

Special Issue Combining Safety
and Equity in the Post-Covid City:
New Trends between Local Policies
and Bottom-Up Practices

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology

Guest editors

Gabriele Manella
Madalena Corte-Real



Editor in chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Editorial manager: Carmine Urciuoli

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Summary

9. What Makes a City a City?

Fabio Corbisiero

11. Combining Safety and Equity in the post-Covid City:

New Trends between Local Policies and Bottom-Up Practices. An Introduction

Gabriele Manella, Madalena Corte-Real

15. Examining Regeneration Experiences of Urban Outdoor Spaces Through the Lens of Children's Rights

Letizia Montalbano, Elena Pagliarino

35. Social Capital and Health: New Frontiers and Old Problems in a Working-Class Neighbourhood in Naples. Testing a Reconsideration of Territorial Healthcare

Francesco Calicchia

53. Safety, Mobility and Sociality in Urban Spaces during the Health Emergency in Italy

Antonietta Mazzette, Daniele Pulino, Sara Spanu

65. Local Authorities and Civic Actions Disentangled: Legibility and Scene Styles

Sebastiano Citroni

79. Italian Cities Looking for a New Normal: Economic and Social Opportunity between Reality, Perception and Hopes. The Case of Milan

Ariela Mortara, Rosantonietta Scramaglia

93. From the "Reception Trap" to "Denied Reception". The Tightening of Migration Policies and the Centrality of Informal Settlements Between Segregation and Resistance

Omid Firozi Tabar

107. Unmasking the Effects of Airbnb in Barcelona

Sofia Galeas Ortiz, Oscar Mascarilla Miró, Montse Crespi Vallbona

125. Endless Displacement. Migration Governance, Containment Strategies and Segregation in Athens and Turin

Erasmus Sossich

147. Public spaces transformations in Latin America during Covid-19: Community Resilience and Tactical Urbanism in Bogota, Quito and Mexico City

Raul Marino, Elkin Vargas, Maud Nys, Alejandra Riveros

3T SECTION - 3T READINGS

165. *The Changing Face of Tourism and Young Generations: Challenges and Opportunities*, Channel View Publications, 2022.

Francesca Romana Ammaturo reads, Fabio Corbisiero, Salvarore Monaco, Elisabetta Ruspini

167. *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative Global Urban Studies*, Routledge, 2023.

João Pedro Nunes reads Patrick Le Galès, Jennifer Robinson

169. *Migranti: la sfida dell'integrazione digitale. Innovazione e co-creation nel progetto H2020 MICADO*, FrancoAngeli, Milan, 2023 Emanuele Stochino reads Maurizio Bergamaschi (ed.)

INTERVIEW

173. *Old and New Problems after Covid-19: Having a Look at the US cities. A Talk with Ray Hutchison*

Gabriele Manella, Madalena Corte-Real

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From the “Reception Trap” to “Denied Reception”. The Tightening of Migration Policies and the Centrality of Informal Settlements Between Segregation and Resistance²

Introduction

As in many other European countries, in Italy since the late Nineties we have been witnessing the gradual strengthening of “zero tolerance” policies (Wacquant, 2000) through a continuous production of administrative measures, a constant involvement of police and media and a transversal protagonism of political forces.

Over the past twenty years, the issue of security has been one of the most frequent in Italy's public and media space, and has had the ability to affect much of the welfare urban policies, especially in areas particularly marked by social exclusion and marginality. At the same time, it has been an overall paradigm of social control with which social movements, especially the anti-racist ones, have had to contend. Security policies cannot be confined to specific areas of social control such as criminal law, but they represent a sort of paradigm within the framework of contemporary capitalism, both in its liberal (humanitarian) and populist (repressive) formulations. In most cases migrants are at the centre of these strategies, exposed to often violent practices of control, but they are also actors of radical resistance processes.

Symbolically insofar as they are stigmatized as “others” who threaten the security of cities in order to crystallize around this fear social anger and the socio-economic concerns of the middle and working classes increasingly impoverished in the new neo-liberal frame. They are the recipients of racializing processes and specific forms of territorial collocation and urban segregation (Davis, 1998; Harvey, 2018; Petrillo, 2018), functional to manage and contain the social surplus produced by the welfare state crisis within the progressive transition from the social state to the penal state (Wacquant, 2006; Simon, 2009) and to activate new and more flexible forms of differential inclusion within the new regimes of labour exploitation (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Cutitta, 2016).

