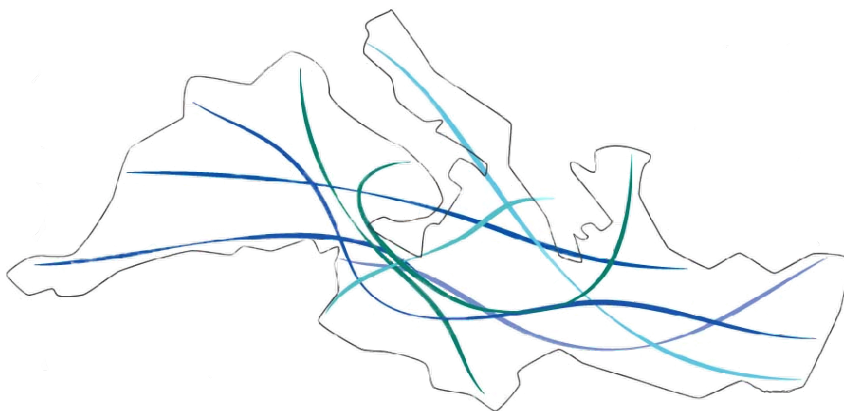


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New Conflicts in the Global City: the “Decorum Battle”



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New Conflicts in the Global City: the “Decorum Battle”

Abstract

Nowadays Urban Transformations are went back to the center of the sociological and historical investigation, after a long interruption in which the study of urban society had been downsized. Within the cities, population have often been differentiated according to social, economic, political and ethnical characters, which generated a mutual hostility extended to rioting and other forms of overt conflict. The article analyses the case study of San Lorenzo, a Roman neighborhood where urban transformations have fostered a conflict between residents and “city users”, attracted by the district’s bohemian atmosphere. The theoretical framework deals with the scientific hypothesis that the dismantling of the “Public City” also occurs through smart labels such as ‘urban regeneration’ and ‘promotion of decorum’. Then, the article critically investigates a plurality of large and tiny events in which the goals of decorum-related groups have been challenged – not helped – by residents’ activism and claims, designing a sort of “short circuit” between the urban vision of a “Clean and Polite City” and the social strategy of a “Slow and Resilient City”.

Keywords:

Gentrification, “Right to the City”, Resilience, Decorum.

Nuevos conflictos en la ciudad global: la “batalla por el decoro”.

Las transformaciones urbanas han vuelto a ser el eje de la investigación sociológica e histórica, tras un largo paréntesis en el que el estudio de la sociedad urbana había quedado relegado a un segundo plano. Dentro de las ciudades, la población solía estar diferenciada según criterios sociales, económicos, políticos o étnicos, lo que producía una hostilidad generalizada y daba lugar a disturbios y otras formas de conflicto urbano. El artículo analiza el caso de San Lorenzo, un barrio romano donde las transformaciones urbanas han avivado el conflicto entre residentes y “usuarios”, atraídos por el ambiente bohemio del barrio. El marco teórico aborda la hipótesis de que el desmantelamiento de la “ciudad pública” se produce también a través de etiquetas como “regeneración urbana” y “promoción del decoro”. El artículo investiga críticamente una pluralidad de eventos de grande y pequeño alcance, en los que los objetivos de grupos relacionados con la promoción o defensa del decoro urbano han sido cuestionados –en lugar de apoyados– por el activismo y las reivindicaciones de los residentes, trazando una especie de “cortocircuito” entre la visión urbana de una “ciudad limpia y educada”, y la estrategia social de una “ciudad lenta y resiliente”.

Palabras clave: Gentrificación, Derecho a la ciudad, Resiliencia, Decoro.

Nuovi conflitti nella città globale: la “battaglia per il decoro”

Le trasformazioni urbane sono oggi tornate al centro dell'indagine sociologica e storica, dopo una lunga interruzione in cui lo studio della società urbana era stato ridimensionato. All'interno delle città, la popolazione è stata spesso differenziata in base a criteri sociali, economici, politici o etnici, che hanno generato un'ostilità diffusa e dato vita a rivolte e altre forme di conflittualità urbana. L'articolo analizza il caso studio di San Lorenzo, un quartiere romano dove le trasformazioni urbane hanno alimentato un conflitto tra residenti e “utenti”, attratti dall'atmosfera bohémien del quartiere. Il quadro teorico affronta l'ipotesi di studio che lo smantellamento della “città pubblica” avvenga anche attraverso etichette quali “rigenerazione urbana” e “promozione del decoro”. L'articolo indaga criticamente una pluralità di eventi grandi e piccoli in cui gli obiettivi dei gruppi legati alla promozione o difesa del decoro urbano sono stati messi in discussione – piuttosto che sostenuti – dall'attivismo e dalle rivendicazioni dei residenti, disegnando una sorta di “cortocircuito” tra la visione urbana di una “città pulita ed educata”, e la strategia sociale di una “città lenta e resiliente”.

