

"MICI DE OAIE" OR "COSTESINE E POENTA"?: THE USE OF URBAN PUBLIC GREEN SPACE BY NEW AND OLD RESIDENTS. THREE ITALIAN CASE STUDIES

Rachele Borghi, Monica Camuffo

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“Mici de oaie” or “costesine e poenta”? the use of urban public green space by new and old residents. Three Italian case studies.

Rachele Borghi rachele.bor@gmail.com

Monica Camuffo camonic@unive.it

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1. Introduction

Private space using, building and adapting are strongly influenced by the culture of its residents, who define the meaning and the function of the private space they live in. In each culture, private space conception influences public space perception, meant as both a continuation of the private one and a place where to socialise. Therefore the process leading to the definition of the public space is highly complex and involves many actors, and it might be source of potential conflict. Often, the use and the function of the public space facing houses is determined by the residents, sometimes generating ethnic neighbourhoods where also the commercial activities have a strong ethnic connotation, the so-called ethnic business (Papotti et al., 2004). On the other side, more widely-used public space is often functionalised by the predominant community; in some cases, for instance when the use made by a minority contrasts with the use made by the predominant community, a potential conflicting situation can occur.

Northern-European urban parks are indeed a good example of widely-used public space. They are characterised by a promotion of the reciprocity and the integration among users, and they can represent a testing ground to try to overcome the assimilation model or the ghettoisation. The experience of such parks is new in the Italian urban context, where urban parks are often characterised by conflicting situation. Italian urban parks might represent a case study to unveil the daily social dynamics occurring between people with very different cultural backgrounds (e.g. citizens and immigrants) exploiting the same public space.

1.2 Urban green space and its role within the urban realm: ecological and social functions

Urban green space (UGS), defined as all publicly owned and publicly accessible open space with a high degree of cover-by vegetation (Schipperijn et al., 2010), is acquiring growing importance within urban areas, mainly due to the increasing public attention on planning and regulation of urban development (Roditi, 1994). Indeed, UGS performs multiple functions, ranging from ecological to social ones (Barbosa et al., 2007). From an ecological point of view, UGS allows to

maintain green corridors essential for biodiversity and migration, mitigate urban climate changes (Gill et al., 2009), contrast the action of polluting agents (e.g. CO₂ and particulate matter), reduce surface runoff (Gisotti, 2007) and can be used as environmental quality bioindicators. Additionally, as environmental psychologists state, green infrastructures offer to citizens the possibility to daily experience environment and natural elements, thus priming and promoting environmental-friendly habits and active-care behaviours (Bonnes et al., 2006; Barthel et al., 2010). Indeed, many researches (Takano et al., 2002; Jackson, 2003; Schipperijn et al., 2010) demonstrate that UGS positively impacts on psycho-physic wellness, promotes physical activity and reduces stress and mortality; it also might produce economic benefits for citizens and administrations, by cooling urban areas and hence promoting energy conservation (Arvantandis et Skouras, 2008).

Indeed, although citizens often perceive as “excessive” the use of public space by immigrants (Alietti et Augustoni, 2009), UGS represents a cultural meeting point among different communities and social groups and it might act as a tool for breaking down social segregation, playing a pivotal role in minority integration (Germann-Chiari et Seeland, 2004; Nicolé et Seeland 1999; Germann-Chiari et al., 2000). For instance Seeland and Ballesteros (2004), in their analysis of three Swiss cities, Lugano, Zurich and Geneva, have demonstrated that the organisation of cultural activities and social events in the context of public green has a great impact on ethnic group integration, thus suggesting that public green planning and administration in accordance with multiethnic society needs promotes integration. Indeed, since urban landscapes are cultural portrayals of society, displaying different cultural traditions in the context of UGS might help people feeling at home and reduce the out-of-place perception often experienced by immigrants (Seeland et al., 2008).

