

# LOCAL “COMMUNITIES”, IMMIGRANTS AND THE URBAN CHANGE: COMPARING MILAN AND BARCELONA CITY NEIGHBOURHOODS

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper deals with the impact of new residents' settlement – namely immigrants from non-European countries – in two neighbourhoods in the cities of Milan and Barcelona. The aim is to explore how urban actors – and especially resident associations – represent newcomers through identity/alterity narratives and deal with the changes that have occurred in local contexts (differential use of public space, new shops etc.) since their arrival. Autochthonous residents' practices and discourses which aim at including or excluding immigrants from the local “community” and the enjoyment of urban space will be investigated in detail. A comparison between neighbourhoods is conducted against the backdrop of urban public discourse on immigration and the different ways in which local authorities attempt to prevent and mediate urban conflicts. To this end, the recent history of urban development and models of governance in these two Southern European cities will be taken into account.*

**KEY WORDS:** Milan, Barcelona, neighbourhood, community, immigrants

## INTRODUCTION

Social scientists have traditionally studied migrations within the framework of the nation-state, focusing in particular on processes of inclusion and exclusion, and the (non)integration of immigrants in national societies. More recently, the importance of the immigration-city nexus has been stressed by a considerable body of literature: cities are recognized as key places in which processes of inclusion take place. Among the different domains in which this become evident, cities are considered to play a major role in the recognition of cultural differences: more and more cultural identities are shaped, managed, negotiated and contested in urban space (Uitermark et al. 2005, Amin and Thrift 2002). In this view, local contestations are considered as key places where *difference* is negotiated and where particular “*microcultures* of inclusion/exclusion” take shape (Amin and Thrift 2002: 291): these *microcultures* are influenced by such factors as “local class relations and associated ethnic settlements, the policies of local authorities on housing,

education, planning and culture, and the balance of play between minority, majority and fringe organizations such as racist groups” (ibidem). Interethnic relations “are played out as a neighbourhood phenomenon linked to particular socio-economic conditions and cultural practices that coalesce into a local way of life” (Amin 2002).

From this point of view, the main object of my research has been to investigate the processes of *identity/alterity* construction in contexts defined by different local *microcultures* and in relation to different processes of inclusion in and exclusion from the enjoyment of urban space. I focus on three neighbourhoods in two cities of the northern part of Southern Europe: Stadera and Benedetto Marcello in Milan and Poble Sec in Barcelona. Due to spatial constraints, however, I will consider just two of the three cases.

The places I examine are “localities” defined not only by their spatial features but also by their relational ones: they are places of concrete daily relations, structures of sentiment and value (Appadurai 2001), where *difference* is a fundamental element in the processes of negotiation and conflict. Different ways to conceive of *difference* contribute to discrimination between the inside and outside, between who belongs and who does not to a specific place. Beginning with these premises, I have investigated the construction of socio-spatial boundaries which shape neighbourhood belonging and the exclusion of those considered as “outsiders”. These boundaries are traced between a “local”, autochthonous “us”, whom belonging to the urban space of the neighbourhood is considered legitimate and taken for granted and a foreign “them”, whom exclusion or partial inclusion in that same place is justified by diverse *discriminatory repertoires*<sup>1</sup> (Blokland 2003). Moreover, the neighbourhood comparison carried out in this paper is analyzed against the backdrop of urban public discourse on immigration and the different ways in which local authorities attempt to prevent and mediate urban conflicts. To this end, I take into account the recent history of urban development models of governance in the two Southern European cities selected for study.

The paper is structured in the following way: first, I introduce some theoretical concepts concerning community, neighbourhood, the relation between the local and the global, and processes of *identity/alterity* construction in contemporary urban contexts; second, after a brief presentation of the two neighbourhoods, I outline the main narratives through which established residents frame the presence of immigrants (“newcomers”,

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<sup>1</sup> Blokland presents 4 different routes to “discriminatory repertoires” which correspond to 4 different ways of relating with the “other”: 1) “indifference”: when actors have little local contact and little interest in neighbourhood contact; 2) good neighbouring and anti-racist discourse which corresponds to the “contact” hypothesis – a particular route that normally implies that “they” have to adapt to “us” to be included as full members in the community 3) “realistic conflict”: when there is competition over the use and symbolic appropriation of space 4) “non-realistic” conflict: when there is no real competition or threat, but immigrants become a “scapegoat” to reinvent a sense of community (2003: 19 -20).

