

Beyond social mix: Looking for a path to rethink at planning in the ‘cities of difference’

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Abstract

Over the last fifteen years the increasing number of foreign immigrants in Italy has led to a growing body of urban studies whose first aim is to describe how the newcomers’ presence has changed the major cities. These are mainly descriptions on how the immigrants settle and use urban space. Despite the variety of these settlements, a common aspect is underlined in the Italian multi-ethnic environments: the absence – excluding some exceptions – of ethnic concentration in specific neighbourhoods. Despite this, spatial policies have mainly used the same planning tools adopted in other countries to reduce ‘pathological’ forms of concentration.

This article aims at exploring the possible reasons for these choices, starting from an analysis of the rationales that usually guide these forms of intervention, exploring similarities and differences between Italy and other Western countries, and pointing out how much the peculiarities of the Italian settlements may be useful to consider them as ‘urban labs’ to discover the ‘resources’ of the ‘cities of difference’.

Keywords

Multi-ethnic settlements, Italy, spatial planning, social mixing policies, local resources.

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Introduction

Over the last fifteen years the increasing number of foreign immigrants in Italy has led to a growing body of urban studies whose first aim is to describe how the newcomers' presence has changed the major cities. These are mainly descriptions on how the immigrants settle and use urban space. Despite the variety of these settlements, a common aspect is underlined in the Italian multi-ethnic environments: the *absence* – excluding some exceptions – of *ethnic concentration* in specific neighbourhoods. This aspect could be observed from the 'quantitative' point of view – the immigrant's share is rarely over 20-25 per cent over the residents' population – as well as from their nationality point of view – settlements are 'deeply' multi-ethnic, as people from different countries live in these areas. They are not ethnic enclaves, but 'cities of difference' in the multicultural sense given by Fincher and Jacobs (Fincher, Jacobs, 1998).

The most common form of concentration is related to some commercial areas. Sociological and economical studies (Ambrosini, 2010) have underlined that labour-intensive jobs abandoned from the natives tend to be taken by the newcomers. From the spatial dynamics' point of view, the immigrants' economic activities (especially corner shops) occupy spaces no more used by Italian entrepreneurs, preserving the neighbourhoods' vitality (Grandi, 2008). In the face of a very aggressive national debate on this issue (Rivera, 2009), these studies try to construct 'out of the mainstream' descriptions of the immigrants' presence, presenting it as a resource.

Given this general context, this article carries on a research path focused on spatial policies in multi-ethnic environments in Italy (Briata, 2010; 2011b). Previous research has been useful to focus on three main spatial forms of intervention where the immigrants' presence is significant and/or visible:

- where an 'intensive' use of public spaces by the immigrants could be found, forms of intervention based on 'breaking up the newcomers' territorialities' (Yiftachel, 1990) through forms of urban renewal aimed at introducing functions and services able to attract also the Italian population;

- where the immigrants' share is significant in the residential buildings, *public-led forms of rehabilitation* aimed at enhancing the real estate pressure. These forms of intervention may imply the weaker groups' – not only immigrants – displacement;
- where the ethnic economies are significant, visible or able to attract foreign clients, forms of intervention based on (a) *rules, restrictions and ordinances* that may have a negative impact mainly on the immigrants' shops – including forms of zoning that introduce special regimes for some areas (b) *commercial 'development' policies*, aimed at attracting new Italian shops and services.

This means that, despite urban studies have underlined the absence in Italy of 'pathological' forms of concentration that could be found in other countries, spatial policies have mainly used the same tools adopted in other realities to reduce concentration.

This article aims at exploring the possible reasons for these choices starting from an analysis of the rationalities that usually guide these forms of intervention, exploring similarities and differences between Italy and other Western countries, and pointing out how much the peculiarities of the Italian settlements may be useful to consider them as 'urban labs' to discover the 'resources' of multi-ethnic environments, and to develop new forms of research and action.

The problematic aspects of concentration

Debates on planning in multi-ethnic contexts have been dominated by the topic of the newcomers' concentration/ segregation in specific neighbourhoods (Marcuse, Van Kempen, 2000). This 'label' covers a wide range of phenomena felt to be problematic: a large number of immigrants in a certain area, a high percentage compared to the total number of inhabitants in a neighbourhood, specific forms of settlement such as the ethnic enclaves (Tosi, 2000).

In the mainstream visions of public debate and policies ‘ethnic neighbourhoods’ are considered as ‘worlds apart’ which create barriers to interaction with the rest of the society, hindering the integration of individual immigrants (Mustered, Andersson, 2005). For these reasons, spatial policies have often been characterized by a dominant approach that aims to mitigate forms of concentration, by dispersing immigrants and in general problematic groups across the urban territory and/or breaking up their settlements’ territorialities by introducing people of different ethnic, social and economic background (Home, 1997; Yiftachel, 1990).