2. Our aim

The aim of our research was to unveil the daily social dynamics occurring between people with very different cultural backgrounds exploiting the same public space. We focused our attention on UGS and the social dynamics therein occurring between old and new residents, defined respectively as Italian citizens and immigrants. In order to achieve our aim, we have chosen three urban parks in the Municipality of Venice: Hayez Park, San Giuliano Park and Piraghetto Park, which indeed represent for us three deeply different and remarkably interesting case study. Our research has taken shape from the events occurring in Hayez Park (Zelarino, Venice). Since 2007 the Park has been in spotlight of local press for being theatre of actions defined as “inappropriate” and “disrespectful of

common rules of behaviour”¹. According to the press and as reported in a City Council inquiry, during the weekends the Park was mostly exploited by “Eastern-European foreigners, who, while taking advantage of barbecues, tables and benches present in the Park, prevent[ed] the citizens, often through the use of violence, from fully profiting of the Park equipment”². Because of these episodes, a better control was urged and, if required, the removal of barbecue installations was suggested.

The true starting point of our investigation lays in the City Council inquiry where a “legitimate” and “normal” Park use is opposed to an “improper” use (e.g. “bivouacking”). We wondered whether the use of Hayez Park by old and new residents was actually “different” or whether the adjectives used in the inquiry were influenced by the perception and the prejudices old citizens have on migrants. More in general, does the “different” use of a given public space derive from a “different” perception of the given space? If this is the case, is it due to different cultural backgrounds? Or to the contingent situations and needs citizens experience in the urban realm? How does this real or perceived “different use” of public green influence the opinion old residents have on new residents? How much does this contribute to the radicalisation of stereotypes? How much does this reflect the widespread opinion about immigration? In order to replay to these questions we undertook a multidisciplinary approach.

3. Methodology

As previously mentioned, our multidisciplinary research was focused on UGS in the Venice Municipality: Hayez Park, San Giuliano Park and Piraghetto Park. The three parks we focused on represent indeed three interesting case studies. Hayez Park has been theatre of conflicts and object of Public Administration intervention. San Giuliano Park is one of the biggest urban parks in Europe. Piraghetto Park has been brought to our attention by the Immigration Office of Venice as being theatre of latent conflicts. We thereby analysed 1) the policies implemented by the last administrations; 2) the management tools employed by Offices and external enterprises in charge of the maintenance and valorisation of the Parks; 3) the interactions among the various Venice Public Administration Departments; 4) the use of the three Parks and the activities therein conducted. In order to achieve such goals, we analysed the documentation and the projects carried out by the Public Green Office of the Municipality of Venice, organised a focus group involving the people in charge of the administration and maintenance of the urban green, and interviewed the responsible of

¹ Zelarino-Venice City Council Inquiry no. 92, dated 19th April 2007.

² *Ibidem*.

the Immigration Service of the Municipality. Moreover we administered two surveys to citizens. The first survey was administered to people met inside the Parks, while the second one to people in Park surroundings. Filling out the first survey, made of 16 questions 6 of whom were open-ended, required on average 15 minutes. In some cases the issues lead to discussions between us and the interviewees, resulting in semi-structured interviews and even life stories. The second survey, 6 questions 4 of whom open-ended, required less time to be completed and aimed at investigate the feelings and opinions of a random sample about the three Parks. The surveys have been administered at different times (late morning, early afternoon and evening), both during the week and the weekend, between September and October 2009 and in April 2010. In total we collected 186 samples for the first survey and 134 for the second one.

4. Public spaces and private prejudice: Hayez, San Giuliano and Zelarino Parks

During the last ten years, the City of Venice has been actively taking care of the urban public green issue, by promoting different initiatives and projects. The public green in the urban context of Venice is mainly administered by a specific Office, who takes advantage of a municipal company (V.E.R.I.T.A.S.) for the maintenance. A first step in the valorisation of the Venetian public green resources was the creation of the Public Green Forum in 2002. Since its creation, the Forum has been a powerful tool to keep the public administration connected with citizens and associations. A second key step was the preparation and the actuation of the Public Green Regulatory Plan, whose first version dates back to 2003. The final current Regulatory Plan, executive since May 2009, has been designed and approved by the tight co-working of the Municipality, the 10th Consiliar Commission, the Public Green Forum, and many environmental associations. Indeed, as mentioned by Cristiana Scarpa, responsible for the initial phase of the Public Green Forum establishment, the drawing of a regulatory plan was perceived as a need not only by the Public Administration but also by citizens. Over time, other tools have been implemented by the City to improve the managing of public green and the involvement of citizens; for instance the census of public green, published online through the Web-GIS (Web Geographical Information System) technology.