Parole chiave: Gentrificazione, Diritto alla città, Resilienza, Decoro

New Conflicts in the Global City: the “Decorum Battle”

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*Introduction**

After a long interruption in which the study of urban society had been downsized, in recent years the transformation within the City has turned back to the center of the sociological and historical investigation. In the 1970s, the energy crisis – like the one we are now suffering – and subsequent recession accelerated the process of de-industrialization, as a part of a transnational corporate restructuring within a deepening globalization, all with a profound impact on urban socio-spatiality. By the 1980s, the very survival of the city in the developed market economies appeared to be problematic, as its actual core-business was being recast in the wake of the substantial shakeout of industrial employment. From the 1990s onwards, the contemporary Global City links the legitimation imperatives of local government to the accumulation drives of private capital. This interdependence of public and private goals within the new urban regime is seen to increasingly require collaborations, networks and partnerships, particularly between the private sector and government. While acknowledging some of the determinism that derives from capitalist logic, for instance profit maximization, the urban regime theory argues that each distinctive power group in the urban arena cannot as a solo player command sufficient influence to determine significant development outcomes:

* Luca Alteri is the author of chapter 1; Alessandro Barile is the author of chapter 2. The Introduction is a common work.

urban governance requires collaboration between public and private stakeholders, involving civil society in the increase of property values into urban areas, defined under the name of “gentrification”, i.e. a class-based displacement which finally threatens the “City for the many not for the few” proposal. As a consequence, local government develops certain lines of exclusion that deny the universality of the concept of “citizenship”. The strata of population that stand in the way of the capitalist valorization of the City become the target of repressive policies. The Global City loses its formally unitarian dimension and becomes dual: its downtown and its periphery are linked by a neo-colonial relationship that focuses the governors’ attention only on the former and denies political representation to the latter.

The ideological frame in which the urban governance manages the afore-mentioned duality is the focus on urban security. Already Tamar Pitch (1989; 2001) and Jonathan Simon (2008) have shown how in the United States the issue of violence within the city was used as a form of urban governance, whilst welfare was diminishing its contribution: the neoliberal cultural model, then, insists on the one hand on the risk of crime, and on the other on the need for prevention. These are two sides of the same coin, since in both cases local administrators emphasize individual responsibility and attribute the sole role of sanctioning the “irresponsible” to the institutions. A stable labour market, the existence of public health and efficient urban services are also tools to prevent city crime, but they involve State and local government intervention: according to ruling class’s point of view, it is better to focus on individual responsibility! It is up to the citizen not to give in to the temptation to become a criminal and to vote for those candidates who propose tough sanctions against criminality, delegating the issue of petty crimes, minor offenses and (a very limited) part of individual insecurity to them. According to this “criminology of the Other” (Garland, 2004), the offender is a “monster”, an alien, unavoidably exogenous to our community: he/she must be neutralized and put in a position not to repeat that behavior again. The same attitude is dedicated to those individuals who, though not being criminals, are considered “indecent”, as if indecency were a premise of criminality.

Under this point of view, a subject is to be condemned even when he does not contravene the law: it is enough that he is not “decent”, as if “police” and ‘cleanliness’ had an identical meaning (as a matter of fact, in Italian language the two words differ only by one vowel, *polizia* and *pulizia!*) and pursued the same objectives. In the following pages, using current literature, we will identify some “unseemly” categories and describe how legislators and police deal with them.

In the second part of the essay, the case-study of San Lorenzo will point out empirical evidences on the urban transformation within the Global (Capitalist) City.