In the last twenty years these forms of intervention have been adapted by policy discourses to changing conceptions of the role of the state in public provision, as well as to new development scenarios of the post-industrial cities that have to be attractive for business services, creative industries, knowledge-based economies and tourism. The promotion of ‘diversity’ at neighbourhood level in terms of social class, income, ethnicity, and lifestyle has been proposed as a precondition for socio-economic upgrading of people living in deprived places (Donzelot, 2006). This is mainly a way to counteract stigmatisation, putting these places ‘on the map’ of the urban territory (Fainstein, 2005).

In these directions, policies aimed at stimulating diversity in social housing estates, inner city areas or decaying historical centres have been carried out in a wide range of countries, becoming a sort of *mainstream approach* to ‘problematic’ neighbourhoods (Mustered, Andersson, 2005).

Despite the absence of an academic debate on this topic, social mixing approaches have influenced intervention also in Italy (Briata, 2011a).

Principles and problems of social mixing policies

Despite the different patterns of socio-spatial segregation that characterize the different countries, a number of common aspects in conceptualising and pursuing objectives of diversity

could be underlined. In particular, social and functional mix are presented as strictly interrelated objectives, and policies aimed at stimulating diversity should involve housing, retail business, services and public spaces (Urban Task Force, 1999). In many countries social mix objectives have mainly resulted in policies aimed at promoting mixed tenure, housing price level mix, or building type mix to attract wealthier and/or middle-class residents in deprived and problematic areas (Bolt, 2009).

In the last years, a growing body of international literature has critically analyzed anti-segregation policies focusing both on their *principles*, as well as on the *results* that have been observed where they have been implemented.

Analytical works have been helpful to underline that social mix is considered in public discourses and policy agendas as a key factor to enhance individual and groups' opportunities for upward social mobility at least for three main reasons¹:

a local development perspective – as social mix may be helpful to change the perception of deprived and problematic neighbourhoods 'from outside'², counteracting stigmatisation, attracting new inhabitants, and stimulating new broader relationships and socio-economical opportunities for people living 'inside' these places;

a social upgrading perspective – related to the supposed 'civilizing' influence of wealthier and middle-class residents, whose presence could motivate problematic individuals and groups, thanks to the contacts with role models from a different socio-economic background;

a social cohesion perspective – as the exposure to 'the other' can lead to mutual understanding, learning or, at least, tolerance.

One major objection is linked to the fact that considering social mix as a key factor for change in residents' behaviour thanks to the wealthier or middle-class residents' influence, means reducing these people's problems to 'social pathology', neglecting that poverty and social exclusion depend also on structural social and economical factors, and that the single persons or groups' know-how/will/exposure to otherness, as

well as the local level initiatives may be not enough to reach socio-economic upgrading (Raco, 2003).

At the same time, based on the outcomes of anti-segregation policies, the assumption of a strong link between social mix and housing mix is far to be proofed (Kearns, 2002). Moreover, tenure mix practices have demonstrated that these policies may result in spatial proximity between different socio-economic/ethnic groups, but that this condition does not necessarily translates into social interaction between people of different background in public spaces, schools, services and shops (Allen *et al.*, 2005). So also the thesis that the exposure to 'otherness' leads automatically to mutual understating and tolerance is far to be demonstrated.

Other studies have analyzed social mixing initiatives in the context of new development scenarios of the post-industrial metropolis where anti-segregation policies may be seen as strategies to change the deprived neighbourhoods' role, image and population in the broader cities' contexts. A growing body of literature has underlined how mixing initiatives may be seen also as forms of state/municipality-led gentrification, carrying with them significant threats of displacement for the weaker groups (Lees *et al.*, 2008). Other perspectives have seen anti-segregation policies as a spatial declination of security policies, reading them as a means for the public hand to re-establish control on places that seem to have only their own rules (Atkinson, Helms, 2007).

Why not ghettos?