However it should be noticed that, although the Regulatory Plan defines the responsibility of the City and the citizens in taking care of the public green (Art.4), the principal aim of the Plan seems to be the definition of rules for managing the ecological, environmental and technical aspects, without really taking in account the connected social and cultural issues. A comprehensive, organic, structured study of social issues connected to UGS appears to never be conducted in the Venetian urban context.

4.1 Hayez Park

Hayez Park is indeed an emblematic example of the potential conflicts among new and old residents in UGS. As previously mentioned, in the past few years, the Park has been theatre of conflicting co-exploitation by new and old residents, additionally a wide-spread unrest raised and the whole neighbourhood was perceived as degraded. Consequently, many complaints were lodged with the Police and the local press echoed the events sparking the political debate on the fate of the Park. Therefore the Venetian Immigration Service started to take care of the problem. Under the supervision of a cultural mediator, the immigrant and citizen associations of the neighbourhood (*Auser, Casa della Cultura Iraniana, DACIA, I Sette Nani, Nepalese in Italia, Ucrainapi, Comitato Cittadini Cipressina, Cooperativa Anche Mia*) were involved and a working group was established. All this prompted a multicultural, member-active process, which led to drawing up a regulation for the management and running of the Park infrastructures. Remarkably, at the end of 2007 the thus established working group funded the Hayez Park Friends association, which actively began to take care of the Park management, for instance by organizing parties and other events in order to promote socialisation among residents.

Sunday, 30th May 2008, the Moldavian and Ukrainian communities welcome Spring with the traditional celebration called *Martisor* in Moldavia and *Teplogo Oleksiya* In Ukraine. [...] It was a nice celebration day, which allowed immigrant communities, citizen associations, the Zelarino Municipality and the Service for Immigration and Citizenship Rights of the City of Venice to meet each others. Remarkably, the number of women who daily take care of our aged people and our little children in our houses was high. [...] The event, sponsored by the Hayez Park Friends, was indeed the result of long-lasting work which had been conducted in the Park and had been able to convert the potential conflicts into an exemplary occasion for socialisation and experience sharing, as the organisers said during in their speeches.

From our survey it emerges a general fulfilment about Hayez Park. Indeed we registered the highest percentage of positive comments from new and old citizens interviewed in the Park surroundings, the 60.4%, versus the 33.3% and the 54.6% scored for Piraghetto and San Giuliano Parks respectively. Almost the totality (93.7%) of new residents met in the Park define as completely positive their experience, while the 41.5% state to have daily interactions with old residents in the Park. It should be noticed that the 17.9% of new residents visiting the Park are women taking care of aged Italians, thus increasing the frequency of new-old resident interaction. Remarkably, the second most popular activity conducted in the Park is the organisation of picnics and barbeques

(21.5%), thus suggesting that the involvement of immigrant and citizen associations in the Park managing had a pivotal role in significantly reducing the social conflict without preventing the “different use” of the Park, as the barbeques were perceived by old residents. On the contrary, many citizens appreciated the fact that the barbeque infrastructures have to be booked in advance and that they are assigned by the *Auser* association only upon ID card presentation. However, almost one fourth of the people interviewed in the Park surroundings (22.6%) complain about the presence of immigrants in the Park, suggesting that, although the conflict might not persist, the widespread opinion among citizens has not significantly changed.

A strikingly characterizing result about Hayez Park can be unveiled by comparing the habits of visiting different parks. More than half of the new residents interviewed in the Park (60%) stated to visit only Hayez Park mirroring the habits of residents interviewed in the Park surroundings (47.7%). Additionally, while the vast majority of people interviewed in the Park surroundings stated to know the Park (88.6%), the majority of citizens interviewed in the neighbourhood of the two other Parks declare not to know Hayez Park, although they say to know other parks (unpublished data). On one side this might be explained by the peripheral location of the Park in the urban context, on the other it might suggest that immigrants tend to take over the marginal, “interstitial space” of a society (Papotti, 2002). From our survey the new resident visiting Hayez Park can be described as follows: Eastern-European (66.3%) workers (31.6%) or women taking care of aged people (17.9%), and living in Italy shorter than five years (91.6%), who visit the Park 2-4 times per week (34.5%), mainly with friends (51.1%) and family (27.7%).

