

Very sneaky crimes Squatting, urban security, and class anthropopoiesis in Milan (Italy)

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Abstract: Milan is an increasingly safe city. Despite this, the insecurity perceived by citizens is growing. Particularly in social housing districts, squatting is considered by institutions, public opinion, but also by most regular residents, as one of the principle causes of urban insecurity. Based on ethnographic research conducted in Milan between 2015 and 2017, this article proposes an anthropological analysis of policies, norms, practices, and narratives related to the governance of housing illegality, showing how these representations contribute to producing a stigmatized, morally connoted, and criminalized image of squatters. In broader terms, starting with the ethnographic case of squatting, the article explores the anthropopoietic dynamics of social class construction and the centrality of moral categories in the production of urban inequality.

Keywords: class, criminalization, ethnography, securitization, squatting, stigma, urban inequality

The Italian Gotham City

In early 2022, Milan came under the national and international spotlight for a series of crimes committed on its territory. Newspapers and social media accounts of politicians documented incidences of brawls, assaults, robberies, and assorted criminal filth occurring throughout the early months of the year. The city soon became consistent with a narrative, also literary and cinematographic, that has been running through it since the 1960s: Milan as the Italian Gotham city. This created a short-circuit whereby securi-

tarian paranoia has far outweighed real security problems.

According to data provided by the Milan Prefect in March 2022, Milan is an increasingly safe city, despite maintaining first place in Italy in terms of criminal complaints. This condition seems to be dictated by the enormous attention of politics on security issues and the constant bombardment of media, where even small incidents gain rapid overexposure.

Every Gotham City needs its Batman. In turn, several stand for it. For this reason, for example, Mayor Beppe Sala announced that the





FIGURE 1. Graffiti, Milan, 2022. Photo by author.

municipality would hire 500 new officers “despite enormous budgetary difficulties.” Along the same vein, Bocconi University, a local private university, announced a service that would accompany its students to their homes.

According to local and regional institutions, the media, and public opinion, one of the most “hateful” phenomena connected to Milanese petty crime—and therefore representative of an urban security issue—concerns the issue of squatting, especially that related to social housing (Edilizia Residenziale Pubblica—ERP). The heinousness of the crime even emerges from the newspaper’s headlines: “In Milan, the situation heats up again between squatter evictions and demands for security” (Burricco 2022); “Another brawl. And the eviction of squatters is postponed” (Galici 2022); “Milan, powder keg of social housing” (Paolucci 2022).

In Italy, consistent with elsewhere, as summarized by Miguel Martínez (2020: 235), mainstream mass media, institutions, politicians, and public opinion, tend to depict squatters as thugs, criminals, scoundrels, parasites, and invaders

taking houses away from the genuinely needy. The political reaction to squatting is consequent to this social perception, and well depicted by the recent words of the Regional Councilor for Social Policies: “There will be no discounts for those who squat in social houses” (A. E. 2020).

Social sciences have devoted some attention to the phenomenon of squatting, approaching the topic from heterogeneous analytical perspectives. From the angle of socio-anthropological reflection, squatting practices have been investigated mainly in relation to other social and political dimensions, such as, by way of example, those of welfare and services (Vereni 2015; Pozzi 2020), citizenship (Appadurai 2000; Holston 2008), mobility and migration (Ager 2013; Bouillon 2009; Massa 2022), marginality and informality (Fava 2008; Ivancheva and Krastev 2019), social movements (Van der Steen et al. 2014), and social reproduction (Starecheski 2017).

The “squatter” category includes a wide variety of actions, representations, and rhetoric (Vasuvedan 2015). In Italy,¹ different types of squatting can be distinguished. The main differentiating factor concerns the purpose of the squatting, whether its purpose is exclusively political and socio-cultural, as in the case of social centers² (Mudu 2004), or residential. Regarding the latter, this can be the result of an individual or a collective action, giving an additional distinguishing factor. Furthermore, squatting can be analyzed according to the spaces occupied (such as land or commercial or residential buildings), which can be private or public. Finally, unlawful occupations may be compelled by different motives: necessity, political affiliation, or profit.

This article focuses on social housing squatting—mainly “deprivation-based,” as defined by Hans Prujit (2013: 21)—in Milan. Specifically, it proposes an analysis of the institutional rhetoric, policies, norms, and practices relating to the governance of the *extra legem* acquisition of social houses. The main objective is to demonstrate ethnographically how different forms of criminalization and marginalization of social

housing squatting are particularly relevant for understanding the anthropopoietic dynamics of social class construction—meaning the capacity of society to forge humanity, according to logics of inclusion and exclusion—and the centrality of moral categories in the production of urban inequality in Italy. The topic of the construction of squatters as marginals and criminals has been the subject of much debate in several national contexts (Bouillon 2009; Fox O’Mahoney et al. 2015; Grohmann 2020), but in Italy this has not been comprehensive (Di Feliciano 2017; Grazioli 2021; Piazza 2012).