“outsiders”), highlighting how they engage in the process of community and territorial identity construction. Lastly, I draw some conclusions from the cases presented and advance more general reflections on the differences between Milan and Barcelona and on the ways by which they influence the local processes shaping the inclusion and exclusion of newcomers.

## **1. NEIGHBOURHOOD, COMMUNITY AND THE “VALUE OF PLACE” IN THE CONTEMPORARY CITY**

The theoretical standpoint from which this research begins recognises how the locality (neighbourhood) plays an important role in processes of identity construction. This idea breaks with a tradition that has tended to posit the “global” and the “local” as antithetical and mutual exclusive components of a binary opposition in which the latter is just the residual effect of the former<sup>2</sup>. As a consequence of increasing global interconnection, proliferation of boundaries and processes of binomial re-signification of states and territories, the importance of place does not vanish, but rather is transformed. As Ulrich Beck stated “you cannot even think about globalisation without referring to specific locations and places” (in Savage et al. 2005: 1)

Two main positions can be found in the debate about the relevance of the local dimension of contemporary urban life: the first sees that the importance of the neighbourhood has faded while the second recognizes that it is still relevant but just for some particular groups (ethnic groups, working class, etc.). This particular debate brings us back to the famous debate about the persistence and loss of community in contemporary urban life. Some, notably Wirth, view urban relations as impersonal and transitory, while others, such as Gans, see urban neighbourhoods as places where intense and significant social relations emerge. The problem with this debate is that it tends to represent community as necessarily related to territory (i.e. strictly “localized”) and tend to conceive it as a zero sum game – more relations outside the neighbourhood equate to a reduction in the propensity to proximity and vice versa (Borlini and Memo 2008: 77). More recently, other scholars have tried to break with the simple co-variation of space and community and have proposed a different point of view in which community-like relations can be found in urban life but not necessarily linked to a specific territory (Wellman 1979 and Fischer 1982).

My starting point is that in contemporary metropolises we do not find “communities” as they were conceived traditionally in sociology, but we do find what Italian sociologist Bagnasco has termed “tracks of communities” (1999). These “tracks” are those partial and diverse issues (identity,

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<sup>2</sup> This conceptualization may be found in the work of several leading scholars, including Manuel Castells and Zygmunt Baumann (cfr Smith 2001 and Savage 2005).

reciprocity, social capital) that have remained following the “explosion” of the concept of community in the social sciences. In our case, the idea of being part of a local community becomes relevant when people face the presence of *others*, or those who are considered as outsiders. In this view, community is conceived as a symbolic and discursive construction (cfr Cohen 1985 among others) which becomes relevant in the moment we identify those who don’t belong to *our* group. This becomes evident in the identification of particular social-spatial boundaries which discriminate between those who belong to a specific place and whose presence is legitimate, and those who do not. In this view, community still has a strong relation with space, and its territorial referent varies according to the level of identity the actors might call upon: local, urban, national, European etc. From this perspective, claiming that neighbourhood and community ties do not necessarily coincide does not mean that we have to get rid of the dimensions of proximity and territory when studying contemporary urban processes. We do not need to conceive of the neighbourhood as a community or, conversely, of the community as necessarily local. Rather, we should investigate for whom and under which conditions the territory and proximity are (still) important.

To this end, I think it is particularly convenient to conceive of neighbourhood as a “practical device whose function is to guarantee continuity between what is more intimate (the private space of the house) and what is mostly unknown (the whole city or, as an extension, the rest of the world) (...) the neighbourhood is the middle term in the existential - on the personal level and social - on the actors group level - dialectics between the inside and the outside. The appropriation of space takes place in the tension between these two terms, an *inside* and an *outside* which little by little becomes the extension of the *inside*” (Mayol 1980: 18-19).