4.2 San Giuliano Park

San Giuliano Park, compared with the two other Parks we analysed, displays some striking differences in terms of extension, planning and construction, as well as social issues. Indeed San Giuliano Park, with its 700 hectares of whom 255 are represented by channels and mudflats, is the biggest European urban park. Remarkably, such a huge urban Park is the result of a long-lasting, innovative project, which involved a degraded green area facing the Venetian Lagoon and led to its environmental recovery and urban requalification. In the past, such area was used as manufactory and urban dump. As reported in the official San Giuliano Park website, the goals of the project were: 1) the creation of an infrastructure comprising a wide range of leisure, cultural and economic activities; 2) the connection between such infrastructures by means of a tailored pedestrian-path network surrounded by the green and the thereby limitation of traffic by creation of parking areas; 3) the removal of the physical, visual and psychological obstacles between the Cities of Venice and Mestre. Remarkably, such an innovative approach, combining environmental rescue and urban

requalification, has received significant European Union funding. The first lot of the Park was opened to the public in 2004. As observed for Hayez Park, the report filled in by the Venetian Consortium for Research and Education (COSES) in 2004 layouts that clear and well known regulations as well as surveillance are perceived as essential for a satisfying and pleasant public green infrastructure. Indeed, along with its extension and innovative character, the more striking hallmark of San Giuliano Park is the absence of complaints reported to the Public Administration. The Park is 24/24 monitored, by day by a volunteer-based police (the so called Silver Police) and by night by a private surveillance company. Moreover, since the Park opening, a co-operation has been established between the Police and the different associations charged of the surveillance of the Park. It should be mentioned that also a user code of behaviour was prepared and published in a brochure (Colladel et Pedenzini, 2004) distributed in thousands of copies since the opening of the Park.

The preventive approach undertaken by the Public Administration in managing and monitoring the Park has been highly effective, as outlined by the absence of complaints about immigrants, tramps, drug pushing or lack of security in the Park context. The major issue seems to be linked to the green maintenance; mainly due to the relative recent opening of the Park, the trees are still quite small and many interviewees state that they do not offer enough shadow or that their maintenance should be improved. Although no social conflict is emerging from our survey, only the 26.7% of new residents (less than half compared with the data from Hayez Park) interact with old residents. New residents mainly come to the Park with friends (42.4%) and family (27.3%), to socialise (43.7%) and spend some time outdoor (17.4%). They are mostly Asian (44.4%) and Eastern-European (42.2%) workers (37.8%) or unemployed (17.8%), who have been living in Italy since less than five years (84.4%).

Also for San Giuliano Park a kind of segregation is emerging in the visiting habits among citizens. Indeed although the percentage of people visiting only San Giuliano Park (28.8%) is half of the Hayez Park counterpart and the percentage of people visiting also other parks is higher (35.6%), the fractions of new residents visiting only San Giuliano Park (71.1%) is even higher than what we observed for Hayez Park. Additionally, citizens interviewed in the surroundings of the two other Parks, although stating to know the Park, in the majority of cases do not visit San Giuliano Park due to the seldom passing public transportation (unpublished data). Indeed the Park has been projected to be reached mainly by private transports and by bikes (a cycling path connects the Park with Mestre downtown). The large extension of the Park might also be a cause for our result: people interviewed in Hayez and Piraghetto Park state to appreciate the small scale of these two parks.

4.3 Piraghetto Park

Piraghetto Park is located in a complex urban context. The whole neighbourhood is perceived as degraded by citizens, who complain for the strong presence of immigrants, the drug pushing activity ascribed to Northern-Africans, the picnics organised by Eastern-European women and the traffic due to the nearby Mestre railway station. In particular the Park has been the object of many complaints to the Public Administration for drug pushing, likely because of the possibility of entering the Park during the night closure hours through some gaps in the fence. However the survey-based statistics we elaborated depict a significantly different situation, not mirroring the expected enhanced social conflict. For instance 76% of old residents defined as positive their experience in the Park, while the remaining 24% partially positive. When asked about the eventual problems occurring in the Park, most of them mentioned immigrants and blamed the latter (mainly Northern-Africans) for drug pushing in the Park; however, none of the old residents was able to report a precise example or episode. The only specifically mentioned problem was the cricket matches played by the Bengalis and the risk to be hit by a cricket ball. National game in Bangladesh, cricket is played in the Park by a small unofficial team, and this, since it is perceived by old resident as a different use new residents make of the Park, is actually fuelling the conflict and the “here-they-do-what-they-want” widespread opinion among old residents. The fact that some infrastructures for cricket are available in other locations not far away might further enhance the conflict.