In recent years we have witnessed an evolution of such stigmatizing narratives, and different forms of construction of “otherness” have followed one another and intertwined. From the moment the discourse on migration started to focus on the asylum seeker, the so-called “tautology of fear” (Dal Lago, 1999), which had at its centre the criminalisation of the irregular migrant, has overlapped with “tautology of suspicion” where the migrant must strive to represent the “perfect victims” and must come to terms, in the pandemic context, of being vehicles for the spread of the virus. From “dangerous” to “victim” to “infector”. To use an effective expression by Niels Christie (1986), the representations of the “suitable enemy”, the “suitable victim” and now the “suitable infector” combine with each other, contributing to define an otherness always destined to occupy a position of inferiority (Fabini & Firouzi, 2022).

This contribution is set within the framework of recent sociological and anthropological studies that have identified a restrictive trend in the functioning of borders in Italy and Europe and a hardening of migration governance. We will try to see how a certain configuration of the battleground animated by governance techniques and resistance behaviour can give us, within the urban context, indications of the novelties of the phase we are experiencing. In particular, we will focus on informal settlements, which in our view become a kind of laboratory where we can interpret the trends underway, in this case that of a security orientation of migration policies.

A relative confirmation of this trend has arrived from the results of the last part of an ethno-

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graphic study in Padua, a city in Northern Italy “famous” for having hosted between 2015 and 2018 some of the largest reception camps in the country.

After a first part where we will present some theoretical and empirical contributions in migration studies, but also in consideration of new strands of urban studies that are productively debating with them, we will define the methodology of empirical study and show the most relevant elements that emerged. Finally, we will make some conclusions, proposing some points for reflection and possible future studies with respect to the balance of the relations between care and control, and between humanitarian devices and securitization solutions.

1. Less Humanitarian Care, More Control, and the Politics of Expendability

In Italy, especially since the so-called refugee crisis started in early 2015³, those stigmatization processes that we could call *production of functional otherness*, have had as a constant reference control and disciplining devices oriented to the figure of the “good refugee” (Vacchiano, 2011). The forms of segregation and marginalization in the reception of asylum seekers (Manocchi, 2014; Pinelli, 2017; Firouzi, 2019) seem precisely geared toward constructing this ideal type of “suitable enemy” (Christie, 1986).

This “good refugee” lives and moves on the outskirts of cities, does not protest, does not claim rights and welfare, is grateful for the gift of welcome, accepts non-guaranteed jobs without raising his or her voice, is not unionized, conforms to the rules like a child in boarding school. This is a figure whose social construction is opposed to the “false refugee”, a label that the dominant public discourse has applied to all asylum seekers who have made their presence visible in the territories, individually or collectively claiming their independence and rights.

Until the Pandemic, the governance of the right to ask for international protection and the organization of asylum seekers’ reception was hinged on the paternalistic and infantilizing social construction of the “perfect victim” to be protected, as distinct, especially in the public narrative, from the “false refugee” and the “economic migrant” figures to be criminalized and rejected. In Italy, the consolidated securitization rhetoric (and norms) crystallized around the figure of the “clandestine” migrant (Dal Lago, 1999; Caputo, 2007; Sbraccia, 2020; Quassoli, 2020) are flanked, in correspondence with the spread of forms of “humanitarian confinement” in the context of the organization of the reception system (Campesi, 2015), by narratives and stereotypes that shape a subject who is highly exposed to victimization and vulnerability (Pasian & Toffanin, 2018; Marchetti & Palumbo, 2021) and thereby rendered docile, disciplined, depoliticized (Manocchi, 2014). Stereotypes and labels applied to migrants – represented sometimes as dangerous, other times as victims, other as spreader, as in the case of the Pandemic – do not replace each other but tend to intertwine and often coexist, with more or less force in the public space depending on the historical phase (Fabini & Firouzi Tabar, 2022).

Looking more generally at the framework of European policies over the past twenty years the governance of borders and migrant mobility has been influenced by securitization logics (Huysmans, 2000; Van Munster, 2009; Neal, 2009; Vaughan-Williams, 2011). At the same time, that approach, particularly towards refugees and asylum seekers, tends to intertwine with a humanitarian one, where practices of compassionate care and control coexist, alternate, and sometimes overlap (Fassin, 2012; Agier, 2005; Cutitta, 2018).

I think it is important to highlight that we interpret the prevalence and radicalization of some orientations within a gradual proliferation of «ambivalent and hybrid security-humanitarian regimes» (Hess & Kasperek, 2017, p. 63).

3 Two statistics can give us a good idea of the changes taking place at that historical stage. The number of people landed on Italian shores increased from 42,925 in 2013 to 170,100 in 2014 and the number of asylum seeker collocat-ed in the reception centers arise from 66.066 in 2014 to 174.734 in 2016 (Ministry of Internal Affair).