The appropriation of the neighbourhood is manifested under specific circumstances as a particular attachment to place, which constitutes an example of the “value of place” (Bauman 2001) which has not been wiped out by the pressure of global flows – as first generation globalization scholars had predicted. This somehow renewed “value of place” takes in some cases the shape of defensive reactions, exclusionary practices and discriminatory narratives towards other groups or specific situation viewed as threatening or deleterious for the image of social prestige that the residential place confers on its dwellers<sup>3</sup>. These “defensive reactions” can be observed in diverse forms: they can affect people’s housing and schooling strategies, they can influence the ways in which public space is lived and the relations between different groups in everyday life, and, most importantly, they can lead to

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<sup>3</sup> I am referring to those “effets de lieu” (Bourdieu 1993) that space produces according to the amount of capital concentrated in it and that works to make residential place a key factor in the contemporary fight for social distinction (Savage 2005).

policies which aim at regulating and disciplining urban public space and trying to prevent the “dangerous classes” from contaminating it. The latter set of phenomena has been defined by Neil Smith as *revanchist city*, a term coined for the New York case with particular reference to the effects of gentrification. By this term, the author refers to a particular situation in which minority groups are considered as enemies through discourses and practices which are a “reaction against the supposed ‘theft’ of the city, a desperate defence of a challenged phalanx of privileges, cloaked in the populist language of civic morality and neighbourhood security” (Smith 1996: 211).

It is quite clear that similar processes have been taking place in European cities in the last few decades and that immigrants frequently constitute the object of this particular political discourse<sup>4</sup>. Several scholars have shown how immigrants in European cities have come to constitute the figure of a “convenient enemy” – a scapegoat blamed for all kind of social problems (see Dal Lago 1999, Palidda 2008), making the “non communitarian immigrant” an out-and-out “social category” invested with a series of negative attributes (Santamaría 2002, Delgado 1997).

Moreover, in the urban context this cognitive category becomes a useful tool to justify autochthonous claims of supremacy within a given territory and to legitimate their demand for a “right to security” (Petrillo 2000: 151 – 157). This particular discriminating and criminalizing discourse becomes manifest in social practices in which a process of invention or re-construction of community goes hand in hand with the refusal and exclusion of “others”, defined as the poor and the culturally and socially different.

In Italian cities, these processes have become particularly evident in the 90’s through the phenomenon of the “comitati di quartiere”: resident associations fighting for liveability and security in their neighbourhoods but often assuming racist and discriminatory stances towards newcomers and spreading a patently anti-immigrant discourse (Petrillo 2003, Belluati 1998, Della Porta 1999). Their discursive repertoires are often based on nostalgia for a lost past, in which the neighbourhood was a peaceful and safe place that can be brought back only by a process of “purification” (Sennett 1970) that eliminates undesirable groups from urban public space. Citizens’ call for “clean and safe neighbourhoods” and their *revanchist* attitude is just one expression of a wider discourse, fuelled by politicians, intellectuals, police forces and media which places emphasis on issues of insecurity and spreads an image of foreigners strongly characterised by discriminatory and racist stereotyping (Maneri 2001, Faso 2008).

This negative situation is dominant in the case of Italy case while it is more nuanced in Spain, particularly in Barcelona, which has developed a model that tries to be more open and inclusive towards newcomers and promotes

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Semprebon (2009)

integration in local contexts. In the following pages, I will analyze the discourses and practices of residents towards newcomers in two neighbourhoods in Barcelona and Milan. I will then explore some of the differences found in these neighbourhoods against the backdrop of urban public discourses on immigration and the different ways in which local authorities try to prevent and mediate urban conflicts.

## **2. *BENEDETTO MARCELLO* RESIDENT ASSOCIATIONS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DANGEROUS OTHER**

The Benedetto Marcello neighbourhood is located in a semi-central position, between the commercial avenue of Corso Buenos Aires and the Central Station. Built as a bourgeois neighbourhood at the end of the nineteenth century thanks to the first town plan - the Beruto plan - it is still an upper-middle class area. Benedetto Marcello street - divided longitudinally into two parts by a green zone (which residents call “giardini”) - constitutes the main axis of the neighbourhood.