1. Categories

1.1. The Ultras

The ultras cause disgust in everyone because they are described as violent “youngsters” who beat each other up and vandalize cities just for a football match. To be honest, they often describe themselves in this way: soldiers of an army fighting a symbolic battle against their enemies, who are the opposing team’s supporters. In recent years, especially after the Heysel Stadium tragedy in Brussels (1985), when the impetuosity of Liverpool fans caused a wall to collapse and the death of 39 Juventus fans and others, ultras became the target of repressive laws. Italy instituted the DASPO, which is a temporary ban on access to venues where sporting events take place, then the “tessera del tifoso” (*fan card*), which gives a “licence of probity” to fans who respect the order of seats in the stadium and do not engage in clashes against other hooligans. The DASPO is imposed on those who engage in behavior “dangerous for public safety”, such as throwing blunt objects and possessing racist symbols. A supporter can also be punished, however, if he/she lights a smoke bomb or perform a peaceful pitch invasion at the end of a match. The fan is also “disqualified” if he/she uses a megaphone to incite the team, or plays drums in the stands, or displays a banner, without first asking permission from the police. In the cases just mentioned, the DASPO has a “preventive” function: the subject who

has not yet broken a rule is punished because he/she might break it in the future! However, such an approach is not paradoxical: it is consistent with the desire to oust those supporters considered “unseemly” from the stadium, in favour of spectators such as families with children or elderly people, who have a good spending capacity and do not create public order problems. Indeed, hooligans are accused of driving away the “normal” (and “affluent”) fans, though several studies have argued that the dramatic drop in stadium spectators is caused by an incredible increase in prices (Alteri, 2020; Teotino & Uva, 2010); the absence of the most active part of the organized supporters – who used to “drag” the rest of the fans with chants, songs and enthusiasm – would even deepen that “flight”. In fact, sports club today are much more interested in pay-TV money than in the fans in the stadium, because football teams have become global brands: Manchester United has millions of supporters in Asia, while Milan’s matches are also watched with interest in Latin America. Hooligans, therefore, only “deserve” repression, even in a manner contrary to constitutional norms: for example, if a fan returns to the stadium though being under DASPO disqualification, he/she risks going to prison for up to four years, despite the fact that an administrative measure would not have the right to restrict personal freedom (Pitch, 2013). The “tessera del tifoso” has also been much criticized: officially, it only serves to “loyalise” fans, as if it were the card distributed by a supermarket to its customers, but in reality it distinguishes “good” supporters from “unseemly” ones, and prevents the latter from getting stadium season tickets or buying tickets to go to away matches. Actually, the “tessera del tifoso” is an instrument of discrimination against those who reject the rules of behavior that want to turn the fan at the stadium into the silent, paying spectator who goes to the theatre. In Italy, government repression of football fans is very strong because ultras have always had a solid organization (Roversi, 1992; De Nardis & Alteri, 2012; Spagnolo, 2017) and have often been infiltrated by extreme right-wing organizations. In producing laws to counter violent supporters, however, methods have been used that have already been tried and tested against the mafia and organized crime associations, which certainly have very different

characteristics from football supporters. At the same time, organized football supporters provide an opportunity to build a common identity, to break out of isolation, to define a community that is not limited to the perimeter of consumerism and silent consent in favour of the political class. These characteristics are not appreciated by those who propagate the primacy of security and “community governance” through the exercise of the “culture of fear”. Net of violence and sentiments that, in recent years, have approached more or less conscious racism, ultras groups are an example of youth aggregation, at a time when the political class prefers to deal with solitary and atomized individuals, building a direct relationship between the leader and the masses, without any intermediary agent. The unpredictability and irreconcilability of the ultras *milieu* does not support decorum, neither in the stadiums nor in the squares.

1.2 The drug addicts

Drug use and the solutions to curb it constitute a complex topic, which is not discussed in this article. Here, however, it is evident how the condition of drug addicts is also affected by “class discrimination”: from the beginning of the Third Millennium onwards, the Italian government has tightened penalties against drug use, but has mainly focused on “street” drug, consumed in public spaces. Those who have the financial means to receive drugs directly at home, consuming them in the domestic environment or at “parties” in the villas of rich people and in private clubs do not run any risk. The *White Paper* that inspired the 2009 security package noted that almost three quarters of the reports to the Prefect for drug use concerned cannabis: is it possible that cocaine users were only a quarter of the total? More likely, cocaine addicts avoid punishment because they do not need to search the “rich men’s drug” around the streets... Moreover, cocaine is often “forgiven” as it provides efficiency and hyperactivity, as well as addiction. As a matter of fact, it is a drug consistent with the rhythms of capitalist production; in contrast, those who use drugs that “slow down” the work’s intensity (cannabis) or benchmark the individual’s isolation (heroin) are punished. The consequence is that many young drug

addicts end up in jail, even though they are not hardened criminals. Prison, moreover, is certainly not the best place to treat their addiction; in fact, suicides and acts of self-harm increase. The suspicion is that the State does not aim at countering the spread of drugs, but only to limit their “visible” use (on the streets and in city centers, on shopping streets, in districts frequented by tourists). The government is not genuinely interested in the health of young people, but only in combating “youth high”, despite the fact that the mass media spread “the culture of getting high” every day: the real goal is to control the places where young people meet, where there is a risk of production of a value system different from the mainstream. Of course, any institutional intervention is “sweetened” by good intentions: who could oppose a battle against drug addiction? Who could associate this institutional commitment with a “hygienic” vision of society?