This article contextualizes the criminalizing “institutional narrative” (Shore and Wright 1997), articulated along territorial competences and governance, and intervention capacities. In this sense, the focus is not only on the analysis of legislative documents, implementing regulations, programmatic writings, operational plans, explanatory pamphlets, but also on the narratives of some workers who contrast squatting in their everyday professional lives, in dialogue with wider ethnographic data. My analysis shows that these representations produce a stereotyped, morally connoted, and criminalizing image of squatting—and squatters.

Actors, research methodology and positioning

The research presented in this article began in the fall of 2015 in a squatted building. At first, my fieldwork included participation in the everyday activities of a homeless people’s association, an inhabitant’s trade union, and a women’s social housing squatters’ collective. These groups organized themselves as a committee of “political squatters,” or “lifestyle squatters,” following the definition traced in the English case by Theodora Middleton (2015) and problematized by Steph Grohmann (2020), intended as individuals who “saw themselves as homeless people who had chosen to do something about their [and others’] vulnerability” (Grohmann 2020: 7), with the aim of fostering residential squats—

such as the one where my research began—to house evicted families. At the behest of the committee, I was never allowed to reside permanently inside the squat that they coordinated in a rather hierarchical manner.³ Nevertheless, thanks to their social and political networks, but also to free myself from excessive control exercised by the committee over the fieldwork, during my fifteen months of ethnographic research I was able to contact, meet, listen, share experiences, and spend time with different social actors involved in the field of housing vulnerability: evicted families, squatters, social service workers, lawyers, bailiffs, third-sector cooperatives, politicians, law enforcement agents, workers of the agencies managing social housing, and activists. A large part of my research was devoted to the analysis of social housing squatting. I have had the opportunity to spend time both with individuals and squatter families⁴ and with professionals assigned by local institutions to fight squatting. In this sense, my reflections arise on the threshold of two (especially moral) worlds that tend to be represented, in some cases improperly, as antagonistic. The data I collected during fieldwork includes both field notes and semi-structured interviews. In addition, I gathered written sources, specifically newspaper articles, social media posts, flyers, press releases, and legislative texts as well as archival materials.

A relevant issue concerns my personal involvement in the activities of my interlocutors. In broader terms, I refer to a general research ethic, which has a great epistemological, methodological, and theoretical impact. In the case presented here, the ethical implications relate to the protection of interlocutors, especially the most vulnerable, such as social housing squatters. Several scholars have pointed out how ethical issues in research are expressed in the choice of a precise positioning in the field. This appears particularly true when working with social movements or, in general, in contexts of high social conflict (limiting to the Italian context, e.g., Matera 2015; Rossi and Koensler 2012; Tosi Cambini 2019). Sabrina Tosi Cambini has shown the concrete risks of “crushing disciplinary ap-

plication on a possible militancy dimension of research” (2019: 315). Tosi Cambini highlights two central methodological strategies—also followed by me—to mitigate the risks: the reflexive posture, the constant observation of one’s own participation in the field (Tedlock 1991), and the transparency of research intent.

Agreeing with Tosi Cambini, I follow a perspective that Michael Herzfeld calls the “militant middle ground,” understood as the result of “the modesty of a discipline concerned with practice rather than with grand theory [that] may ultimately have a more lasting effect in the world” (Herzfeld 2001: x). Nancy Scheper-Hughes suggested that anthropology could be both a field of knowledge and a field of action, of struggle (1995). This resembles what Franco Basaglia, a radical Italian psychiatrist, and Franca Basaglia Ongaro, an activist and politician, both protagonists of *Psichiatria Democratica*—a movement that promoted Italian psychiatric reform and liberation of the sick from asylum segregation in the 1970s—called a “negative worker” (1975). Adapting the concept to anthropology, Scheper-Hughes argued that “the negative worker is a species of class traitor . . . who colludes with the powerless to identify their needs against the interests of the bourgeois institution” (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 419–420). In general, I have acted as a “negative worker.” In this sense, this article is a call—addressed to those who govern the phenomena analyzed here—to promote greater protections for the most vulnerable.