The whole neighbourhood, especially the northern part – with Vitruvio street as a boundary – is characterised by the presence of different “urban populations” (Martinotti 1993) who cross and mingle, making it a crowded place; this is related to four factors: 1) proximity to the Central Station 2) the presence, twice a week, of a big open air market<sup>5</sup> 3) the vast commercial offer of streets around Benedetto Marcello and the commercial attractiveness of Corso Buenos Aires 4) the area’s accessibility thanks to presence of different forms of public transport.

As far as immigrant presence is concerned, it appears quite limited from the residential point of view, while it is much more significant from the commercial one and the use of the urban space, consistent with the dominant pattern of Milanese central “ethnic” neighbourhoods (Novak 2007: 225). In the streets around Benedetto Marcello, there are plenty of shops run by immigrants (Chinese, Pakistanis and Bangladeshi people especially): phone centres, restaurants, cafès, whole-sale of textiles and jewellery and so on. There are then some services (as trade and housing unions) and places of worship<sup>6</sup>.

In 2006, the residents of the neighbourhood constituted two associations to fight against the congested and unpleasant situation provoked by the open air market (which is accused of attracting too many people and obstructing access to parking and public spaces), the presence of a building area which for years has been hindering the enjoyment of part of the neighbourhood’s park,

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<sup>5</sup> This market is huge (100 stalls approximately), crowded and colourful. More and more Italian sellers are being replaced by immigrants and the clientele are increasingly diverse as well.

<sup>6</sup> The Lazzaretto church, where mainly Singhalese meet and an Orthodox church which constitute a pole of attraction for immigrant from the entire city and from the outskirts.

and the presence of people perceived as dangerous in the area, as well as street prostitution and delinquency more generally. These associations have put forward specific requests to local institutions to solve social problems, particularly through an increased presence of the police force in order "to keep the area clean".

Benedetto Marcello is not clearly conceived as a neighbourhood: people do not agree with what the boundaries are and identify it with small and variable portions of urban space. Despite this fragmented situation, a "sense of place" and of "community" has been developed through the identification of selected problems and "enemies", as well as through the constitution of resident associations which struggle against them. The identification of "enemies" - namely, open air market sellers, "illegal" undocumented immigrants, gypsies, drugs addicted, homeless, prostitutes and their clients, as well as immigrant shop keepers - have helped to construct a (stronger) sense of "us" and "sense of place" [Rose 1995].

These associations do not build on a specific "anti-immigrant" platform as was the case in some Italian cities during the '90s. Nevertheless, their members, especially their, advance discriminatory representations of immigrants:

"Here we have, as far as immigration is concerned, a presence which more than sedentary -- it is commercial, we have some poles of attraction which are the shops for foreigners, we have the disaster of the phone centres, which by themselves attract a lot of immigrants... *our territory is taken by the commercial activities...*" (Leader of one of the resident associations)

"Being close to the station, their presence is much more concentrated. There are some days here, for example in August, that I think "do I have a residence permit in my pocket?" because I have the impression of being in Tunis. I have doubts about where I am. Milanese people are all gone and they are the only ones that stay here, you can't find an Italian for entire days, you can only see those that come and go. They are very much concentrated... in other zones they are more diluted. Here they frighten you because 90 % of them are men, they hardly come with their families..." (Shop keeper)

These quotations show how immigrants are considered as something completely extraneous to the neighbourhood: their presence is represented as a kind of cataclysm that has affected the neighbourhood, or a sort of military invasion. People are particularly worried about immigrants being there because they see them as a threat to security, safety, cleanliness, and tranquillity. There are two main spaces "affected" by this presence: the streets where most of the "ethnic shops" are located and the park next to Benedetto Marcello street, which attracts what the leaders of the associations define as the Central Station "fauna", namely drug addicts, homeless, gypsies and

undocumented migrants (*clandestini*).

In Benedetto Marcello, we find a negative dominant discourse on newcomers which seems to be generalized among a group of Italian residents and shopkeepers. Through a deeper analysis, we see that the situation is much more complex and distinct from common perceptions insofar as some of the Italian residents – for example those who “dare” to buy from immigrant shops and those shopkeepers who have work relations with their foreign colleagues – have a more nuanced view of the problems of the area, even if they keep on blaming newcomers – especially the unemployed and the undocumented – for the deteriorated character of the neighbourhood.