The (i)mmobilisation strategies of migrants and some radical stigmatization and institutional abandonment of migrant subjectivity have led to the assumption of a “securitization” of migration governance (Fabini & Firouzi Tabar, 2023) in Italy and the Mediterranean region, achieved through the “excuse” of Covid-19 (Stierl & Dadusc, 2021), and a “de-humanitarianization” of the securitization rationale behind bordering and migration control (Heller, Pezzani & Stierl, 2023). Adding to these arguments is the idea that the main point is not a retreat of the “humanitarian reason”, but a consideration of how it has been inflected through hygienic-sanitary logics and combined with deterrence measures aimed at preventively disrupting migrants’ access to rights, asylum, and European territory (Tazzioli & Stierl, 2021). A tendency that seems to consider at sea and in the territories, the “necropolitical sacrificability” of migrants (Fabini & Firouzi Tabar, 2023) and the constant threat of being subjected to irregularity and repatriation as well as to socio-spatial segregation and institutional abandonment as functional devices for the organization of increasingly racialized and violent forms of subaltern inclusion (Ambrosini, Lodigiani & Zanfrini, 1995).

Recent political trends in Italy, especially the latest reform of migration legislation (Law 50/2023, conversion law of the so-called Cutro Decree), suggest, as we will see, that the trend towards securitization, made evident during the pandemic phase, is still ongoing. The overall message seems very clear: migration, even with respect to asylum seekers and refugees, is a matter of national security, less and less related to the humanitarian spheres.

Among the multiple signals in this direction, three political and normative solutions seem particularly significant, all contained in Law 50/2023, which has changed Italian policies on border control and the management of the reception of asylum seekers.

First, the government criminalizes NGOs engaged in Search and Rescue (SAR) operations in the Mediterranean Sea, turning a humanitarian dimension into a national security one. The most serious decisions in this regard have been to sharply increase the penalties for smugglers, to reinforce agreements with Libya to block the departures and to implement the (illegal) rejections in the Mediterranean Sea, to prohibit NGOs from carrying out more than one rescue in the same mission, and to designate very distant locations as ports of disembarking to making rescue activities economically unsustainable.

Secondly, resources for the reception of asylum seekers like legal and psychological support and Italian language courses have been cut, severely downsizing the sphere of rights and completely eliminating any institutional objective of social inclusion and accelerating the exit processes.

This law strikes the right to reception through two other provisions: it definitively states that asylum seekers can only be placed in emergency facilities, and new temporary camps are established where adults and minors can be confined together and where only food, shelter and language mediation are provided.

Finally, the most recently debated measure: the decision to build new administrative detention centres in every Italian region and the decision to hold people who have arrived from safe countries in detention spaces while waiting for the conclusion of the process of their asylum application. It is important to emphasize another element which concerns a recent practice of several Italian prefectures, and which has produced considerable exclusion and social marginalization towards asylum seekers: the tendency not to place young “newcomers” in reception facilities even though they have clearly expressed a desire to seek political asylum, and to give them appointments to formalize their application months later, a period in which they swell the population of the homeless, subject to complete institutional abandonment.

The urban repercussions of this orientation suggest a nationwide generalization of those conditions of radical rejection, socio-spatial marginalization and hostility that characterize the so-called “cities of exclusion” (Marchetti, 2019), where the dynamics of abandonment of a part of the asylum seekers risk excluding them even from those basic forms of parallel welfare thanks to which they were guaranteed a dignified survival (Semperebon, 2021).

The recent legislation and the repressive governmental practices in many territories suggest that

the processes of forced or voluntary exit from reception, already existing for many years due to an increasing porosity of its symbolic and material walls (Firouzi Tabar, 2020), is undergoing an acceleration. This has resulted in an increasing presence of the homeless asylum seeker within the informal settlements that arise within cities. During some meetings and interviews, some of the workers of the Municipality of Padua repeatedly reported that for the first time in their experience they were seeing many homeless asylum seekers (waiting for a long time to be placed in reception facilities) turn to the support desk to get a meal, to take a shower, and often to ask for a place to sleep. The presence of this figure in urban space was also verified through periods of participant observation in the surroundings of a new informal settlement, Salvemini Square, located near the train station, and then emerged from the increasing number of appeals made by a group of lawyers who were collaborating with the "Open Gates" legal support desk, which we will return to later.

These individuals experience diffuse exposure to social neglect, repressive actions by law enforcement, and intimidation marked by coercive dynamics connected with the very important concept of "deportability" (De Genova, 2002).