Milan: Real estate gold mines and plebeian abysses

In November 2019, Milan’s Mayor Beppe Sala declared, in a smug tone, “€13 billion in real estate investments will arrive in the next ten years” (Fioravanti 2019). This declaration confirmed what various real estate analysts have been rumormongering for some time: Milan will be the next investment capital of Europe. In June 2019, the city broke the record for real estate purchases and sales: €4.9 billion of investment in 2019,

€2.8 billion in 2018, and €4.3 billion in 2017. As a local journalist rightly pointed out, Milan has become the gold mine of real estate.

These recent trends—despite having been partly “frozen” by the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis—articulate a hegemonic narrative that has characterized the city for some 20 years: the invention and application of a new model of urban governance, a mixture of policies of inclusion, economic growth, and generalized welfare. I refer to what has been called the “new Milan model.” Indeed, a great chorus of voices recounts a metropolis in which the economic miracle has finally come true. Feebler, however, are the voices of those who tell of the exclusionary dynamics produced by such a model. From the “plebeian abysses,” as the nineteenth-century intellectual Lodovico Corio called the poorest areas of the city (1885), come echoes of daily structural violence, which feeds on evictions, urban clearances, and housing precarity—further confirmation that Milan is, in the truest sense of the word, exclusive.

Oxfam Italy’s *Disuguitalia Report* (2021) illustrates how, in a national context of generalized impoverishment, Milan stands out as the Italian capital of inequalities. In fact, on the one hand, Milan is the wealthiest capital city by average income. On the other, considering the Gini index—an indicator that measures the degree of income concentration and that assumes values between zero (complete equality) and one (absolute inequality), with an index of 0.54—it stands as the most unequal place in Italy. Within the same urban context, in fact, one finds the neighborhood with the highest average income in Italy (€100,489 per year) and, only 10 kilometers away, a working-class neighborhood, whose average of €18,926 is surpassed five times by the former.

The impact of this condition of structural inequality is particularly visible in the housing conditions of city residents. Consider, for example, that, in 2019,⁵ in Milan and the surrounding province, 16,513 requests for eviction enforcement were filed, 1,582 enforcement measures were issued, and 2,416 evictions were carried

out. At the same time, in 2019 approximately 25,000 households were waiting for the allocation of public housing. In 2020, probably due to a change in assignment policies, this number halved. Despite the decrease, trade unions and social movements have highlighted the inability of public housing policies to meet the needs of the most vulnerable segments of the citizenry. In fact, the great number of requests highlights the impossibility for many citizens to tolerate staying within a particularly fierce housing market.

Looking at public housing, the situation is not any better. The housing stock destined for public housing services in Lombardy (until 15 July 2020) consists of 161,987 units; 54.5 percent of the regional public housing services are in the territory of the Metropolitan city of Milan. About 35.7 percent of the entire stock is concentrated in the city of Milan, with a total of 57,766 units.

In this context, in 2020 the ERP dwellings squatted were approximately 3,870, out of a total of 57,766 real estate units. It should also be considered that 13,671 houses are vacant: effectively a small city now uninhabited and that, if available, could meet almost the entire need for public housing.⁶ The number of “vacant” properties stands out even more when compared with the share of public apartments assigned yearly: 1,270 in 2021.

A very sneaky crime

From a legislative point of view, squatting is considered a criminal offense in Italy, governed by Article 633 of the Criminal Code. Unlike other contexts, which have only recently legislated on this phenomenon (for instance, the Dutch case or the English case, presented in Dardusc and Dee 2015; Grohmann 2020; Martínez 2020), Italy has been criminally punishing squatting since the 1930s. Even from a social point of view, squatting—and in particular ERP squatting—seems to represent a phenomenon interpreted by institutions and citizens as a

criminal, morally unfair, and economically harmful act. During my research, several political committees for the safety of working-class neighborhoods, custodians of large blocks of flats, tenants, maintenance and social workers, and law enforcement officers shared their ideas with me. In general, they agreed on the fact that squatting affects not only the effectiveness of the public housing service—de facto taking away resources from the truly needy—but also the security of the neighborhoods, as well as the principle of legality tout court. This discourse is particularly present within working-class neighborhoods, less so among the city’s middle-class neighborhoods. Not least because of a clear spatial division of places of residence and belonging, which also becomes ethical, as Grohmann (2018, 2020) suggests, the latter tending to be disinterested in what goes on daily in ERP blocks. Or rather, the bourgeois idea of working-class neighborhoods is so stereotyped and distant from the factual reality that, in a homogeneous form, all public housing tenants are somehow considered marginal, dangerous, or at best extremely vulnerable and needy.