Most of the time, residents’ narratives correspond better to what Blokland (2003) has called “non-realistic conflicts”, where “outsiders” are used as a scapegoat “that serves above all to create some experience of community where a sense of it otherwise ceased to exist”. This route of “discriminatory repertoires” is particularly present among people who have very little interaction with migrants but use ethnicity to distinguish a community of “our people”. The need to reinforce “local identity” and to re-establish a sense of community can originate from the discontent provoked by urban changes that are affecting the neighbourhood and the city more generally (Lainati 2007), as well as from the failure of local authorities to address the concerns of residents. It is in fact the case that local authorities have proven unable to solve the urban and logistic problems that affect the area, but rather than owning up to their shortcomings, they find it more expedient to fuel resident associations’ negative discourse on newcomers, and they promise to clamp down on the Central Station “fauna”. A local politician remarks:

Everything started with the uneasiness and discomfort of the residents with the open air market... a feeling that has worsened with the presence – not only during the market, but all day long – of ethnic groups who overstay, linger in the area: Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis and gypsies, a lot of gypsies... (Local politician)

Local authorities do not consider the immigrants who work, live or use the neighbourhood public space as new citizens with their own “right to the city”; on the contrary, they de-legitimized their presence and see them and the conflicts that arise through an “ethnic lens”. As a result, they reinforce the us/them “orientalising grammar” (Baumann 2001) that comprises the dominant narrative in the neighbourhood, and they perpetuate discriminatory definitions of immigrants.

We will come back to these issues in the following pages; let’s now turn to Barcelona’s Poble Sec.

### 3. POBLE SEC AND THE NOUVINGUTS: AN INTEGRATING COMMUNITY?

Poble Sec is a neighbourhood located in the district of Sants-Montjuic, close to the mountain of Montjuic, the harbour and Paral·lel Avenue, a very large and busy street with important leisure and commercial offer; the latter separates Poble Sec from its “negative” alter ego<sup>7</sup>, Raval, a multiethnic neighbourhood, and from Eixample, a bourgeois district to which most of Poble Sec residents feel they naturally belong.

A popular barrio with a strong worker and anti-fascist tradition, it was a pole of attraction for immigration coming from other regions of Spain during the XX century; more recently, it has faced an exponential growth of “non-communitarian” immigrant residents<sup>8</sup>, especially Pakistanis, Moroccans, Filipinos, Ecuadorians and Dominicans. Immigrant presence has become much more visible in the neighbourhood thanks to the opening of numerous commercial activities which have revived, to an extent, Poble Sec’s depressed commercial offer.

Neighbourhood identity and community sentiment are strongly felt by Poble Sec’s residents, mainly those who have lived there all of their lives - *de toda la vida* residents – but not only. Often people refer to it as it was a “small village”. This is reflected in the high number of social, cultural, and political associations, as well as associations with an explicit territorial vocation, such as neighbourhood and traders associations.

In Poble Sec, the general discourse on newcomers has been diffused by the “Coordinadora de Entitats de Poble Sec”, a group which gathers all the associations present in the neighbourhood and implements social, cultural and recreational activities. This particular discourse seems at first sight completely different from the one spread in Benedetto Marcello, being much more inclusive towards newcomers. The latter are indeed considered by the established residents of Poble Sec as new potential members of the community: they are considered *nouvinguts*<sup>9</sup> more than immigrants. This particular narrative is focused more on the dimension of time and less on ethnicity: over time, immigrants will integrate in the neighbourhood and become part of the community<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The so called “Pacchetto Sicurezza” law recently approved by the Berlusconi government is a clear example of this approach: as immigrants and civil rights associations have highlighted, in fact, the first result of the enforcement of the new law has been an intensification of arbitrary controls against immigrants, sometimes through abusive modalities.

<sup>8</sup> From 6,8 % in 2000 to 25,7 % in 2007 [Departament d’Estadística. Ajuntament de Barcelona].

<sup>9</sup> This term, which does not appear in the Milanese discourse, is the Catalan word used to refer to “newcomers”.

<sup>10</sup> This particular category has been commonly used in community studies since Elias and Scoston showed how “oldness” was the relevant criteria that made the old residents of Winston Parva - “the established” - consider themselves better persons than the newcomers - the “outsiders”, both being white and working class groups.