1.3. Prostitution

In Italy, the issue of prostitution is still an unresolved problem, despite the fact that in 1958 a law (“Legge Merlin”) sanctioned the closure of the brothels, denying the possibility of regulating and taxing the sale of one’s body. Even today, prostitution is a complex phenomenon, which involves the economic crisis (many women started prostitution after losing their job or being in need to pay for their studies, due to the reduction of welfare) and the “anthropology” of a given society: although male prostitution also exists today, the clientele is almost always male, because men use prostitution to reassert their “gender superiority”. Despite the fact that the phenomenon of prostitution has many variations, the concern of local administrators only concerns prostitution practiced on the streets. The topic is treated according to the paradigms of urban decency and safety. Moreover, a mayor’s only concern is to “hide” prostitution in his/her city by “moving” the streets where it is practiced to the suburbs or peri-urban area. Rarely does the issue concern the exploitation of women and the dignity of young (male and female) prostitutes. It is only about the indecency of half-naked people on the side of the road, even at the risk of complicating the city traffic. The paradox is that prostitution carried out “indoors” (in

a flat, in a private club, far from the gaze of children and families) is basically tolerated. Yet it is precisely this type of prostitution that exposes women to exploitation, because only organized crime has the economic power to rent flats for the exercise of ‘sexual intercourses for money’. Perhaps the real goal of the local administrator is to eliminate “poor” and foreign prostitution, that which takes place on the streets and whose clients come from the working classes. On the contrary, the use of one’s body (and not the cultural capital and skills acquired through study) for self-promotion is encouraged by the mass media and many statements by the ruling class. If you are beautiful (or if you can make believe you are), you have to use your beauty, not least because in capitalism everything is for sale: it is the *all the way down* contractualisation (Pateman, 1997) that has replaced Keynesianism and that involves the use of sex roles. In society there are only “real men” and “real women”, each imprisoned in his or her rigid role. Those who call for decorum and security are not concerned with the lives of prostitutes, but with the survival of social agencies such as the family, the patriarchy and the “native identity” against foreigners.

1.4. Immigration

The first generation of immigrants in Italy worked and were essentially invisible in public space. Then, however, immigrants became perceived by the eye: in the streets, in the squares, in the halls where their community gathered, near bus and train stations, in the shops where food imported from their country was sold. Their presence is very physical: they are recognizable from afar, also because they are full of colours, smells and often a cheerfulness that is unbearable to Italians. Moreover, immigrants tend to be young, therefore vital and enthusiastic, while the country that receives them is increasingly old (Mezzadra, 2004). This is why the political class immediately tried to “hide” immigrants in the enclosure of their respective groups, avoiding contact with the Italian population. Then it spread the image of foreigners as being similar to savages: their “chromatic” or “food” diversity became a cognitive or biological *diminutio*. Exactly like savages, foreigners are described as incapable of curbing their “sexual appetite”: foreign men are all potential

rapists, foreign women all potential prostitutes. Statistics state that in Italy sexual violence takes places inside the home (by ex-husbands and boyfriends), yet – according to the newspapers – the one who rapes is always the Other. On the contrary, “rape represents the border between Us and Them. We marry women, they rape women” (Pitch, 2013, p. 15). Indeed, in 2008, the rape and murder of a Roma woman by a foreigner directed the elections in the city of Rome: after the first round, the center-left was ahead, but the center-right won the ballot. The mayors’ responses are usually the following: eviction of Roma camps (without finding alternative accommodation), closure of small businesses run by Asian immigrants, restrictions on the sale of kebabs and ethnic food, strict administrative controls in immigrant-dominated neighborhoods. Decorum, urban regeneration and the fight against decay are the official motivation for these measures. Actually, they are nothing more than examples of a kind of “institutional racism”.