To understand, also from a legal point of view, the criminal relevance attributed to squatting in Italy, it is necessary to bring into dialogue public policies on housing and urban planning, understood as a spatial modification aiming at ordering working times and spaces (Boffi et al. 1974). In this sense, the ERP accommodations, their urban location, and the selection of the tenants have played a fundamental role in the construction of the local imagery relating to the—at times “monstrous”—figure of the squatter.⁷ Following Piero Vereni (2015), the policies of construction and management of public housing have, since their creation at the beginning of the twentieth century, conveyed a specific form of class anthropopoiesis.⁸ With this term I mean the capacity of society, and the powers that traverse and structure it, to forge different forms of humanity. By referring to class anthropopoiesis, the intention is to underline the centrality of the logics of inclusion and exclusion and the devices to produce marginality that run through

societies, highlighting the processual character of the mechanisms for the construction of social diversity. If it is therefore true that living can be understood as a relational process in continuous evolution between humans and the environment (Ingold 2000), government planning for access to ERP seems to represent an attempt to control this relationship. From the point of view of the selection of the social classes housed and the construction of the model tenant, this achieved some success, with the result of structurally excluding the most disadvantaged individuals. Tenants' unions, squatters and activists in Milan do not hesitate to attribute this choice to a punitive institutional attitude toward those individuals or families guilty of being incapable of remaining in the private rental market. This guilt is sometimes incorporated by those who find themselves excluded, especially in the case of *pater familias*. The sense of shame and failure thus becomes the constant background noise of a life lived in a deeply vulnerable condition. This prevents, among other things, a political awareness among tenants of what has happened, which is why tenants' unions often de-emphasize the individual or the family, so that they can collectivize the political responsibility (Nonini 2017) for the situations of those who are not guaranteed the "ontological security," meaning the subjective and emotional state that "allows us to feel at ease in our environment and at home in our housing" (Madden and Marcuse 2016: 68). In this sense, trade unionists argue the need to interpret the housing crisis as a class struggle, in which the material and political dimensions at stake are made explicit.

The process of exclusion described above has its own historicity, as Antonio Tosi makes clear: "throughout the history of housing, the poor have been . . . intentionally excluded from housing measures or have been subject to reductive interpretations of housing" (Tosi 2017: 152). Contemporaneously, this process still appears to be in force, in a wider and more severe way (Sassen 2014). Within this configuration, the social construction of the categories of "adequate" tenants seems to play a fundamental role.

In this sense, the law contributes to producing the classes of regular and irregular occupants, which only partly coincide with the logic of deserving and underserving subjects. By doing so, the law builds not only the broader framework within which the policies and practices of local governance of public housing are developed, but also models of action—or "moral economies," following Matt Wilde (2020)—that differentiate the "good" tenant from the "bad."

In general, the regional regulations (in line with the national framework) assume that any access to public property that does not comply with the bureaucratic assignment procedure represents a crime, to be opposed with severity. Coherently, squatting, here as in other contexts (Prujit 2013), is treated as material damage to public assets and moral damage to the community. During my fieldwork, this perspective was confirmed on several occasions by the heads of the Security and Protection of Public Asset Group of the two agencies (Aler and MM) that manage public properties. At the time, Corrado Rinaldi⁹ oversaw the Security and Protection of Public Asset Group of MM. Previously, he had worked for many years in the police. During an interview, Rinaldi defined the moral value of the crime. In his words: "Squatting is a very subtle crime, which damages those who are even poorer than those who squat. Paradoxically, the one who is most disarmed is the one who suffers the crime. Those who are . . . a little shrewder, a little more 'out of civic education,' manage to achieve something. . . . So, it is a very 'sneaky' crime."

In the Italian context, as characterized by a large percentage of homeowners, the moral character of the crime is also constructed from the sacredness and inviolability of domestic space. The moral repugnancy of the squatter derives from his "spatial nonbelonging" (Grohmann 2020: 8). Just like dirt for Mary Douglas (1966), the squatter is "out of place," and as such morally unworthy. For this reason, squats are considered "non-homes" (Nowicki 2021: 839). This also gives rise to the stigmatization process that affects squatters. Following

Martínez (2020: 235), it also sheds light on the “hegemonic ideologies and discourses that intervene in the reproduction of the capitalist city in general, and the neoliberal city specifically.” Consequently, as Lucy Finchett-Maddock notes (2016: 6), it “symbolises the defence of enclosure and individual property rights over the rights of the community.”