Despite the inclusive stance that the leaders of associations assume, a large part of the population, especially elderly persons - which constitute a high percentage of the resident population – held, and to some extent still hold, a very negative attitude towards their new neighbours. Association leaders explain these reactions by saying that the drastic and unexpected arrival of these people exacerbated residents “fear of the unknown”, resulting in racist attitudes. Moreover, the established residents say that the problem is that “nadie nos presentó” i.e. nobody made introductions. This catchphrase carries two meanings: 1) a mutual ignorance of the customs and cultures among the two groups (the “established” and the “outsiders”); and 2) the fact that public institutions have not informed the “established” and have failed in mediating small conflicts that have arisen.

This particular narrative, as well as the general tone of the discourse in the neighbourhood, suggests the image of the neighborhood as the “home” of established residents and the new comers as “guests” that should introduce themselves to the householders. This reaffirms the us/them dichotomy, conveying the idea that “they” are the guests who have to respect the “good manners” established by “us”, the landlords<sup>11</sup>.

This interpretation is confirmed by the constant stress that the people I interviewed put on the supposedly “different customs” of immigrants (such as gathering in the streets, listening to loud music or throwing garbage on the floor etc.) which are considered to clash with the civic rules of the neighbourhood<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, these behaviours are often read through an ethnic and cultural lens; in this case, we find the “good neighbouring and anti racist discourse”, “a particular route that normally implies that “they” have to adapt to “us” to be included as full members in the community” (Blokland 2003: 19 - 20).

From another point of view, the strong identification of “historical residents” with the neighbourhood and the feeling of being a community can lead social control aimed at “outsiders” to become suffocating<sup>13</sup>. The risk is that the crucial condition of urban life, “the right to indifference” (i.e., the right to pass by “unseen” in urban public space, [Delgado 2007: 182 – 201], might be denied to those that are stigmatised as “cultural others”, especially immigrants. Laura, owner of a bar and member of the directive board of the Poble Sec trade association says:

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<sup>11</sup> Sayad recognises this same narrative in the migrant “double sorrow” related to the politics/politesse relation of the “*pensée d’état*” [Sayad 1999].

<sup>12</sup> And with respect to Barcelona more generally, see the controversial 2006 “Ordenança de civisme” of the Barcelona Municipality [www.bcn.cat], which will be discussed in the next pages.

<sup>13</sup> In Poble Sec, (resident) associations have implemented forms of “community policing” in collaboration with the police (Mossos de Escudra and Guardia Civil) and political institutions of the district. This phenomenon, which has become more and more common in European cities, is revealing of a particular way to conceive the city, the neighbourhood, the “local community” and “others”. Due to spatial constraints, I cannot explore this topic in more detail in this paper.

“Here we are like a small village... it seems that we have to examine everything to see that it really... it happens a lot. It seems that those who come from outside must be examined: people here live like in a village. Very closed. Now it’s a little bit less because a lot of people from outside have arrived. But people who have been living their whole lives... they all know each other”

The positive side of this vision, as we said, is that it expresses the will of some people in the neighbourhood (in this case, the leaders of some of the associations) to include “outsiders” in the local community, to make them feel that Poble Sec is their own home. Some of the “newcomers” I interviewed indeed expressed this feeling. Rachid, who was born in Casablanca but has been living in Barcelona for some years, states:

“I love this barrio for the diversity it has. You can find all kinds of people, What I like is that as I walk here I say hello to all my neighbours. Its’ like a village and I love it. People know each other, they say hello. You go to a bar and they know you. It’s a village and I love life in a village, while there are places where people don’t even know each other. Here no, wherever I go: “hello!” I say hello whenever I arrive to my house. I love to know people.

This inclusive, positive, although paternalistic stance is the one supported by local institutions which have invested in the neighbourhood integration of *nouvinguts*. For instance, the regional and city governments have funded a project of urban renewal known as “Llei de Barris”, which permitted the “coordination of associations of the Poble Sec” to promote a project known as “Pla Comunitari”, which includes a series of actions to “transform and improve the community in order to favour cohabitation within the neighbourhood and hence to fight against social exclusion”<sup>14</sup>. These projects include a specific section for “Cohabitation and Reciprocal Knowledge” issues thought to improve the relations between established residents and newcomers.