Another interesting result is that, although the Northern-Africans were the most mentioned foreigners in the interviews we collected, the Bengali community was actually the most present in the Park during opening hours while we were administering our interviews (54.2% versus 4.4%). Of note, the Bengali community is also the most numerous group in the Venetian urban context: the census filled in by the City of Venice in 2009 scored 4499 Bengali, but only 676 immigrants from North Africa (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) out of 26852 total foreigners³. We found that the Bengalis visiting the Park are mainly young people who have been living in Italy since less than five years. Some of them still attend school, others work in hotels and restaurants. Due to their precarious situation and their lack of work, they often come to the Park to play cards, basketball and, as previously mentioned, cricket.

Far more interesting is the fact that, although the 33.3% of people (new and old residents) complain about immigrants, tramps, and drug pushing, the 60.9% of new residents state to have positive interactions with old residents. Additionally, even more surprisingly, we registered many positive and friendly interactions among new and old residents, the same old residents that were previously

³ Census Statistics of Research Service, City of Venice, dated 31th December 2009. The statistics take in account only officially registered foreigners.

complaining about immigrants. For instance, the aged people playing bocce in the Bocce Club of the Park often shared their shelter with the Bengalis who came under the shelter to play cards, as well as with the Eastern-European women who organised there their weekend picnics by taking advance of the tables and chairs freely provided to them by the old residents playing bocce. Although our statistics do not include the interviews of the members of the Bocce Club, since they refused to fill in our survey, we managed to chat with them and obtain the information we were seeking. They were not able to explain their hospitality towards Bengalis and Eastern-European women under the light of their previous complaints about immigrants. The only comment old residents made was that “Bengalis are different” and that the Park degrade is due to drug pushing by immigrants and to the presence of many drug-addicted people blamed for throwing their syringes in the surroundings of the bocce infrastructure. This indeed underlines a merge between the image of the immigrant and that one of drug-addicted people, which is not supported by direct experience, since none of the interviewees reported episodes of drug pushing during the Park opening hours. Strikingly, we could document that new residents, Bengalis and Eastern-European women, point out the dangerous presence of foreigners in the Park, in particular the “drug-pushing Northern-Africans”. However, none of the new residents was actually able to provide specific examples or events beyond general statements. For instance, a family running an internet point in the surrounding of the Park claimed the danger the Northern-African pushers might represent for their children. The most surprising result is that the status of parent is perceived both by new and old resident as a common determinant by mean of which distinguishing “good” and “bad” Park users. Indeed both new and old residents wanted to specify that the immigrants they were complaining about were not mothers with their children.

5. The point of view of the Public Administration

In order to have a more complete picture of the dynamics among new and old residents in the context of the three urban Parks, we decided to examine the policies implemented and the management tools employed by the Venice Public Administration and the Offices and external enterprises in charge of the maintenance and valorisation of the Parks.

5.1 The Focus group with the technical staff of Venice: the Public Green Office and V.E.R.I.T.A.S.

In order to dissect the specific issues the public green technical staff deals with, we organised a focus group. We therefore involved on one side the head and the technicians of the Public Green Office, on the other the technicians of V.E.R.I.T.A.S., the company managing the public green.