How to create a criminal

The institutional interventions represent a considerable economic effort for a phenomenon that affects less than 6 percent of the total housing available. It therefore seems that the financial investment does not derive from the substantial gravity of the phenomenon, but it is connected to a broader process of criminalization.

This emerges clearly from the analysis of the policies related to the governance of the phenomenon. A document,¹⁰ produced by Aler to illustrate some corporate strategies against squatting, is paradigmatic (Aler Milano 2015). Adopting an “ecological” perspective, which can be traced back to the Chicago school and goes as far as James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling’s broken-window theory (1982), which has been critiqued for its environmental determinism and reactionary propensity, the document argues that urban security problems are consequences of environmental “degradation.” Popular neighborhoods, characterized by “poverty, marginalization, and exclusion,” are considered extremely degraded places. So are their residents (e.g., Wacquant 1993). In particular, according to Aler, “non-EU citizens”—“bearers of cultural diversity”—are considered responsible for accelerating the process of environmental degradation. The Lombardy public housing company sustains that “the massive and undifferentiated settlement of user classes with high problems” (poor and migrants) and “the criticality of the housing model, characterized by large unused common spaces,” which have become places of negative socialization, lack of fences, little privacy, and little security, produced the

perfect situation for the development of petty crime and squatting. The resolution of these critical issues should be addressed through the identification—and the expulsion—of the subjects who represent “a source of social danger”: specifically, squatters.

How do the local institutions identify these “sources of social danger”? First, by trying to reconstruct the motivations that lead to squatting and different modes of action. During my fieldwork, I interviewed Federica de Pretis, operational manager of coordination institution against squatting on behalf of the Municipality of Milan, inviting her to contextualize squatting in Milanese public housing. In her words: “They do it for money . . . They have a mapping of the empty quarters. They find one or more empty quarters at a time. They show it to the family [that want to squat], they slip into the family, with a process that often is . . . put[ing] in bridgeheads, that is pregnant women, disabled, very fragile people, who have some chance of stopping the police. . . . There are those who have made it a job.”

According to this description, the previously reported “sources of social danger” represent a rather homogeneous category, consistent with the Western European attitude toward this phenomenon (Martínez 2019). ERP squatters are those who act with criminal intentions. After all, processes of criminalization and stigmatization are processes of trivialization and simplification of the complexity of reality (Middleton 2015). On the contrary, ethnography has shown that the category of squatters is vast and heterogeneous. Certainly, it also includes those who “made it a job,” speculating on the housing difficulties of the most vulnerable. In Milan, not only social movements, political squatters, and activists, but also “deprivation-based” squatters, severely criticize the work of these subjects. On the one hand, they recognize in these operations, unlike their own, a criminal intentionality, driven by the desire to exploit the unintended political and social blindness (due to a lack of economic, social, and symbolic resources) of those who turn to them to obtain housing through the pro-

vision of money. On the other hand, however, they identify institutional responsibility for the emergence of these “professionals” as due to the particularly exclusionary logic of access to social housing. However, as anticipated, and contrary to what local institutions claim, this type of squatter represents a minority.

The majority, conversely, is represented by individuals or families in serious conditions of housing vulnerability that decide, acting alone or with the support of social, political, but also ethnic or class-based mutual aid networks, to occupy public housing. Consider, for example, the case of transnational migrants, who, until recently and in a similar way to other European cases, such as Portugal (Alves 2013) or France (Bouillon 2009), were subjected to discriminatory treatment: in order to obtain a house, they were required to have resided or worked in the region for five years,¹¹ and, at the same time, to prove the absence of property rights abroad (different from that required of Italian citizens¹²). This gave a strong impetus to squatting, not only because squatting represents in most cases an alternative to anti-immigrant policies, but also for the political implications of squatting in promoting a social acceptance of migrants (Mudu and Chattopadhyay 2017). Consider the case of Youssef and his family, who were forced to squat in a public house concurrent with the birth of their first child. Youssef, who had been living in Italy for 26 years, was a tiler, but he had been unemployed since 2008 and therefore decided to start his own business, which unfortunately did not go as planned. I met Youssef in the winter of 2015 at the trade union offices I frequented during field research. He wanted to know about the possibilities of accessing public housing. Learning of the impossibility to do that, he left the office disconsolately, saying “I will find another solution.” Sometime later I met him in the courtyard of a large tenement building, while walking with his son. He told me that, with the help of some fellow countrymen, he had finally decided to squat; “I know it’s not the right thing to do, but it’s also not right for me to make my family live on the street. I don’t get a

council house. The other houses cost too much. What was I supposed to do?”