A completely different point of view has been analysed by studies less interested in the 'external' exclusion of 'segregated' neighbourhoods and more focused on the internal dynamics among the inhabitants of these places. The debate on the limits and on the potentialities of segregated places has a long history that goes back at least at Park studies' (1925) in the context of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology. Despite this, the interesting aspects of the recent rediscovery of these issues is due

on the one hand, to their connotation as ‘a reaction’ to social mixing initiatives and, on the other hand, to the strong link that they establish with the current situation of the welfare state restructuring. These perspectives have tried to look at segregated neighbourhood not only as dangerous environments with their own rules, but also as places that could have a potential in stabilizing the cities (Cattacin, 2006). In this view, these places’ function in contemporary societies would be underestimated because here immigrants and people of low socio-economic status can find a warm and loyal surrounding and, considering the shrinking capacity of intervention of the welfare state, *self-regulated spaces of mutual-help and solidarity*. These relationships have a strong capacity to act and to solve concrete problems, and mixing policies may weaken or brake established networks, without giving any other kind of resource back. These perspectives do not suggest to consider the spaces of segregation in a positive way *tout court*: their potential integrative role in the cities is in fact strictly connected with the welfare state’s financial crisis and the related difficulties in the implementation of redistributive policies. In this general context, combating these places may create more problems than solutions.

Concentration and public policies’ role

Despite the vast amount of critical academic literature, social mixing initiatives still remain the main form of intervention in the immigrants’ settlements, revealing a sort of disjunction between research and policy agendas. At the same time, this disjunction may be helpful to stimulate reflections on the weak aspects of research that has focused on these issues.

In particular, as underlined in previous paragraphs: there are critical views of social mixing policies that, despite their criticism towards anti-segregation actions, seem still to be linked to a negative and problematic image of the immigrants’ and weaker groups’ spatial concentration. These negative views appear in some way embedded also in the researchers’ analysis and narratives, and may condition the research point of view, not

being useful to explore innovative approaches and ways of action;

there are studies that underline the public hand's will to re-establish control on 'problematic' neighbourhood, considering this issue mainly in a negative way, but the physical, economical and social conditions of decay that often characterizes these neighbourhoods, renders the public hand's will to establish forms of control far to be illegitimated. A negative view *tout court* in this sense may not be helpful to explore innovative approaches related to the 'control' issue, for example declining it in terms of care and not only in terms of repression;

there are studies that suggest to reconsider the potentialities of segregated places with a particular attention to their self-regulating capacity. The welfare restructuring is without any doubt a reality, but this does not mean that the public hand shouldn't and couldn't have any kind of role in these places, for example managing situations of conflict or integrating and/or sustaining existing networks. Underestimating the state's or the local authorities' possible role in these places may not be helpful to explore innovative paths of intervention.

Existing literature's gaps may create open spaces for further research and analysis based on two main families of problems related to: i) the connections between the *descriptions* of problematic neighbourhoods and the consequent *forms of intervention*; ii) the *role that may be played by the public hand* in these kind of places.

In the next paragraphs the article aims at pointing out how much the peculiarities of the Italian environments may represent a good research field to observe the international literature's less explored aspects, and may be useful to consider these environments as 'urban labs' to explore the 'resources' of multi-ethnic contexts, and to develop new forms of research and action.

Descriptions and ‘solutions’

A wide range of literature, studies and data have underlined that ethnic concentration is an uncommon phenomenon in the Italian context. Despite this, policy agendas did not invest in original and innovative spatial policies in these kind of environments.

The very aggressive public debate on immigration could be the first reason for the administrations – even the more ‘progressive’ ones – to act in this way. Historic and central areas are labelled by the media as *banlieues*, and places where the Italian born residents are still the majority are described as *ethnic ghettos*: these negative narratives of multi-ethnic environments seem able to affect policy agendas more than the out of the mainstream descriptions of academic literature presenting the immigrants’ as an urban resource.

In this direction this article works on the hypothesis that some core concepts and narratives that underpin analysis and forms of intervention in these places – in particular the problematic aspects of concentration – may be considered as ‘assumptions’ (Raco, 2009) that, far to be proofed, play a large part in conditioning the public debate and policy agendas, but also in *orientating the researchers’ ways of seeing*.

For example, all the ‘distinctions’ in ethnic economies aimed at seeing in immigrant-run corner shops a service for the all the residents of a neighbourhood independently from their origin, seem to be used to demonstrate that in some places ethnic *concentration is not an issue*. The same could be said on the descriptions of the immigrants’ presence in terms of share as it was introduced also in this article: an ‘absolute’ index of concentration does not exist and concentration is defined both by perceptions and by relationships of the local level with wider levels.

As underlined by policy analysis and social sciences, analysis and problems’ framing are strictly linked with existing tools that decision makers may mobilize to cope with them (Bobbio, 1996; Crosta, 1998). In this case it seems as if, as researchers, we try to

frame problems in a way that cannot lead to existing tools and ‘solutions’.

But, in these ways, we do not produce ‘usable knowledge’ (Lindblom, Cohen, 1979). A way out could be exploring ways of reframing descriptions of multi-ethnic settlements considering the ‘concentration/segregation’ issue as a powerful ‘assumption’ that is at once both descriptive and prescriptive. In this perspective, social mixing policies may be seen not as *one of the possible answers to concentration*, but as an *embedded answer* to descriptions based on concentration. This could mean that not only policy agendas should be reframed as literature has underlined until now, but that also our ways of looking at the immigrants’ settlements – as researchers – should be subject to challenge and put under critical and auto-critical observation.