1.5. Writers

When a government is not legitimized by the explicit consent of the people, it will easily tend to rule through fear of street crime and by dividing citizens into ‘respectable’ and ‘non-respectable’ (Sorgi, 1983). The fight for security will become a priority of this government. Actually, it is not about “existential security” – against the risk of losing wages, welfare, social rights, public schools – but “physical security”, against the risk of being robbed, mugged, raped. As Foucault stated (2009, p. 71), “the State that guarantees security is a State that is obliged to intervene at every opportunity”.

This is why institutional communication agencies always invent new reasons for State intervention, often against categories of citizens considered inadequate and “abusive”. The call for decorum is part of a public discourse in which the so-called “urban incivilities” is described as a serious urban problem: a citizen would not be worried about losing his/her job, but about a Sinti rummaging through a public dumpster! A mayor with fewer and fewer economic resources to govern the city prefers to issue ordinances against the habit of young people drinking wine brought from home in the square (like the “Ley antibotellón” in Andalucía) or eating a sandwich

on the steps of Trinità dei Monti in Rome, rather than improving public transport or urban waste collection.

Drunkness, shouting, but also the frugal meal eaten away from a restaurant are considered social problems because they differ from standard behavior. In contrast, those who remain within certain limits are considered “decent” because they do not mix with alternative or marginal cultures. Above all, they do not participate in any kind of conflict. Decorum also fights against writing on urban walls, spreading the opinion that decay is only an aesthetic fact: self-published posters by political groups, tags by writers, the writing with which the neighborhood remembers a dead person or an anniversary are erased because they clash with the “whiteness” of the walls and, in essence, the redevelopment project of that particular district. It is often small groups of residents who obtain permission to carry out a kind of “aesthetic censorship”, deciding what to erase and what to keep. Paradoxical situations not infrequently occur: in Rome, in the bohemian district of Pigneto, the Retake association cancels graffiti on the shutter of a bookshop. The owners, however, protested loudly because those designs reflected the shop’s identity and had been commissioned *ad hoc*. Again in Rome, in the Garbatella district, the historic red “Vota Garibaldi” sign, which dated back to the 1948 elections[†], was erased by the overzealous Urban Decoration Office (Barile, Alteri & Raffini, 2019). The murals that cover city walls are today at the center of a conflict between those who want a candid and aseptic urban landscape and those who consider the writings to be an identity aspect of the neighborhood. At a time when we celebrate a “street artist” like Banksy, who deliberately avoids museums and private collections, deciding what can remain painted *outdoor* and what should be removed is a delicate exercise. When the decision is made by a committee or a private association, then it is easy to abuse. There is a more important problem, however, that erasing a writing: the “anti-City” of the poor, migrants, unemployed, sick people,

[†] In those elections, the Popular Front has used the historic image of Garibaldi as a symbol.

squatters, political dissidents has no right to present its demands, because it cannot afford “to be decent”.

A poet, Pier Paolo Pasolini, had already understood this:

I would like to weave a eulogy
of filth, misery, drugs, and suicide:
I, privileged Marxist poet,
who has ideological tools and weapons to fight,
and enough moralism to condemn the sheer act of scandal,
I, profoundly decent,
make this eulogy, because the drugs, the filth, the rage,
the suicide
are, with religion, the only hope left:
pure contestation and action
against which the enormous wrong of the world is measured.
(Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Poeta delle ceneri*)

2. Rise and fall of a gentrified neighborhood

The Roman district of San Lorenzo can be used as an excellent case study. It is a small, circumscribed territory, clearly delimited in its urban boundaries. At the same time, it is not a closed neighborhood, it is not a suburban village, with its rigid social dynamics and not very suitable to be generalized. It is a neighborhood located close to the city center, at the intersection of the capital's two most important railway hubs (Termini and Tiburtina station), and home to the largest university in Europe (“la Sapienza”). It is a territory continuously crossed by exogenous population flows, both during the day and in the evening and night hours. Our research mapped commercial activities in May 2020, counting around 600 businesses of various types. It also surveyed the real estate assets, which consist of 6,125 housing units. Finally, we collected thirty interviews with neighborhood residents.

Since the mid-nineties, San Lorenzo has been hit by the second gentrification wave suffered by the city. If the first wave (in the Eighties) had attacked some neighborhoods of the historic center (Monti and Trastevere) or neighboring ones (Testaccio), with San

Lorenzo (and together with it Garbatella, Ostiense and Pigneto) to be attacked is the belt that was once semi-peripheral of the city. A part of the city which is now completely inserted in the process of enhancing the urban space. An enhancement that in the meantime has given rise to a third gentrification wave, even more distant from the city center (Centocelle, Quadraro) (Annunziata, 2019; Cingolani, 2018).