The reasons for squatting in social housing are multiple and do not concern only foreigners. For example, Delia, an Italian founder of a committee of women squatters in a working-class neighborhood located in the north of the city told me about the reasons that led her to squat 27 years ago: “We squatted because we had no alternative. If I had had an alternative when I was 26, my daughters, growing up amid demonstrations or in a house where every time the intercom rang it could’ve been the police, I wouldn’t have brought them up so. I’m not proud of that. But . . . What was I supposed to do?”

Unlike “speculative squatters,” those who occupy social housing motivated by material necessity—or for political reasons—manage, in certain cases and if they have enough time, to build relationships with their neighbors, to gain the respect of the communities they fit into, in effect securing for themselves a solid network of protection from evictions.

Despite the variety of cases, the institutional actions proposed to expel these subjects—“sources of social danger”—are uniform and consistent with the idealized taxonomy proposed by those same institutions, who clamored for instruments for coordinated repressive action.

This request was satisfied in November 2014 with the “Operational Action Plan for the prevention and contrast to squatting in ERP” (Prefettura di Milano 2014). The plan provided for some procedures aimed at “linking the actions to combat illegality with the assistance and safety measures of housing” (Prefettura di Milano 2014: 4). As the Regional Councilor for Housing and Social Housing declared at the time: “The one signed today is not a repressive document, but an action plan that meets a very strong cry for help that has come from many neighborhoods” (Regione Lombardia 2014).

According to my interlocutors, the social welfare dimension was relegated to the background, favoring instead prevention, and overall evictions. This was also confirmed to me by

de Pretis, who I introduced earlier: “This protocol says that evictions should be done as soon as possible, and that [the vacant] housing should be assigned or reassigned as soon as possible.”

In general, the most-used official rhetorical justification to support the need for evictions of squatters concerns the restoration of legality. The equation is simple and explicit: squatting in an ERP house corresponds to stealing someone else’s right. So, evictions represent the full realization of the “real and ultimate goal” of institutions: “making public houses available for those who have the right” (Prefettura di Milano 2014: 4). In this way, the variety of possible

factors that have led people to squat is limited to a simplistic non-compliance with the rules, which primarily damages other ERP users. The impetus is again to act on a moral level to blame and, consequently, criminalize those who do not adhere to the process.

In recent years, Aler and MM have conducted a decisive “awareness” campaign—read criminalization—against squatting. The main message of this concerned the theme of the “cancellation” of the rights of others. The goal, rather than a generic protection of rights, seemed to be the construction of a living environment aimed at denunciation and suspicion.

ALER

Chi occupa una
CASA
cancella
IL TUO
DIRITTO

Occupare una casa è un reato*

*Art. 633 del Codice Penale. Libro secondo. Titolo VIII. Capo I:
"Chiunque invade arbitrariamente terreni o edifici altrui, pubblici o privati,
al fine di occuparli o di trarne altrimenti profitto, è punito,
a querela della persona offesa, con la reclusione fino a due anni o con multa."

PER LA SEGNALAZIONE DI CASI DI OCCUPAZIONE ABUSIVA
02-73922692 24 ore su 24

LOMBARDIA. CRESCIAMOLA INSIEME.

Regione Lombardia
Cass

FIGURE 2. Flyer against squatting, Milan, 2015. © Aler Milano.

The image shown below is part of an initiative promoted by Aler, the Municipality of Milan, and the Lombardy Region. I came across this flyer during fieldwork. Anyone residing in an ERP neighborhood could find it at the entrance to buildings, in corridors and in receptions.

The poster is structured from top to bottom. First, the eye meets the final part of the tail, blurred. This represents the last of the last. An elderly man with a cane closes the line. Following the human chain, the faces, bodies, and features become clearer, and one becomes familiar with the characters. Some users will probably see themselves. Arriving at the head of the procession, the message overlaps the context, signaling the social, collective, and individual outcomes at the same time, of the flouting of the rules. The sentence ranges from the particular (“Whoever squats in a house cancels your right”) to the general (“Squatting in a house is a crime”), indissolubly binding each individual with the community to which they belong. Proceeding downward, the general rule becomes law: the exactness of the imperative (“Article, Book, Title, Head”) indicates the inevitability of the same. Lastly, the general strongly reconnects to the individual: everyone can contribute to enforcing the rights of all, through a telephone hotline, active 24 hours a day.

