencing a transitory crisis, such as adolescents or women in childbirth (15). According to Foucault, in contemporary societies, there is instead a proliferation of "heterotopias of deviation": spaces where individuals considered deviant from the norm are placed, such as psychiatric clinics and prisons. The mere existence of these places is already "a contestation of all other spaces" (25): they are "counter-spaces", whose existence denounces the segregating logics that created them. Bastogi is similar to a nursing home for the elderly, a place at the limit between the heterotopia of crisis and that of deviation (Foucault 1998a, 312): one enters here because of a crisis (e.g. housing) and remains, getting older, until social and natural death.

The heterotopia of deviation partially coincides with the total institution described by Goffman (1961, 4). Goffman defines the nursing home for the elderly as a place for "persons felt to be both incapable and harmless". Similarly, people in housing crisis are directed to Bastogi and some of them have been there for 30 years. In Rome, housing policies have historically provided temporary shelter without addressing the multiple aspects of emergency living, resulting in precarious solutions. Instead of guaranteeing universal housing rights, this approach has perpetuated chronic emergency for a significant portion of the urban population, formalised in policies that have mainly benefited middle and working class people (Caciotti 2020, 18).

Consequently, this type of temporary housing assistance policy labels those living in Bastogi as unable to independently build a dignified life. In this phase of the looping effect, social and charitable support initiatives proliferate, and the media discourse focuses on a specific type of poverty (cf. Bauman 1982, 183), linked to either personal and cultural qualities (with racist overtones for immigrants) or individual deficiencies (poor health, limited education, etc.). As a consequence, people in Bastogi, becoming aware of being tagged with a denigratory label, subjectivise the stigma into a form of resistant agency.

3. Kamil

Some individuals, especially the youth, respond with violent performances or by publicly proclaiming that they belong to a lawless and thuggish neighbourhood. This is exemplified by Kamil[2], a young Egyptian immigrant to Italy, who grew up in Bastogi and developed an inherent sense of failure due to the poverty, ignorance and weakness commonly attributed to the local inhabitants. Despite the efforts of his hardworking father, Kamil has lost confidence in the promise (both parental and societal)

2 Several semi-structured interviews were collected in May 2018. The names of all informants are fictitious.

that education will lead to a better life. When searching for a job, the few young people who successfully complete their studies must hide the fact that they live in a temporary housing centre. There are study assistance programmes, but the educators, hired by a charitable organisation, are constantly replaced. While this happens because they are poorly paid and for other contingent reasons, Kamil feels mocked. It seems to him he is being treated as 'irredeemable'. Consequently, instead of pursuing a potentially futile job he gets involved in small-scale drug dealing. Careful not to overstep, fearing a lengthy prison term, with his friends he establishes a reputation in the urban area, embracing a gangster *habitus*. When a group of Moroccans lavish excessive compliments on some local girls, Kamil and his friends decide to assault them. A renowned Roman newspaper reports the attack as the result of a settling of scores between two criminal gangs. It also declares that a 'young mafia' is emerging in Bastogi. Along some television programmes, a wave of moral panic around Bastogi begins to grow (cf. Cohen 1972). Definitions change: from 'incapable and harmless', CAAT residents now become 'dangerous squatters' and 'criminals or potential criminals'. Never mind that there are people in Bastogi who have been waiting for a house for thirty years. The newspapers choose to focus on those who have occupied a vacant flat.

What is overlooked by this narrative are the structural conditions, the political and administrative incapacity, and the bureaucratic slowness, which together contribute to the present situation: oversubscribed waiting lists, a decade-long shortage of new public housing projects, the total deregulation of the rental housing market, and other forms of speculation, such as securitisation. The 'problem of squatting' has taken the place of the 'housing crisis' in the public narrative. Kamil scoffs at newspapers and TV. Indeed, he pins a medal on his chest: "Better to be considered a harmful criminal than a scumbag", he states one day. By rejecting the first label (incapable/harmless), Kamil has embraced a new one, that of a young gangster. This novel imaginary surrounding Bastogi's inhabitants ('criminals and dangerous people') at least seems to ascribe him the power to inflict harm (Bauman 1999, 139). What for some people is morally deplorable, for Kamil is a "practice of freedom" (Foucault 1998b).