What is striking is that the migrants living in these campsites, are portrayed as responsible for a problem of law and order, as producers of degradation that threatens the city. This applies to those who voluntarily choose to leave reception facilities, but also to those who have had a positive or negative response to their asylum application and who, in the absence of inclusive policies following the reception period, find themselves forcibly living on the streets. The inhabitants of these informal settlements are abandoned, excluded from any inclusion strategy and represented as deviants responsible for a security problem, treated as criminals (Mantovan, 2018), in some cases as ungrateful subjects who dared to refuse the gift of reception.

However, we do not intend to communicate a passive image of the subjectivities we are talking about.

In accordance with some theoretical orientations that have recently come to prominence in migration studies we look at the scenario determined by security policies as an open field, as a battleground (Ambrosini, 2021) marked by constant conflicts and frictions between the devices of control and the emancipatory thrusts of these people (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Hess Kasperek, 2017; De Genova, Garelli & Tazzioli, 2018; Papadopoulos, 2022). While we are aware of the violence that this securitization frame of migration governance produces, we think it is important to focus on less popular areas of our cities where it is possible to observe the manifestation of migrants' counter-conducts and resistances against exclusion and marginalization. These homeless asylum seekers often use the city by creating and inhabiting specific interstitial spaces (Fontanari & Ambrosini, 2018) to gather resources for their continued journey, in some cases thanks to the interactions with the scarce low-threshold services that are available, in others, through connections with the local social networks, especially with the antiracist groups and associations (Pasian, Storato & Toffanin, 2020; Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021). These settlements evolving beyond the formal reception system can be seen as an arena, characterized by conflicts, social tensions and negotiations.

In particular some specific areas such as that around the railway station, can become battlegrounds marked by changing power relations «for the physical and symbolic production, occupation and appropriation of (public) space» (Cancellieri & Ostanel, 2015, p.10). This "spatial agency" that Cancellieri and Ostanel refer to leads back to the struggle for public space and can be a condition and a prelude to further forms of socio-political urban protagonism.

In Italy, through heterogeneous behaviours and individual and collective practices asylum seekers, both people in transit and people desiring to stay, often engage in informal and occasionally illegal ways of occupying metropolitan, urban, and rural spaces (Stopani & Pampuro, 2018; Peano, 2021), becoming active participants in subjective processes of conflict and negotiation, both in the more welcoming "sanctuary city" (Ambrosini, 2021) and in the inhospitable frame of the "cities of exclusion" (Marchetti, 2019).

As said before, we do not want to underestimate the forms of further suffering and violence that constitute the social effects of repressive and security policies and of an increasingly widespread tendency towards institutional abandonment and sacrifice of thousands of men and women who have passed from the social trap represented by reception to seeing it in many cases completely denied. At the same time, however, we believe it is important to have a gaze capable of catching the various acts of “making spaces” (Colucci & Gallo, 2016) by migrants outside the reception system and their ability to express autonomy and innovation, particularly evident through the study of informal settlements (Belloni, Fravega & Giudici, 2020; Benedict 2020), to try to trace and bring to the surface those forms of agency from marginal positions (Ghorashi, De Boer & Ten Holder, 2018) and those counter-hegemonic expressions within the spaces of urban segregation (Dempsey, 2021). These resistances and counter-conducts signal an active presence of migrants and their unwillingness to be passive actors in the governance of the urban space (Hall, 2015; Darling, 2017; Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021).

The informal settlement that I have had the opportunity to know in Padua show the coexistence and sometimes the intertwining of forms of oppression produced by institutional choices and the production of spaces of resistance within highly conflicting urban contexts.

2. Methodology

This article contains some empirical contributions that emerged during an ethnographic study in which extensive periods of direct observation were accompanied by active engagement in various protests and mobilizations, where asylum seekers advocated for their rights within reception facilities and dignified forms of local inclusion. Specifically, in 2022 there were many occasions for meeting with a large group of asylum seekers excluded from the institutional reception system in and around an informal settlement in Padova near the railway station.

We can divide the empirical work into three parts although the interactions with some migrants was long-lasting and went through all of them.

In the initial two parts, we focused on the organization of reception facilities and the conditions in terms of human rights and freedom, followed by an exploration of the social ramifications brought about by the pandemic on asylum seekers.

In the last part, finished at the end of 2023, our collocation and interactions in the research field were guaranteed both by the relationships established during the preceding stages and by the fact that the informal settlement in question emerged in the same square where I am engaged as an activist within a social and cultural space called Stria, specifically within the legal support desk for asylum seekers organized by the Open Gates association.

The presence of a legal support desk a few meters away from the central area of the informal encampment made it possible to look from inside to get to know the perceptions and point of view of the inhabitants of that place, but also to activate a self-reflective process with respect to the ambivalences of solidarity-based anti-racist practices (Firouzi Tabar, 2021).