Porous category boundaries

Although it is widely criminalized and stigmatized, as shown over the previous pages, at the time of my research local institutions provided some legal devices—included in the regional law that regulates ERP housing—to regularize squatting. I came across these during fieldwork in the tenants’ union offices. In April 2016, for example, I was participating in some consultations. On that occasion, at the end of a meeting with a mother and her disabled 15-year-old son who were squatting in ERP housing after an eviction from rented accommodation, Camilla, also a squatter, activist, and trade unionist for five years in the union ranks, invited me

to take some “dictated notes” in my field diary. “According to law,” Camilla told me, “There are three categories of squatting in social housing: squatting with the presence of a disabled or sick person in the family; squatting for necessity; administrative squatting.” These types of “bureaucratically constructed” subjects (Bourdieu 1990) find themselves in a peculiar situation of illegality, such that reintegration into the ranking of assignment of public housing despite their prior exclusion may be granted. Certainly, as Dorina Pojani notes for the case of Bathore in Albania (2013: 819), which represents a remarkable case of successful squatter settlement upgrading, these types of operations are more socially acceptable when they involve public property, as is also the case with social housing squatting in Milan. In such cases, in fact, even the middle class tends not to object, since the value of private property remains intact.

The first case presented by Camilla states that the protection of disabling conditions linked to the squatters’ health prevails over the protection of legality tout court. Earlier, the case was reported of frail people, including those with disabilities, being strategically used by what I termed “speculative squatters” to avoid the immediate eviction of the property occupied. Interestingly, this operation is somewhat facilitated by the legislation itself. To this end, social movements or trade unions also strategically use the presence of disabled or sick people to avoid eviction. More than once I have witnessed the strategic use, in the various stages of eviction, of medical documentation attesting to forms of disability or illness. After all, it is about the possibility of manipulating, with the tools allowed by law, the category of vulnerability, in this case expanding its boundaries. In this sense, unlike in the rest of Europe, at least to the best of my knowledge, this strategy emerges as a particularly effective possibility not only to prevent an eviction, but even to be able to obtain the allocation of social housing from an unlawful act. As Silvia, an activist once told me, this represents a possibility to “get into the ranking through the back door.” Clearly, this strategic manip-

ulation is only one step in a more articulated process. Nevertheless, as Anders Corr (1999) notes, echoing the words of Woody Widrow, a US tenant organizer since the early 1970s, in the end, even if these are short-term strategies, they can be tools to be used in the struggle for housing reform.

The second case provides that those squatters who demonstrated they have acted due to a “state of necessity” could obtain legitimization. As reported by some interlocutors, the formulation of this article represented the successful outcome of a long process of political struggle and recognition of the structural causes that contribute to producing the phenomenon of squatting. However, in practice, until now, no squatter has been legitimized thanks to the use of this legal device.

The third type concerned “administrative squatting,” that is, according to Camilla, “squatting without trespassing.” So, by administrative squatting we mean an unregulated stay—an outcome in some cases of a tactic employed by residents to manipulate (and deal with) bureaucratic rigidities—in an ERP house following a takeover. Once the right to take over has been ascertained (due to, for example, the squatter’s relationship to the previous holder of the contract), the irregular situation can be normalized. However, even in these cases, this device has proved difficult to apply in practice. On the one hand, the institutions and managing bodies seem to presuppose a predatory intent in the failure of the new tenant to report the passage of users. On the other hand, official inclusion in the squatter category activates a series of cross-checking procedures (fiscal, criminal, family, professional) that, in most cases, identify some critical issues, tautologically confirming the stigmatizing and criminalizing premise.

In addition to these three categories, social housing squatting is also related to the issue of the tenant’s arrears and the forfeiture of access and permanence requirements.¹³ Specifically, during my fieldwork, I could see that the boundaries of the notion of squatter tended to be quite mobile. This fluidity, however, did not seem to

be restrictive, but inclusive, in the sense that it tended to include subjects who in the past were not considered unlawful. The then Councilor for Housing Policies, for example, was a supporter of the need to include the themes both of arrears and of forfeiture in the area relating to unauthorized use of social housing. His words, reported during an interview, were clear: “I call it ‘illegally rising,’ in respect of forfeiture. It is not only those who squat in the house who have entered improperly. Even those who are in there and no longer have the right to stay are abusive.”