Moreover, they have implemented projects of conflict mediation, such as that of 2005, which aimed to mediate between old and new entrepreneurs, giving birth to a multi-ethnic trader association with members belonging to the principle immigrant groups in the neighbourhood.

The discourse in Poble Sec is far from being homogenous. Other associations, in fact, (“Associacions de Veïns i Veïnes del Poble Sec”) show a much more critical attitude towards immigrant presence in the neighbourhood. Their discontent with the situation became evident and public in May 2007, when

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.pcpoble-sec.org/web/?p=119>

some people were considering the opportunity to buy a locale in the barrio to open a Muslim oratory. A big public debate was immediately organized by the resident associations: 200 people joined to express their opposition to the opening of the oratory, some expressing racist positions. Interestingly enough, one of the protest organizers' arguments was that those who wanted to build the Muslim oratory "no son del barrio", showing how attachment to territory can engender defensive reactions against outsiders. Another of the arguments was related to the fear that the neighbourhood could become a ghetto, as well as the worry that real estate prices would decline in value because of this presence.

What is interesting in this story is that the "real conflict" revealed to be not between "autochthons" and immigrants, but between two different groups of "established residents" with different visions of the neighbourhood. Some of the associations, together with the local institutions of the district, got really upset with the debate that was organized and the news published by the press on the matter; the local institutions had in fact already denied permission to the potential buyers on the grounds that the locale did not fulfil the proper requisites. Some people of the "pro – immigrant" group feared that this entire story could damage the image of the neighbourhood as a place of peaceful cohabitation.

#### **4. COMPARING MILAN AND BARCELONA: MAKING SENSE OF NEIGHBOURHOOD DIFFERENCES**

To deeper understand the differences we have found at the local level, we need to take into account the urban level as a whole and the different ways through which local authorities are dealing with immigrants' integration in the city and the management of public space.

Historically, Milan and Barcelona went through similar economic and social processes: to make a long story short, they were industrial cities which now have economies based mainly on the service sector. Both cities have been important poles of attraction for internal immigration in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the century; since the 80's they have been facing significant waves of immigration from non-European countries, as their respective states have changed from being countries of emigration to countries of immigration. Nowadays, together with the capitals of their respective states, they have the highest percentage of immigrants in Italy and Spain. While internal immigrants traditionally have been quite easily integrated in the cities' expansive industrial sectors, foreign immigrants have been inserted into a more complicated and precarious economic framework (Solè 2005: 14). Since the '80s, the two cities have adopted different models to deal with de-industrialization and have obtained different results. The difference does not lie in their economical development, which has been relatively successful in

both cities, and especially in Milan, where finance, high technology, industrial services, fashion, design and the trade fair have made it an important “node of the global network” (Magatti et al. 2005).

The difference lies in the urban management and governance models that the two cities have followed. After democracy was re-established (1977) in Spain and regional autonomy granted (1979), the Catalan capital promoted what later was called “Barcelona Model”: a laudable urban restructuring model based on the coordination of economic and political interests with the general civic interest and based – at least at the beginning – on the promotion of social cohesion (García and Claver 2003, Degen and García 2008). By contrary, Milan lacked an integrative and inclusive vision (Gonzalez 2009: 31), strong narratives of identity (Bassetti 2005: 11) and shared processes of decision-making (Magatti 2005: 24). As a result, Milanese citizens have felt a sense of *disenfranchisement* from urban management processes in recent decades and have seen a worsening of their quality of life (Ranci 2005). Moreover, local leaders have failed in their governing of urban changes and in integrating old and new populations, exacerbating urban conflicts related to the multicultural coexistence. The increasing immigrant presence has been considered by local authorities as a problem in terms of security and public order (Mingione, Borlini & Vitale 2008), and no attempts to manage urban transformations and conflicts through processes of newcomers’ progressive inclusion have been made.