From immigration as a resource to the multi-ethnic neighbourhoods resources

Italian multi-ethnic environments are cities of differences where the majority of the residents are Italian. And Italian born residents usually do not feel comfortable with the negative descriptions of their neighbourhoods made by the media and policy makers. Descriptions operated from outside are quite different from those made by people living inside these places (Briata, 2011b).

In the last years the Italian multi-ethnic settlements and their descriptions as ghettos or *banlieues*, have stimulate the insurgence of some literature that has tried to focus not only on the problematic aspects perceived from outside, but on everyday life and coexistence problems as they are perceived and described by Italian and foreign residents – people, community groups, users. This is the rationale that guides description such as those of Torpignattara in Rome by Fioretti (2011) or for Via Padova in Milan by Arrigoni (2011) and Gadda (2012).

This attempt to catch the insiders’ point of view may be seen also in a number of pioneer actions carried out by public administrations in some cities. Here the guides for the analyses

of multi-ethnic environments were a number of associations and community groups rooted at the local level that are engaged in everyday activities in these places, coping with concrete problems.

An example could be the ‘participated analysis’ carried out in the Padua train station area by an association rooted at the local level that works on social exclusion issues, involving the local entrepreneurs, workers and residents. This work aimed at establishing some core points to be followed in the area regeneration. The project was characterised by different types of field analysis: ethnographic observation, interviews to relevant actors, discussion with community groups, interviews to different ‘categories’ of people living in the area (young/old; workers/residents; Italian/foreign entrepreneurs; men/women).

Among the more significant outputs:

the differences between the perception of the place ‘from outside’ and ‘from inside’; between the daytime and night; between women and men (independently from the immigrant/not-immigrant origin);

a vision of the immigrants’ presence from the Italian residents’ point of view that does not hide problems, but at the same time that is not a stereotypical one – there is not a negative perception of immigration in general, but a number of deviant behaviours are associated with the foreigners;

a vision of security that does not seem to be complacent with the narratives based on ‘emergencies’ proposed by the media, but that claims for the restoring of a ‘lost normality’ through initiatives able to bring regeneration, vitality, a different positive visibility of the area that ‘should be much more similar to the city centre’ (Banca Etica, 2008).

This survey was the first step for a project based on the residents’ proposal for a quite problematic square that led to the opening of a ‘zero kilometre’ market; the promotion of a number of events to bring people in the area also in the evening; the ‘adoption of an ethnic shop’ from the Italian entrepreneurs to build up bridges between different economic realities.

The Aldermen for trade in the Padua Municipality has decided to propose this approach also for other areas.

This experience has been described not for its still weak outputs, but for the unusual way to ‘build up the problem’ that seem to individuate. A description made also by ‘voices’ of a multi-ethnic co-existence *de facto* – that imply problems, mistrust and prejudices – but that in some circumstances may lead to consider the ‘outsiders’ as ‘established’: micro-stories that tell of concrete problems, and of the local capacity (or not) to cope with them; resistance by the local groups to the existing dynamics; tactics that render everyday multi-ethnic and multi-cultural coexistence possible; awareness of what kind of problems could be faced at the local level, and what kind of problems require a not local approach or/and the public hand intervention.

Such a way of looking – less focused on immigration as a resource, and more focused on the *resources of multi-ethnic environments* – may be helpful also to understand the role that the public hand may play in these places. A role maybe less focused on breaking up problematic groups’ concentration through social engineering, and more focused on managing the coexistence of people with different (and not only ethnic) backgrounds, potentially but not necessarily in conflict.

These ways of looking may be more helpful to understand some strengths and weaknesses of these places such as the capacity of some local association to strike root and cope with everyday life problems, or the level and nature of some conflicts. A comprehension of these aspects could be helpful also to understand what kind of role may be played by the public hand – provider, enabler, conflict mediator, regulatory.

This does not mean that all the resources to cope with the problematic aspects of these neighbourhood could be found inside them, but that in the comparison between the insiders’ and the outsiders’ perspectives some new paths of research and action may be explored.

Notes

¹ Based on international planning, geographical and sociological literature on social mixing initiatives, this ‘classification’ has been done directly by the author (Briata, 2011a).

² The reference to internal and external descriptions and dynamics is proposed being aware that what is ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ a place is a strategic construction operated by the local and not-local actors (including the researcher that embraces these distinctions) to simplify complex situations, and to prefigure some course of research and actions, excluding others.

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