This statement was made in the final phase of the fieldwork. I remember that it created a sensation in the Milanese-scape. Trade unionists argued that the biggest problem of this proposal lay, on the one hand, in the tendency to increase the speed of turnover in social housing and, on the other, in the potential consequences produced by enlarging the squatter category. They claimed, in fact, that the expansion of the expulsion criteria would coincide with a narrowing of the access criteria aimed at including in the ERP system subjects who could bear the costs and who do not go into arrears. This would have basically confirmed the tendency to favor “good”—and thus paying—tenants.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the housing issue back to the center of the political debate. The lockdown made visible the socio-economic inequalities in housing. The Italian Confederation of Workers’ Unions has predicted a risk of eviction for 50,000 Milanese families. Faced with these numbers, local institutions show some concern, but they seem determined not to abandon the “new Milan model,” partially responsible for this widespread housing fragility. As David Madden and Peter Marcuse point out (2016), the housing crisis does not represent the outcome of the failure of the policies, but rather the most evident consequence of their success.

In this configuration, analysis of the securitarian and criminalizing treatment of squat-

ting shows the contemporary need to construct forms of inequality that appeal to moral categories of the social aspect, rather than the actual severity of the phenomenon. This is where vulnerability comes into play, as a category intrinsic to human beings that is structured from spatial relations, as Joshua Burraway (2021: 807) suggests, echoing Grohmann (2020)—as an intimately social product, this can be “made, unmade, and remade” (Grohmann 2020). It is precisely for this reason that squatters can manipulate this attribute, in fact, and in some cases even manage to protect themselves from the risk of eviction.

In this sense, squatters represent one of the many urban ideal types who suffer degrading and discriminatory treatment, the fruits of violent political, police, and judicial action aimed at protecting the right to property above all other rights. Nevertheless, squatters are not passive victims or heroic anti-capitalists. In a certain sense, the desire to obtain housing by freeing oneself from bureaucratic procedures, although determined in most of the cases I observed by a situation of vulnerability, is also the outcome of a double process of neoliberal modeling, which concerns, on the one hand, the system itself, and on the other hand, the subjects and subjectivities involved in it. In this sense, the social housing squatter reproduces a bourgeois and capitalist dream: to obtain possession of a home. However, by acting outside the established channels, from a subaltern position, they become the perfect scapegoats, entrusted with the role of hiding structural dysfunctionality.

I have examined how, from a discursive, operational, and legal point of view, institutions in charge of regulating and managing public housing construct and deal with squatters. The class of squatters is the outcome of an anthropopoietic process, understood as the social, political, and normative production of a specific form of humanity, endowed with both attributed and embedded values, morals, and behaviors. The process is characterized by extreme ambiguity and uncertainty (moral, behavioral, professional, human), thus revealing the peculiarity of

contemporary forms of exclusion—an exclusion based on a process of taxonomic regulation and securitization of the urban. As Mary Manjikian notes (2013: 5), “the language of securitization creates an understanding that an issue cannot be tackled using our regular everyday political logic.” However, ethnography makes it possible to bring out the intimately regular everyday political logic and the social value of practices such as squatting and thus, in a certain sense, to deconstruct, and to fight, the language of securitization, criminalization, and stigmatization that affects those who, out of necessity or political activism, challenge the mechanisms of the neoliberal city.

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Notes

1. For a general European overview with national insights, see Van der Steen et al. (2014).
2. In Italy, the term refers to facilities, managed by organizations or autonomously, aimed at offering recreational or cultural services. It is used extensively to refer to a particular type of self-managed structure linked to a countercultural network—often born after the squatting of an abandoned space—aimed at supporting minority groups and providing cultural activities.

3. On the topic of hierarchy and authority in squats, see Kadir (2016).
 4. As in the case of the squatted building, I have never lived in a social housing squat, in this case due to a prohibition, dictated by security reasons, formulated by the university I worked for at the time of the research.
 5. The years 2020 and 2021 are not representative of the trends of housing vulnerability, given the nationwide blocking of evictions imposed by the Italian government during the pandemic.
 6. Note also that in Milan, 16,000 houses are rented out to tourists (Maran 2022), and that, according to a local tenants' union, 80,000 private houses are vacant.
 7. For a diachronic and Milanese-centered perspective, see Alasia and Montaldi (2010).
 8. For the original formulation of the concept, see Remotti (2013).
 9. All names used in the article are pseudonyms.
 10. The document is no longer available on the Aler website. The pages of the document were not numbered.
 11. Declared unconstitutional by ruling no. 44/2020.
 12. Amended by Lombardy Region Resolution no. 3679, 13 October 2020.
 13. The rent of ERP accommodation is calculated according to tax declaration (ISEE). The reference areas are Protection, Access, Permanence, and Forfeiture. Forfeiture indicates the residents who pay the highest rent, due to a high tax declaration or administrative defaults.
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