4. Developments and conclusions

As a result of the events described above, the already limited social support initiatives are further reduced. It becomes more difficult for charitable organisations to recruit volunteers. In the public narrative, the social workers are afraid to enter this 'kilometre of Evil' (*chilometro del Male*, as another newspaper calls it), while the low salary and precarious economical condition of said workers is glossed over. After a while, other inhabitants react differently to these denigrating labels. Through small initiatives – such as creating green and shared spaces, volunteering to fix up the after-school premises – they challenge Bastogi's image as a place of crime and evil. The CAAT also becomes attractive for some entertainment businesses. Two movies are shot. These, however, focus little or not at all on the active and regenerative dimension of some initiatives. Movies, but also some video-blogs, conveniently find a *topos* in once again depicting the unjustly criminalised Bastogi inhabitant as a poor, unfortunate and harmless citizen. The cyclical nature of these knowledge generation processes is continuous. It affects the choices of individuals living in this space of permanent temporariness.

A final ethnographic example is that of Elena[3], a 37-year-old single mother. The woman has been living in Bastogi for fifteen years as an authorised assignee of temporary accommodation and waiting for a public housing. She finally finds a permanent job in the hotel industry after ten years of precariousness, even though the pay is just over 1,000 euros per month. As a new 'housing voucher' policy has been launched[4], Elena hopes to take advantage of it and be able to leave Bastogi with her two children. The support ranges from 600 to 800 euros per month. This possibility required Elena to enter

3 The latest collected interviews date back to January 2024.

4 It is called "bonus casa" (Rome Municipal Resolution No. 150 of 2014).

the private rental market, as the voucher is paid directly to the homeowner. However, the voucher has a duration of only four years. Once this subsidy ends, her limited salary – the expected increase of which never comes – means that she would not be able to pay the expenses, and therefore would have to leave the flat under threat of eviction. Elena adopts a strategy that for many others might be morally questionable: becoming a squatter in Bastogi. Through the advice of her former neighbours, she easily finds a place. However, while in the past she was 'waiting for public housing', she is now a 'squatter'. Her situation has become more precarious. A 2015 a national law[5] denies squatters the right to apply for residency, prohibiting access to basic social services such as the family doctor, making it impossible for them to pay utility bills[6]. Due to this law, Elena cannot even vote. She and her children cannot apply for electricity and gas supplies. For gas, it is enough to buy a dangerous LPG cylinder every two months; electricity, on the other hand, is taken from the lifts (hence electricity supplied by the Main Municipality, which owns the building). When the category of 'squatter' prevails (in the loop) over that of 'person in housing crisis', TV news crews never fail to start their video with a shot of those makeshift electrical connections, as a symbol of parasitic dishonesty.

Let us go conclude by coming back to Goffman's "total institutions" (1961). In a mental hospital, Goffman writes, interactions between staff and inmates are highly structured but not necessarily in a linear way. In this context, "looping" is defined as the phenomenon according to which the staff can provoke a response from an inmate and then use that response to justify the original provocation, therefore perpetuating a cycle of similar interactions. The inmate then realizes that any reaction which outside the total institution would be normal (a sneer, a scream, a laugh), is "collapsed back into this situation itself" (Goffman 1961, 42). Between one labelling loop and another, it seems only one choice remains for many people in Bastogi, namely distancing themselves from the political, legal or rhetorical labels with which they are captured, adopting a "distant" attitude of defence (as for the inmate in Goffman's example). Distance can be understood both rhetorically and legally. On the one hand, it involves distancing oneself from the imposed label, while on the other hand, it can also mean moving away from the legal category of "person on the waiting list for public housing" to identify as a squatter. Distance – social, moral, and political – is the constant that afflicts the 'defective' citizens from Bastogi, inevitably separating them from the institutions and the rest of the city.

5 Decree-Law No. 47 of 2014, converted with amendments by Law No. 80 of 23 May 2014.

6 Since the implementation of this law, a strict division into three 'housing statuses' has emerged in Bastogi. Comparing the latest municipal census (2019) of local inhabitants with my fieldwork data, it is estimated that 50% of the population are officially recognized as beneficiaries of temporary accommodation. Another 20% are squatters with authorised residence and the remaining 30% are 'simply' squatters.

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