The neighborhood first began to accommodate an increasingly large student population. In the wake of this demographic and social change, the activities of the neighborhood quickly reconverted. Instead of the traditional artisan activities (marble workers, blacksmiths, glassmakers), starting from the end of the Eighties, and faster from the early 2000s onwards, the neighborhood has been populated with bar, pub, pizzerias and small food shops (today are about 206 businesses, one third of all commercial activities in the area). The first commercial reason for the neighborhood has become the consumption of alcohol and street food. This has led the neighborhood to lose activities connected to the needs of the average Roman family, to replace them with activities aimed at a student population that animates the life of the area especially in the evening and at night. The transformation is critically experienced by all the inhabitants. This is how a historical resident of the neighborhood expresses itself:

Basically, the important change took place towards the end of the 1980s and early 1990s. Until then, in this district, which has its origins in the town plan of 1881, with the arrival of people from Abruzzo, who enriched the district with their presence, nothing had changed. Here, substantially in the last thirty years, everything has changed, that had not changed in the previous one hundred and fifty years, in the history of the neighborhood. And this happened when there was an exponential growth in the presence of students, who came to study here at Sapienza. [...]. Clearly, not everyone could afford to buy a house, most were rented and there was this change: families went away and students replaced the occupation of the houses. The demographics of the neighborhood have halved in terms of the presence of residents, and I think there is still three or five percent of the people who populated it. From there, in fact, also changing the typology of the social fabric, the trade that concerns the neighborhood, the productive activities, the typology also began to change. Meanwhile, five supermarkets have sprung up within ten years, which did not exist, because there were all small shopkeepers. All the commercial premises that you see today in San Lorenzo were all occupied either

by artisans or by shopkeepers: grocery store, butchers, wine bars, emporiums where everything was sold.

These changes have changed the rental and sales real estate market. The inhabitants began to leave the neighborhood, renting as many rooms as possible in their home to individual students. If the average rent in the mid-2000s was around 800 euros per month, for about at least twenty years every single room has been rented at a price ranging between 300 and 500 euros per month. The municipal administration, instead of governing and limiting the rental market, as well as regulating commercial activities through the limitation of licenses, has favored the transformation. In the mid-2000s, two opposite phenomena occurred: on the one hand, the district began to lose population substantially, going from about 11,000 inhabitants to less than 10,000 (today there are about 8,700 inhabitants registered).

Territory	2006			2021		
	Italians	Foreigners	Total	Italians	Foreigners	Total
San Lorenzo	9.299	955	10.254	7.221	1.449	8.670
Rome	2.574.437	250.640	2.825.077	2.434.483	378.882	2.813.365

(2021-2006)/2006 %		
Italians	Foreigners	Total
-22,3	+51,7	-15,4
-5,4	+51,2	-0,4

Source: <https://www.comune.roma.it/web/it/roma-statistica-popolazione1.page>.

On the other hand, the general economy of the neighborhood seemed to grow geometrically: in San Lorenzo, the commercial activities multiplied, replacing the lower value-added activities with others capable of producing a greater private income. The neighborhood seemed to be enriching despite the loss of population, thus bringing up the rental market, devoid of public regulation. The loss of population was compensated by the daily arrival of a more affluent exogenous population: students and employees of the University by day; clientele looking for entertainment in the evening. The neighborhood thus began to attract artists, show business personalities, freelancers attracted by the bohemian atmosphere in which economic development, interesting cultural life and vintage street furniture were mixed. Compared to the “showcase city” of the historic center, invaded by tourism, San Lorenzo seemed to offer a more “authentic” life and a more “popular” dimension. The presence in the territory of various occupied “social centers” contributed to building the narrative of the popular and left-wing neighborhood, but in step with the times and open to novelties. In conclusion, the neighborhood was fully invested by a process of gentrification consistent with all the characteristics that describe the phenomenon: production of land for progressively richer users, loss of population, total privatization of the commercial, housing and cultural offer (Barile, Alteri & Raffini, 2019; Semi, 2015; Slater, 2011). The economic crisis that has hit Italy, and therefore Rome, since 2009, has jammed the mechanism.