From the focus group it emerged that the “different” use of the parks between old and new residents, as previously described, might actually be due to the “different” way new residents “do perceive the parks in their countries”, indeed their habit of “meeting, having lunch, playing cards and spending their days in the parks” clearly does not fit with the way old residents use the parks, the latter “spending much less time in the parks”. During the focus group the concept of “meeting together and spending time in the parks” was farther explored, thus leading to its association with two other key words: “garbage” and “dirt” in parks. Although the focus group pointed out that “it is the meeting together” and not the “condition of being foreigners” to be responsible for littering, since “both Italians and immigrants abandon their garbage on the grass”, the mental connection between ethnic landscape and dirt was quite strong even in the participants of the focus group. The use of the “bushes as toilettes”, a woman working as “hairstylist in the park and leaving the hair on the ground”, people using the park as “a restaurant and cooking there”, the “employment agency” organised in the park are just some examples we collected during the focus group about how, among the technical stuff, the perception of a different use of the park was intimately connected with the perception of an anomalous, not appropriate exploitation of a public space. Many of their statements were actually depicting the immigrants as “invaders”, “tramps squatting benches and parks”, “camping out on public space near the soup kitchen” “not only in the periphery but also in Mestre downtown” and preventing old residents to visit the park: “many complain they can’t go there anymore”.

Strikingly, during the focus group, great stress was placed on the difference between “we”, the old residents, and “they”, the new residents, somehow reflecting the same prejudice of the interviewees. Additionally, during the focus group the technical stuff often associated the immigrants with other problematic social figures such as drug-addicted people and tramps, or, in other cases, the immigrants were generally defined as non-EU immigrants, although most of them do actually come from EU-countries. As example: “in the Centre for drug-addicted people [...] there are many extra-EU people, they can be divided into two groups: from East-Europe and Muslim or Northern-Africans, who have a different relationship with the social workers, they do not even look women in their eyes”.

Another interesting element brought to our attention by the participants of the focus group is the fact that frequently Public Administrations and citizens call for a (even dramatic) tree pruning and hedge trimming in order to “prevent people to hide and carry out illegal activities”. However, when asked about the concrete problems caused by immigrants in the Parks they could record, all the participants agreed that “between Italians and immigrants there is not a real conflicting situation, we do not receive so many complaints”. It actually emerged that the main issue concerning parks are

acts of vandalism seriously damaging public infrastructures. The striking result is that vandalism in the park context is not caused by immigrants, since the vandalism seems to be much more frequent in “areas where the presence of immigrants and tramps is very low or they are even absent”, but it is “almost always caused by young bored Italian guys”.

5.2 The interview of Mr. Gianfranco Bonesso, responsible of the Immigration Service of Venice

In order to gain a more complete portrayal of the issues related to parks and immigrants, we interviewed the responsible of the Immigration Service of Venice, Mr. Gianfranco Bonesso.

Since the beginning of the interview Mr. Bonesso pointed out that the issues raising from the exploitation of the public green are not necessarily connected to a “conflicting situation among different ethnic groups”, rather they might be due to “biased and negative portrayals [citizens might have] not always matching to reality”; strikingly, he stressed that often the greater is the “visibility of the place” where the episodes of supposed conflict happen, the greater is the uproar caused in public opinion: the more a public place is visited and used by citizens, the more episodes of improper use, even not being associated with real conflicts, are noticed and receive public attention. Concerning the issues of Hayez Park, the data emerging from the interview of Mr. Bonesso do correlate with what we have previously deduced from the interviews conducted in the Park: “the fact that the different use immigrants, mainly Eastern-Europeans, did of the Park generated a conflicting situation”. Mr. Bonesso highlighted that the absence of a code regulating such “different uses of the Park” might have enhanced the conflict, generating a “self-fuelling process”.

On the other side, referring to Piraghetto Park, Mr. Bonesso identified the main issue in the drug pushing problem, and stated that this is not attributable to a foreigner-Italian contraposition, but it more simply represents an unauthorised, improper use of a public space, independent of the nationality. Mr. Bonesso stressed that, also as consequence of a biased reporting of the information, such issues are often referred as being caused by immigrants. The prejudice, often linking immigrants with a behaviour disrespectful of the rules, might actually dissolve in the “mixed places”, right where conflicting situation are thought to raise. In these “mixed places [...] people might freely meet and relate to each other”. Mr. Bonesso highlighted that the Parks, due to the opportunity to freely meet out of the roles society imposes, indeed have a great potential in promoting social integration and inter-cultural meeting, compared with other public places such as “the school and the work place, with their strict rules and precise functions”.