3. Results: Contested Spaces in the City

We are in Padua, in the railway station area. Towards the end of 2018, Law 132 on security and immigration was approved by the Italian parliament, and it is no coincidence that the two concepts overlap within the legislative measure. Among the various issues, such as some attempts to hinder the NGOs active in the Mediterranean, emerges one of the most relevant cuts in investments for the reception of asylum seekers that led to a deterioration of the conditions of migrants in the facilities. Between 2018 and 2019 the total investment of the Italian state for the

various forms of reception decreased by about 150 million (Data: Ministry of Economy) euros. More in detail we see that the public funds disbursed *per die* for each asylum seeker within the emergency facilities falls from 35 euros to 25 euros (Data: Ministry of Interior), forcing especially the small organizations to make substantial cuts for social inclusion services.

Among the many choices to restrict the requirements for access to reception and accelerate expulsions from it, we find the elimination of one of the most widespread forms of regularization: the "humanitarian protection". That "permit to stay" was introduced by Law 286/1998. In the absence of conditions for having international protection, it tends to care people who suffered particular physical and psychological harm in trying to reach Italy, and those who built a consistent path of social inclusion in Italy while waiting for their asylum application to be examined.

The meaning is to institutionally abandon and make irregular and deportable thousands of individuals who previously, albeit precariously, found some socio-economic protection in the framework of the right to asylum and institutional reception. It is no coincidence that during the first months of 2019, the first small encampments sprang up, first in Piazza Salvemini and later, following a police eviction, in Piazza Gasparotto.

We are in a logistically and architecturally strategic area.



Image 1. The gathering of young migrants in the square.
(Source: original from the Author)



Image 2. The square after the police station opening.
(Source: original from the Author)

The square is visually sheltered, little known, and is only a few meters from the station, public showers and popular kitchens where free meals are daily distributed. At the same time, it is close to the city centre. In 2021, immediately following the end of restrictions due to the pandemic crisis which pushed everybody to abandon the square, the area began to be populated again (Image 1). The settlement, especially in terms of the number of people using it as a night shelter, reaches its maximum size and crowding during the spring and summer of 2022, precisely at the stage when, together with other activists and fellow researchers, we decide to inaugurate the Stria cultural space and the legal support desk within it.⁴

The relationships previously built with some of the settlement's inhabitants and my role as activist and coordinator of the asylum seeker help desk within the square ensured a daily, trusting interaction with the migrants in the area through interviews, informal conversations, and consultations at the legal support desk.

The composition of those who passed through or inhabited the settlement during those months is heterogeneous. Asylum seekers who left the reception facilities due to a revocation of the measures, the end of their asylum application or by voluntary choice, irregular migrants looking for inconspicuous places of shelter, regular migrants without a job and without sufficient income to have a home, but also migrants with a regular job unable to find accommodation due to racism in the rental housing market. The square also played a functional role for certain young newcomers who, especially since the Cutro Decree, have found it very difficult to find a place in the institutional reception network. Thanks to the legal support desk, but also to the constant presence of various solidarity associations and the availability of a group of lawyers, they were able to receive information and assistance that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. Additionally, the square provided a place for them to spend a few nights while awaiting improved accommodation. For many months, the square's arcade had turned into a dormitory. The contiguity with the legal support desk made it possible, on the one hand, to monitor at almost all hours of the day and evening the situation and to intervene in emergency situations by providing water and blankets, or by reporting to social and health services the most serious critical situations.

The biographical stories collected during individual conversations, but also in collective moments of confrontation, reveal first and foremost the consequences of an institutional governance entirely based on emergency logics, a fact that forcibly collocates many migrants in an extreme spatial, social and temporal precariousness, often rendering them incapable of constructing medium-term projects, too busy in a daily struggle for survival. During December 2022, a new phenomenon, at least in intensity and spread, gave us concrete evidence of the conditions of these "suspended lives" particularly referring to migrants who had recently arrived in Italy. Our association was contacted at the same time by a group of Pakistani migrants who had been frequenting and sometimes sleeping in the square for a few weeks and by some social workers who worked at the public showers, a key point of reference for vulnerable individuals seeking support. It was reported to us that many migrants who had arrived in Padua, despite having expressed a desire to seek asylum, were not seeing their right to be placed in reception facilities respected and thus find themselves in the particular (forced) condition of homeless asylum seekers (image 3). Going to the public showers to ask the municipality for temporary accommodation in the framework of the so-called "winter emergency", the workers could not accept their request since the Prefecture was the only institution that could take care of them.