Since the beginning of the 2010s, due to the crisis, public resources for land management have gradually been exhausted (Agnoletti *et al.*, 2015). First of all, the cleaning of the streets, calibrated on the resident population and not on the one actually present or passing through. Then the cleaning of the (little) public green, left in a state of neglect. Phenomena well present in the eyes of its inhabitants, as reported in almost all the testimonies:

In short, San Lorenzo has changed radically. When I was born, let's say that I can speak since the Eighties, San Lorenzo was a popular neighborhood, it was a town, it was a neighborhood where we all knew each other, where you wandered on the street and whoever you knew, you went to anyone's house, it was a village. It was a politicized neighborhood, the references were also the party, the feast of “l'Unità”

[communist newspaper, A/N], the feast of the neighborhood, as was the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Then slowly it lost its identity, it began to depopulate, building speculation arrived, many families left and many students arrived, the neighborhood emptied, lost its identity, even its political identity, and little left. It is now a student dormitory district, and in the evening it is an entertainment district and a drugstore square. [...]

Then, in my opinion, in the Nineties, after all, San Lorenzo had changed, but it was a change that you might like or might not like, but it was a change in some positive way. It is true, it was already beginning to lose its popular soul, but the neighborhood had also become a bit chic, it was a pleasant neighborhood, there were many clubs, there was a clientele that rose in level, even culturally, because there were so many things on a cultural level, such as exhibitions, live music, events, theater and so on in the pubs. Then as you say, but let's say from 2000 onwards perhaps, there has been a slow decay, which in the last four five years has accelerated heavily, and lately has also lost in terms of nightlife, that too has expired.

Subsequently, with the progress of the crisis, all activities not related to the food&beverage sector, have reduced the presence in the district or closed due to the impossibility of coping with the average level of rents. The rental market has increasingly turned solely to the student population, maintaining an average price level that is impossible to sustain for a middle-income family with dependent children. Classes in primary and secondary schools began to shrink and disappeared. If until the Eighties the two high schools saw the presence of sections from the letter A to the letter H, today there are only two sections per school year, the A and B. San Lorenzo not only has lost population, but the resident one is getting older. Eventually, starting from the mid-2010s, the neighborhood was deserted by day and overpopulated by night, when it received a population from all over Rome and also from neighboring cities. An entertainment-neighborhood where, however, it is increasingly difficult to live. Moreover, on the sides of the neighborhood, around its access roads, a population of homeless, poor or nomadic has accumulated, which has contributed to reducing the sense of security. There are no significant conflicts between the indigenous population and those camped on the edge of the neighborhood, but the intolerance is palpable and emerges in the stories of all the witnesses interviewed. In the face of all this, and in the complete absence of a public planning capable of governing the territory, the

discourse on the progressive deterioration of the neighborhood has shifted around the concept of “decorum”. If before the word “urban decay” identified a worsening of social conditions (unemployment, precariousness, impoverishment, poor security), today it is completely identified with an aesthetic condition.

The neighborhood, as mentioned, is very dirty. The absence of effective land management, street cleaning and public parks has led groups of citizens to organize themselves around the problem of urban aesthetics. In particular, by removing the writings on the walls that dirty the facades of the buildings. Little by little, also thanks to the pandemic and the lockdown, the discourse on the deterioration of the neighborhood has focused on the aesthetic factor. The neighborhood was no longer degraded because it was socially impoverished and demographically depopulated. The problem now is the infamous writing on the wall. Associations of private (and wealthy) citizens such as “Retake”, supported by the Municipality, have been active around the cleaning of the walls of the neighborhood. Public discourse at that point became polarized: those who believed that the problems were other and more structural were accused of being in favor of degradation. The action of a civic association has thus created a political-ideological contrast. Political forces at the city level have lined up around this opposition, compacting themselves around the defense of the “Retake” phenomenon and the civic solution proposed by it. Those who tried to shift the terms of the speech were at that point accused of being an “extremist” or even an accomplice in the deterioration of San Lorenzo.

Progressively, the dispute became totally political and alien to the feelings of the residents of the neighborhood. All the interviewees seem to be disinterested in the problem, declaring that the real problems are others. In particular, the first and most urgent problem was identified in a repopulation of the neighborhood to be carried out through a public intervention on the rental and mortgage market. Secondly, residents complain about the lack of control over commercial activities, especially with regard to small food shops often managed by foreigners, which turn into real clandestine bars in the evening:

San Lorenzo must be repopulated, San Lorenzo must be reopened to families, a social fabric that no longer exists must be redone. If San Lorenzo is made up of student houses and Airbnb, there is no future, you can improve in the evening, you can improve the nightlife, but as a neighborhood it does not exist. So, either repopulate it or nothing. In my opinion, two types of intervention must be made: one at a commercial level, which must be improved, you cannot leave the neighborhood in the hands of the bars that compete with each other to see who sells the shot at the lowest price; you have to offer something of quality, you have to make sure that people come to San Lorenzo because the food is good, because there is an exhibition, because there is cinema, so once this has started, the neighborhood flourishes again. This from a commercial point of view. From the point of view of the neighborhood, the neighborhood must be repopulated, through rental incentives: if you do not have a lot of money today, how do you come and live in San Lorenzo?