6. Conclusions

Public space is indeed the main stage where social interactions occur, therefore it might have a great potential in promoting social integration (Gaddoni, 2010). However, public space is often depicted as a context of conflicts mainly through a simplified rational framework reducing the dynamic multiplicity of reality to few key static concepts, such as *ethnic group*, *race* and *culture*. (Brazzoduro and Cristofi, 2010; Demissie, 2007). The concept of *identity*, when perceived as fixed and determined, might exclude the possibility of hybrid forms and subsequently define *a priori* a group of moral and ethic values and hence cultures, thus allowing to place individuals in precise cultural systems or societies (Amselle 1999; Bauman, 2007; Fabetti, 1995; Gallissot et al., 2001; Maalouf 2005; Remotti 1996). Urban green space, urban parks might represent a place where to explore and experience the cultural differences otherwise perceived as conflicting. Indeed they might act as social and environmental laboratories where to install positive social interactions and learn environmental care, mainly through the different approaches different users might have with UGS.

The aim of our research was to unveil the daily social dynamics occurring between new and old residents exploiting the same UGS. In order to achieve our aim, we have chosen three urban parks in the Municipality of Venice, Hayez Park, S.Giuliano Park and Piraghetto Park, which indeed represent for us three deeply different and remarkably interesting case studies.

Our work clearly demonstrates that old residents might often perceive as “different”, and hence unauthorised, the exploitation of a public space by the new residents, generating a conflicting situation. In our specific case, the way Italian citizens mostly conceive the Parks as places where to spend a few hours outdoor led to a mis-representation of the much more wide use done by immigrants of the same Parks. As clearly demonstrated by the case of Hayez Park, the (maybe only) road that should be undertaken, in order to solve such conflicts, is the involvement of new and old residents. In this way it might be possible to manage the green infrastructure respecting of all the cultural systems. Indeed, as Hayez and San Giuliano Parks have showed, an important point is that the resident involvement should match with the draft of codes of behaviour, which should be perceived as common for all users. Along with this, the Parks should be monitored not only by the Police or by volunteer-based forces, but also by the citizens themselves, who become thereby responsible of the public space they use. This is supported by the fact that many interviewees state that mother with children and families, independently from their nationality, do act as deterrent for improper, if not criminal, park exploitation, as in the case of Piraghetto Park.

Another important point that should be stressed is that the greater interaction between old and new residents has been registered right in the Parks perceived as most degraded (Hayez and Piraghetto

Park), suggesting that the widespread opinion might be due more to prejudice than to a real conflicting situation. Actually a daily co-living of new and old residents might promote integration, as in the case of the retired Italians hosting young Bengalis under the shelter of their Bocce infrastructure. Indeed, as emerged from the survey and during the interview of the responsible of the Venice Immigration Service, Mr. Bonesso, the prejudice might be echoed by the visibility of the place. As emerging from the survey conducted in Piraghetto Park and from the focus group, the prejudice about immigrants often leads to a merge between the immigrant figure and other socially problematic figures such as tramps and drug-addicted people.

Strikingly, also immigrants do differentiate among themselves: in Piraghetto Park new residents complain about other new residents and their disrespectful use of the Park. This correlate with the general observation that immigrants tend to have a much higher self-consciousness during their free time, since they are not obliged to stick to rigid roles, imposed for instance by the workplace, and they can hence observe each other and develop critic opinions (Giusti, 2008).

Even big parks inspired by the Northern-European ones might not be working as meeting point without an appropriate background. Indeed, as demonstrated by the case of San Giuliano Park, although no conflict among new and old residents is reported, also no insignificant positive interaction has been registered, suggesting that in Italy such experience still needs a preliminary work from public administrations and maybe even educational organs to be fruitful.

The concluding remark is that it might not be the presence of immigrants *per se* to represent a problem in the park context, rather their different park use. The way leading to a positive co-exploitation of parks passes through citizen involvement and responsibility. However, as showed in the case of Hayez Park, this might not be enough to eradicate prejudice, since a long-lasting process might be required.

Since public green planning is becoming a more and more challenging task, it would be necessary to re-shape the public green concept, through a multidisciplinary approach, in order to understand a complex reality resulting from an intersection of global and local dynamics. In this way it would be possible to help public administrations in the decision making processes and provide an interpretative framework to relate theoretical models with local experience.

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