These are people trapped in a kind of socio-legal limbo. On the one hand they were unresponsive with respect to the institution that officially deals with asylum seekers, the Prefecture, and on the other hand they were rejected and literally left on the street by the municipality social services. In that period I was able to meet and get to know many young people in this condition and I could see the signs of a deep discomfort and disorientation due to this institutional

4 The opening of the Stria space is favoured by the long work of actors as the cultural circle Nadir, the Co-working C0+ and the Gasparotto association. An important collaboration plan was created with them in order to address the problems and contradictions of the area and imagine together innovative forms of urban regeneration.

abandonment of very young people (in several cases we are talking about under 20 migrants). For these people, who seem to confirm a trend toward "securitization" that sees increasingly "less care" and "more control", there is no public investment for socio-economic protection. This condition drives them to find refuge and seek resources in the informal dynamics of urban space and in some cases in reference to anti-racist realities in the territory.

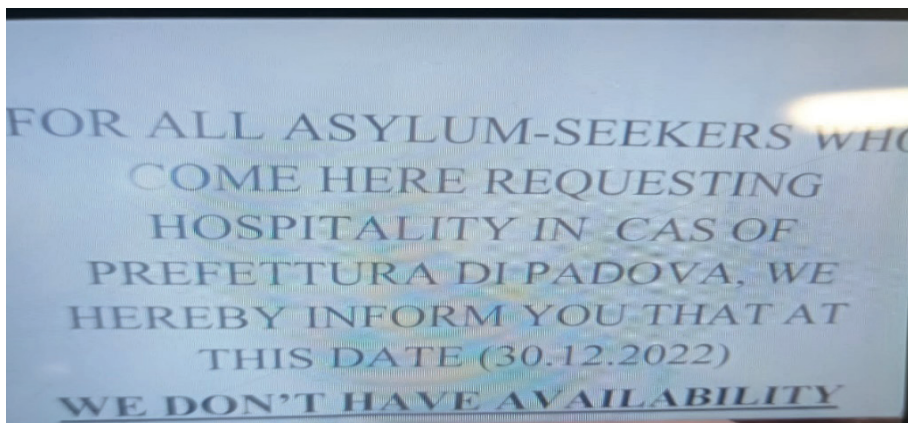


Image 3. This poster was hung in front of the police headquarters and the prefecture of Padua
(Source: original from the Author)

While representing in many cases a minimum basis for the protection of primary rights such as the right to housing the organization of reception itself is steeped in critical issues and problematic contradictions. Indeed, the choices and life stories observed and shared during that period brought to light and confirmed the idea of the social trap represented by the institutional reception system. In this regard it seems emblematic that within the encampment I found people who I met for the first time in the protest marches seven years before against the rights violation within some reception camps, people who today show all the rage and frustration toward an oppressive and discriminatory migration management system.

Among the people met within the informal settlement, there are many cases of former asylum seekers whose reception itinerary did not favour an emancipatory process, trapped in a precarious and frustrating vicious circle. Among them, the case of Hakim, a young Ivorian guy, seems to be very emblematic. Hakim does not sleep in the square, he finds better solutions from friends, he arrived in Padova during 2011 at the time of the so-called North Africa plan so he has a good network in the city. Until 2013 he benefits from humanitarian permits, but in 2013 the plan ends and he finds himself excluded from reception and thus homeless. With dozens of other people, he occupies a building, Casa Don Gallo, where he remains for two years while he waits for a response to his application for international protection. From 2015 to 2019 he is placed in the institutional reception circuit, where for a short period he also experiences the difficult living conditions in the first reception camp in Bagnoli, in the Province of Padua. It is there that we met for the first time, during the summer of 2017. In 2019, his application for asylum is rejected, and he is expelled from the reception facility despite a "reiterated application" for international protection. Then, his residence permit is no longer renewed and he starts to live irregularly. Hakim, and many others like him, more than ten years after his arrival sees his path to inclusion, which began with hopes and ambitions, retreating instead of evolving. As emerges from a long interview done before he left to reach France, he suffers on his skin the violent effects of Italian migration policies and finds in the informal dynamics and networks of the territory the last resources to try to change course in his life:

«Do you remember when we used to do the manifestation together to get the Bagnoli refugee camp closed down? That was many years ago. We thought we were doing the right thing, even when we

occupied Don Gallo with comrades from the Union. But it didn't help. In the end then they move you around, move you around and tell you to wait. At first it is okay, everything is okay because you think you wait and then you get the document. Do you see me? It's been ten years and I don't even have it. I don't even think about it anymore. I met some guys here near the station who also come to the square sometimes, they are organizing to go to France, I'm thinking to go with them»

Hakim's story not only signals to us the violence that characterizes migration control and, in response to it, the importance of studying what happens in urban contexts. It reminds us, once again, that around the concept of agency of migrant subjectivity the imperative to avoid any form of "romanticization". The relations built over the years, the informal dynamics from which to recover socio-economic resources and the solidarity of anti-racist associations, combined with the main point that is the obstinacy and stubbornness of the subjects themselves, keep alive the hope for emancipation and growth. At the same time, social exclusion from the institutional point of view and the extreme precariousness of the legal condition makes the situation radically problematic, and this is increasingly true for the very young newcomers.