In conclusion, the gentrification stalemate has not brought the neighborhood back to a pre-gentrified era, but has aggravated the problems produced by the gentrification process. The effects of the two years of the pandemic intervened in this situation described here. Obviously, during the different lockdown periods, the neighborhood looked spooky. Once urban mobility was restarted, however, San Lorenzo once again appeared transformed, for the worse. In the morning, in the afternoon and until dinner, the neighborhood continued to be essentially deserted. Many businesses had in the meantime closed, as the average level of rents (drugged by uncontrolled student supply/demand) remained artificially high. The only activities that survived were related to evening entertainment. Consequently, if during the hours of the day San Lorenzo appears depopulated, at night there is the usual overpopulation. Thus increasing the activities of the food&beverage sector to the detriment of any other commercial activity. Even the reopening of the university did not lead to a condition prior to the pandemic. The students, thanks to “smart working” and “distance learning”, have resumed attending the Sapienza with much smaller flows, affecting the general flows of the neighborhood. Precisely in recent years, and also thanks to the pandemic, the rental market has been further worsening due to the considerable increase in short-term rentals for tourists. Currently, the share of homes destined for tourism (especially connected to the Airbnb platform) is about 8%

(precisely 7.34%, corresponding to about 450 apartments). Much less than the percentage that is reached in the historic center (about 22% of the houses here are rented to tourists), but much higher than any other neighborhood outside the center (the average Roman figure is about 1.75%).

San Lorenzo is therefore a depopulated neighborhood. From the demographic peak reached at the end of the 1950s – with about 35,000 inhabitants – it has now been reduced to less than 9,000. The drastic reduction does not only describe an aging of the resident population, but a real loss of inhabitants, in the face of a city, Rome, which has not demographically grown for years but has not lost population either. In short, the loss of population in the neighborhood is not a “natural” phenomenon (a sort of *shrinking city*), but a displacement of population, which is not replaced by another of equal quantity (a *shrinking neighborhood*). This movement is anything but natural or physiological: on the contrary, it is a forced movement of families who are forced to leave the neighborhood because it does not bear the economic burden. In the first place with regard to the rental and mortgage market, dedicated solely to student reception; on the other hand for the commercial composition, now almost exclusively aimed at a certain type of needs, tailored to the lifestyle of the student population or aimed at the nightlife. In short, the neighborhood was populated with bars and restaurants, “piadinerie” and finally legal cannabis shops, activities that have taken precedence over those aimed at a more typical family dimension.

The lack of some services, for example a widespread and well-kept public green area, or alternative neighborhood shops to food monoculture, not to mention the nocturnal chaos, affects the choice of families to move elsewhere. San Lorenzo is thus exploited as an income but impoverished of real presence, of resident and active citizens. The priority solution to the regeneration (real, not the market-driven one) of the neighborhood therefore passes through its repopulation. One possible mechanism is to implement public control over the real estate market, especially as regards the rental market, given that the sales market seems to be less affected by student flows. Publicly impose limits on the race to raise rents, limit

the possibility of renting single rooms, or even single beds; establish a ceiling for the student tenant population; carry out effective public controls and severely punish offenders, finally giving the student population the opportunity to stay in student hostels and not in private homes. A greater public presence, therefore, with the aim of progressively increasing the population of San Lorenzo by reducing the substitutability rate that is currently excessive. Without a process of this type, all the rest of the measures that could be adopted would appear to be palliatives by now unable to stop the demographic, economic, urban and social decline of the neighborhood. This, at least, is what emerges from listening to the inhabitants who collaborated in the construction of this research. Thanks to them – and to the data collected – the article tried to unveil the current trends of Urban Transformation. Whilst local administrators argue about ‘Social Innovation’ and ‘Platform Economy’, the processes of privatization, neoliberalization, and commodification of the urban spaces foster the dismantling of the Public City.

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