Those who occupy a relatively advantaged position – normally those who have been residents of a neighbourhood for a longer period – experience feelings of loss of control over the conditions in which everyday life takes place and so invoke the intervention of public authorities to restore social order, believing it cannot be obtained through endogenous and informal social processes. Municipal authorities are generally requested to enact repressive and preventive measures to soothe conflict and restore a semblance of control over the urban environment, ‘neutralising’ through police intervention those actors who are otherwise held to undermine the safety of all. As we said before, the Milanese version of the *revanchist city*<sup>15</sup> works to legitimise citizens’ fears and to support Italian residents’ defensive reaction against newcomers, thus contributing to a vicious circle of “moral panic” in which immigrants are seen as “enemies” (Dal Lago 1999, Maneri 2001, Palidda 2000, Quassoli 1999).

In Barcelona, things are slightly different. The discourse on immigration is more open and integrative: much importance is given to the integration of immigrants in local contexts, and great significance is given to issues of coexistence. In this respect, the “Ajuntament” and the “Generalitat de

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<sup>15</sup> In line with what is happening on the national level, see for example recent “pacchetto Sicurezza” law enforced by the Berlusconi government.

Catalunya” have implemented policies to foster the integration of immigrants in local communities and have initiated projects of mediation to prevent and solve conflicts raised between different populations in the urban spaces (Solà-Morales 2006).

To a certain extent, this particular approach is the legacy of the socialist and anti-fascist local tradition that has managed the urban realm over the last 30 years. The less conflictive situation found in Barcelona is also a result of the importance that historically has been given to civic society, and resident associations in particular: these associations became a significant force in the final years of Franco’s regime, and subsequently have continued their struggle to ameliorate urban life conditions and improving democratic processes<sup>16</sup> (Sarasa 1998, Bier 1980).

Anyhow, not all that glitters is gold: the attitude of local authorities in Barcelona towards immigrants and cultural diversity is – in the words of many – highly focused on rhetoric which aims at constructing a cosmopolitan and progressive identity of the city more than really including newcomers in the city and giving them the right to belong<sup>17</sup>.

The management of public space is also a controversial issue: the use of public space has been governed by the 2006 “Ordenança del Civisme” of Barcelona [www.bcn.cat], a kind of “perfect civilized citizen” handbook which lists all the things one should not do in the urban realm, with the relevant fine in case of infraction (street prostitution and begging included).

This attempt to “domesticate the urban public realm” (Delgado 2007: 17) is not free from discriminatory effects. The discourse on *civismo* becomes particularly significant when the subjects in question are immigrant groups which are represented as “culturally different”. They are normally considered as less civilized, people who need to be taught how to behave in order to be included in *our* community.

## 5. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

The two cases we have analysed show how the neighbourhood dimension becomes relevant in contemporary urban life under certain circumstances. In particular, the attachment to place and the idea of belonging to a specific community emerge at the moment in which social change and urban

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<sup>16</sup> Many of these associations’ leaders entered into politics after the re-establishment of democracy (Sarasa 1998).

<sup>17</sup> A clear example is that the processes of empowering immigrants have shown to be far from being effective (see Peró 2005 on consultative institutions).

transformations become evident, for example, when new neighbours or new urban populations arrive.

We have seen anyhow that the relations between “us” and “them” and the different symbolic fences that the dominant group raises up against “others” take different forms and give rise to exclusive as well as inclusive processes. The differences we have found between the two neighbourhoods depend on a large spectrum of variables. We have focussed on the role of local policies (the presence or not of an institutional effort to promote the integration of the newcomers in local contexts and to mediate and prevent conflicts between groups), the dominant discourse on immigration at the urban level (more or less stigmatising towards immigrants) and the models employed to govern urban space in the two cities.

Other aspects to be taken into account deal with variables at the micro level, such as class issues and the nature of resident associations, as well as variables at the macro level, such as national discourse (the role of immigrants in the *nation-building* process).

The study of inter-ethnic relations in the urban realm is a complex and necessary task. Here we have focussed just on how the dominant discourse on immigration and immigrant integration in the city influences the ways in which “others” are represented by actors at the neighbourhood level. It is important to keep in mind, however, that daily interactions can help to contest and challenge these representations, and hence the extant “us/them” dichotomy currently found in these and other local contexts is far from being fixed and absolute, but is a complex and constantly changing construction.

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