Moreover, Hakim's biographical profile warns against the risk of creating rigid and ideological categories insufficient to read the complexity of the phenomena observed. While it is true that this life trajectory, and other elements gathered from the field of research, reinforce the idea of a general tendency to restrict or nullify the rights and dignity of migrant people, this tendency must be read by considering very carefully many contingencies as well as many subjective and local structural variables. The suggestion that comes to us is to focus on the "battleground" along the multiples of mobility that people trace trying to escape the reins and traps of migration control policies. Going back to Piazza Gasparotto it should be noted that at certain stages, the socio-sanitary conditions within the settlement were highly critical, accompanied by issues related to drug use and frequent episodes of conflict, in some case violent, among its inhabitants. Nevertheless, the concealed and sheltered location of the settlement, along with its strategic positioning and the presence of social support networks and easily accessible low threshold services, facilitated in some cases a more dynamic and independent utilization of the opportunities offered by the urban environment. The settlement and the relational dynamics it produced among the inhabitants, but also with external actors as anti-racist groups, have represented for some migrants an opportunity of relational visibility as well as the possibility to accumulate social capital both to connect more to the city's opportunities and to accumulate resources with a view to continuing their migration trajectory.

There are many cases of migrants, often known in the evening hours because during the day most of the settlement's population moved to other parts of the city, who spent only two or three weeks there before attempting to reach France or Germany. In this case, the relational network of the settlement was pragmatically useful not only to rest and regain strength for the new journey, but also to gather information and logistical indications on the safest way to reach and cross the border. Even in the weeks during which the area is overcrowded and conditions of greater social decay and episodes of conflict between the inhabitants intensify, the police forces do not seem to want to act through the classic repressive and security instruments. What prevailed was an informal dynamic of tolerance and a constant negotiation plan, oriented not to exasperate the conflict and not to impose the instruments of the penal and repressive approach, where in many cases there was a strategic and "logistical" disapplication of the law (Fabini, 2023). The words of a Nigerian guy who was irregular after the denial of his asylum claim and who was living in the informal settlement in the square in those days, words collected after closing time of the Open Gates desk where he was collaborating as a mediator, seem very meaningful:

«The police? I used to try to avoid them. but now I'm tired, I've been in Italy for five years, I also spent almost two years in the Cona camp in Venice, together with 1,000 other people. After five years I'm here without papers, without a home and without a job. I'm tired of running away too. and then they know that around here there are many of us without (papers) they know us, what should they do? arrest us all?»

Throughout this phase, municipal authorities exhibited a mix of responses, oscillating between the provision of essential services, such as night shelters for migrants, including those without documents, the willingness to mobilize the local social services and the anti/marginalization “street units” to try to approach the situation with the tools of mediation and care.

In spite of this, situations of abandonment, strong social exclusion and critical situations from the point of view of primary rights persisted and were in part counteracted by the presence of Stria, of Nadir, another cultural space active from years in the square, and the network of solidarity associations. In addition to specific interventions such as legal support, the main contribution of the self-organized realities was to “make visible” on a daily basis the most urgent critical issues and push institutions to intervene, albeit often belatedly.

Between spring and winter 2022, the informal settlement and its surrounding area emerged as an experimental laboratory of encounters and relations involving a portion of the migrants in the camp. This experimental space brought together various professionals such as lawyers, mediators, and researchers, as well as anti-racist solidarity groups and the municipal administration. It is important to highlight that, especially thanks to the migrants’ ability to utilize that portion of the city and their skill in building and leveraging unexpected relationships within it, the prevailing theme during this period was the structural causes behind the formation of the camp. Simultaneously, the issue of social marginalization and institutional neglect often took centre stage in the city’s public discourse.

This was partly due to the efforts of solidarity groups very active in the area. In this context, there was a growing recognition of the need to address these phenomena with social tools of care and inclusion, in open opposition to the securitization model.

