Beyond the aberrant city
Towards a critical ethnography of Naples

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How might the question of contemporary urban change be approached from an ethnographic perspective? Before engaging with the weighty questions of, say, gentrification or deindustrialization, it requires, at a very elementary level, starting from the premise that every city, however defined, is a dynamic place embedded in and shaped by multiple historical contexts, be these socioeconomic changes, technological innovations, shifts in public discourse or fluctuating fads. While this may sound like a truism, the fact of the matter is that many of the world's cities are not perceived — at least in the eyes of the West — to be dynamic. Rather, they are lodged in a perpetual catch-up game, compelled to imitate a select group of trendsetters.

In like manner, Naples is rarely imagined as an innovative or dynamic city. Indeed, it is often publicly viewed to be in a near perpetual state of crisis, locked into its own idiosyncratic cycles that lurch between a few positive episodes and numerous lows. The city's recent history has been subject to major ruptures — the so-called Neapolitan Renaissance, the resurgence of the camorra, the trash emergency, Bassolino's fall from grace and the 'political laboratory' of the present De Magistris administration — which, when not reduced to ideological wrangles, are readily cast outside the general course of history. For instance, as the international media fished for ready-made stories about filth and crime during the city's refuse crisis, comfort came with the knowledge that this was Naples; this could never happen closer to home (despite the fact that not-too-dissimilar cases of environmental mismanagement were unfolding contemporaneously in other parts of the world). In conflating rubbish with the camorra and trivializing collective protests, Naples was placed off a map of possible futures and potential alternatives.

Naples has long been regarded as a pathological exception: a city of chronic problems, marked by peculiar cultural practices, ingenious survival strategies and a dearth of law and order. On the one hand it is a city that *lacks* — a modern class structure, public space, civic traditions and so on — while, on the other, it possesses the residues of an incomplete or anomalous development, such as widespread poverty, organized crime and the lumpenproletariat. Certainly the aberrant image of Naples has not always been seen in a negative light, as exemplified by Pier Paolo Pasolini's famous panegyric about the city's purported resistance to the spread of a national consumer culture. Either way, Naples is construed as a city that has yet to become modern. Elements identified as falling under the label of modernity — horizontal ties, socially differentiated residential districts, the factory, etc. — have been, at most, confined to the symbolic and physical margins of the city and, in any case, isolated

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from the major social and economic advances of elsewhere.

The idea of a pre-modern, static world has been traditionally bound up with the 'popular' neighbourhoods at the city's core, which, according to who you talk to, have been variously seen as the sanctums of a self-sustaining 'slum economy' [*economia del vicolo*], a unique urban culture, general deviance, or, in the case of Pasolini, an indomitable Tuareg tribe. As the aberrant locales at the heart of an extraordinary city, these neighbourhoods have posed a series of dilemmas for administrators, visitors and social scientists alike. They are enthralling and repellent, picturesque and unsightly, caught between pleas for preservation and demands for demolition. They are, at the same time, the sites of a 'noble' past and the lairs of a 'lumpen' present, where local people's uses of monuments and piazzas do not always tally with the ambitions of cultural heritage policies. The aporetic nature of the neighbourhoods and their inhabitants has inevitably spawned a litany of stereotypes, but it has also operated to define appropriate objects of analysis. Hence, researchers have been interested to decipher and resolve important questions such as poverty and crime, while more mundane issues like the use of urban space or the relationship with motorized traffic are automatically dismissed as inconsequential.

Since the 1970s anthropology has made a significant contribution to comprehending social and symbolic systems in Naples, and to redressing popular and scientific commonplaces about local society. Nevertheless, the notion of Naples as a city remains somewhat ambivalent in a lot of the literature and is rarely at the centre of theoretical reflection. Studies have concentrated prevalently on the historic centre, not so much as a heterogeneous social domain that is interdependent with the rest of Naples, than as a place that endows the anthropologist with the opportunity to holistically represent aspects of everyday life presumably less discernible in other European cities (a classic example here being Thomas Belmonte's *The Broken Fountain* [1989]). Likewise, the question of urban change has received scant attention, with greater priority accorded to the pursuit of all-embracing and enduring explanations for social and cultural behaviour. As such, there has been little interest to grapple with how modernity in Naples has been experienced, contested and reconfigured over the course of the city's recent history. Irrespective of the extent to which crude images of overcrowded alleys are picked apart, the allure of Naples is still that of a very particular place.

One way out of this impasse is to reconceive Naples as an *ordinary city*, a concept developed by the South African geographer Jennifer Robinson in her recent post-colonial critique of urban theory. Her argument is deceptively straightforward. According to Robinson, all cities, in spite of the inequalities that exist between them, "are dynamic and diverse, if conflicted, arenas for social and economic life" (2006, p.1). All cities invent different ways of being modern and urban. All are transformed by global capitalism but are also – one might add – the sites where its alternatives are hatched. In seeking to dispossess the West's claims to a universal urban experience, Robinson does not call for an urban relativism nor does she wish to undermine the distinctiveness of cities by establishing a lowest common denominator. On the contrary, she maintains that "bringing all cities within the same field of analysis through the idea of ordinary cities ensures that no particular city or group of cities will a-priori determine how cityness is represented" (2006, p.171).

How might the ordinary city serve as a useful basis for thinking about Naples? First and foremost, it alerts us to how, despite the various 'turns' in contemporary thought, ideas about an aberrant Naples continue to be reproduced both within and outside the city. It subsequently allows us to contemplate diverse ways of being urban, such as the reappropriation of

monuments or driving habits, without these being necessarily censured as irrelevant, deviant or 'folkloristic'. In addition, it encourages us to provincialize assumptions about contemporary urban change in Europe, such as the transition to a post-fordist society or the erosion of public space, and in doing so to highlight how it is these very assumptions and not Naples that are parochial and incomplete. Naples is not simply relieved of the burden of having *to mimic*, but like everywhere else, is able to inform urban theory and, more generally, broaden our understandings of urban life. So, for instance, the political and financial intrigues underlying the city's trash crisis stand out as wake-up calls for a global audience, rather than the superfluous details of a macabre spectacle confined to a nether world.

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In conclusion and drawing upon this shift in perspective, I want to suggest some points that I believe can contribute to a critical ethnography of Naples. First, such an ethnography needs to engage more seriously with analogous urban processes of other cities, be they Stockholm or Delhi, rather than measuring Naples exclusively against the rest of Italy or Mediterranean Europe. Second, it is necessary to oust the city's historic centre from anthropology's pantheon of privileged field sites and to revisit it as one part of an ordinary city interconnected with the world at large. Third, greater scrutiny must be paid to the interactions and conflicts between different social groups and how these are constitutive of urban life, *contra* the tendency to dwell on those inhabitants (usually of the popular neighbourhoods) seen to share the same values and practices. Finally, research needs to take on board the sorts of historical contexts mentioned at the beginning of this essay. The challenge, as George Marcus and Michael Fischer have insisted, "is not to do away with the synchronic ethnographic frame, but to exploit fully the historical within it" (1999, p.96).

The importance of a historically-grounded ethnography is especially pertinent for a city like Naples which continues to be subject to the charges of exceptionalism and immutability and yet has seen, over the last thirty years, fundamental anthropological concepts such as "culture" and "identity" enter forcibly into public and political narratives about urban renewal and decline. These same narratives have in turn been internalized, challenged and rejected by different people who proceed to reshape what it means to live and be in this ordinary city.

References

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