However, this element alone would not have been sufficient without the existence of an institutional willingness that we can consider rare in the Italian political landscape, which is broadly oriented towards representing social marginality as a matter of security and public order. As already mentioned, the Municipality of Padova, particularly the head of social services, decided to directly invest resources, despite attacks from right-wing parties. These resources were used to strengthen “street units” in the area to daily support the homeless population, and to create a new street unit focused on people with drug addiction. They also committed to supporting existing associations and, at the proposal of organizations such as Open Gates, to establish institutional tables where different actors (including the Police Headquarters and the Prefettura) meet to envision a structural social intervention in the area and to plan a social requalification of the same using mediation and social inclusion tools. This particular activism of associations and the administration’s willingness unexpectedly found an echo in the local press. One of the local newspapers, *Il Mattino di Padova*, on October 22, 2022, headlined in this way an article about the situation in Piazza Gasparotto: «Migrants expelled from reception centres are the “drifters” who fill the squares of Padua». This article, and others of the same tenor, overturn the assumptions of the securitization paradigm by attributing the tensions and conflicts present in the area not to the dangerousness of the subjects, but to the structural limitations and criticalities of migration governance. From the individual responsibility to the institutional one.

However, this experimentation, and the virtuous storytelling that accompanied it, was short-lived.

The first signs of a shift towards a more traditional security-focused approach appeared on the morning of September 26. Without prior notice, law enforcement officers entered the square and cleared the makeshift beds where dozens of people were sleeping, discarding all their belongings, including their clothes. Around the same time, a media campaign began with remarkable consistency, focusing on the perceived danger posed by the people frequenting the square and questioning the effectiveness of a social and community-based approach.

In a short span of time, the long inclusive process constructed in that area was severely weakened, overshadowed by the intrusion of stigmatizing narratives and the practices of criminalization activated by the police.

In January 2023, an event occurred that marked the definitive return to a security-focused approach: the establishment of a police station in the square (Image 3). This led to the subsequent dismantling of the informal settlement, the “desertification” of the area, and the relocation of a large portion of migrants to another sheltered location in the vicinity, Piazza Salvemini. Ironically, it was the same place where they had moved years earlier after a police eviction.

Identifying a specific reason to explain this shift is not easy. It can be hypothesized that, beyond the classic justifications underlying the securitization rationale, there was a strong reluctance from local institutions to continue investing in a social experiment creating a reproducible precedent and, above all, an attraction point, as “inclusive city” for migrants residing in more hostile territories. On the other hand, we can explain this change by considering the city hall’s goal of responding, with immediate and visible solutions, to the debate activated in the city following the intervention of some local newspapers that had used headlines like these to portray the situation: «A Tent city in Piazza Gasparotto in Padova: Is the kingdom of pushers and drug users», «Decay in a short walk from the station. The residents: Sex in the square in change of drugs». We can see once again a centre-left local government imitating the right-wing approaches and feeding populist practices and rhetoric, thus confirming the transversality of the securitization trend in local government (Tondelli, 2009).

Certainly, for some migrants – such as many recent asylum seekers excluded from institutional reception and an increasing number of asylum seekers expelled from reception centres following the approval of the Cutro Decree – this abrupt shift toward a security-oriented approach will have significant social consequences, pushing them towards extreme social marginalization.

4. Final Remarks

The case of the informal settlement in Padua shows us two elements that we consider useful for a more general discussion on the phenomenon of migratory movements and its governance within territories, reinforcing the idea of a progressive “securitization” of “othering” and “bordering” policies in the urban context.

First of all, the process that characterized that part of Padua’s urban space, at least until the security turn, showed how, despite the presence of structural elements of suffering, discrimination and oppression, we are in the presence of an always open field marked by conflicts, negotiations, alliances and resistance where subjects are often not passive victims.

Secondly, we see how this battleground is increasingly developing in the shady areas and sheltered places of urban space. The occupation of these spaces by migrants, specifically by an increasing number of “homeless asylum seekers”, occurs for several reasons and through many different forms. It may be the search for shelter to spend the night, or it may be a strategic device to seek new forms of active inclusion in the territory, or even a temporary logistical support to continue the migratory trajectory.

It is true that after the end of the informal settlement experience in Piazza Gasparotto, many migrants have found other solutions and appropriate contexts to cope with the distress caused by the processes of racialization and institutional socio-economical abandonment we have recently witnessed in Italy. However, it is equally true that the “expendability” in act thanks to the hegemony of the securitization model places them at very dangerous levels of denial of basic rights, leading to daily suffering and violence.

Certainly, this conflictual and emancipatory use of the city and the occupation and production and reproduction of new spaces and relations in some of its areas, as the Padua case shows us, must severely reckon with the tendency to restrict the requirements for the right to asylum, to severely weaken the organisation of reception and to impose securitization approaches in the management of new migrations.

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