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Phone centres and the struggle for public space in Italy: between revanchist policies and practices of resistance

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This paper proposes to contribute to debates on revanchist urbanism. By drawing from empirical data collected in two northern Italian cities, Verona and Modena, it provides an exemplification of relevant policies: phone centres normative framework. After discussing to what extent the original thesis by Neil Smith can be transported to the cases under analysis, the paper points to a vacuum in the relevant literature: a lack of attention to dynamics of politics. Hence, it demonstrates that while scholars risk promoting a narrative of domination, the target of revanchist policies can resist the potential annihilation of public spaces operated by revanchist interventions.

Keywords: revanchism; urban safety; immigrants; political engagement

Introduction

Under the guise of “renewal”, cities around the world are re-shaping urban spaces in order to revive city centres, in their effort to be attractive to live and invest in and hence be competitive with respect to other cities. Against this background, an increasing willingness is observable on the side of local governments to impose harsh penalties on those people seen as “undesirable” by tourists, shoppers, commuters, and investors alike. Some of the most ambitious analyses of relating urban dynamics have tried to contextualise relevant policy choices as part of a revanchist urban strategy to “reconquer” the city. I am referring in particular to Neil Smith’s revanchist city thesis (1996) which has been at the forefront of an intense debate in urban geography.

The concept of revanchism was first introduced by the author to capture what he described as a vengeful reaction against the poor and marginal, as the dominant classes tried to “tame the wild city” and bring it under their control. According to Smith, two important factors contributed to the development of a similar political turn. First, the economic recession of the late 1980s triggered unprecedented anger amongst the white middle classes, who soon identified marginalised dwellers as the source of urban unease. Second, the fears expressed by the middle classes – of a wider economic crisis – were reproduced by the media which amplified existing sentiments among voters, while seeking to identify a scapegoat to be blamed for their perceptions of jeopardy.

Smith carried out his research in a specific context. The inspiration was provided by mayor Rudy Giuliani’s “zero tolerance” campaign in New York: he identified homeless people, panhandlers, prostitutes, squatters, graffiti artists and unruly youth as the major threats to urban order. However, revanchism went further than political ideology and

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moral crusade to work its way into municipal legislation. The latter has been played out in strategies that criminalise a whole range of antisocial behaviours in an effort to “re-order” and “cleanse” public space, in an ongoing management of residents’ anxieties.

In the late 1990s, the revanchist mode started being exported to other countries and cities such as British cities, Oslo, Bremen, Vienna, Barcelona, Stockholm and Dublin have drawn from it. Well beyond its original domain of urban policing, the language of zero tolerance has been generalised at an impressive speed: there has been zero tolerance for kids’ smoking, for bad behaviour in schools, for public drinking, and various other behaviours deemed antisocial, including first and foremost those which cannot be classified as illegal. In other words, zero tolerance has become a “virtual Vesuvius of clichés camouflaging weaker or milder practices of social repression” (Smith 2009, p. 5)

This contribution will provide an exemplification of a similar practice, by analysing phone centre municipal legislation which was approved in Verona and Modena, two northern Italian cities, with the main aim to “re-order” these public spaces. The paper will not only provide an analytical disquisition but also cast light on the dynamics of politics that have characterised the conflict that emerged around phone centres in order to highlight how phone centre owners¹ have resisted the annihilation of these public spaces, thus demonstrating that, contrary to what the relevant literature seems to suggest, revanchism does not necessarily take place against a background of mere (power) domination.

The paper is organised as follows: first, the research questions and the methodology will be introduced. Second, phone centres will be presented as a “new urban space”. Third, a brief theoretical background on revanchism will be sketched out to clarify the relevance of the paper with respect to the general debate into which it is entering. The fourth section will provide evidence on the applicability of the revanchist mode to the phone centre normative framework. The fifth will report the main empirical findings, by discussing various forms of actions in which phone centre owners have engaged to resist revanchism in Modena and Verona. A final section will review the findings and draw some conclusions for further research.

Research questions and methodology

The main questions that will be addressed in the next sections are the following. (1) Can phone centre legislation be intended as revanchist in nature? (2) If so, has the legislative process been characterised by dynamics of mere domination, as the literature on revanchism seems to suggest, or was any form of resistance observed at all? The first question will be answered by drawing from the revanchist literature and by applying it to the specific case of phone centres. The second will be dealt with by building on part of the empirical findings of a Ph.D. thesis on urban conflicts and immigrants’ collective action in Italy which was completed in September 2010.

The data were collected through an ethnographic approach which was considered most adequate to carry out an analysis of contentious dynamics. In particular, it consisted of various phases of participant observations, carried out at different intervals between May 2008 and May 2009; 84 semi-structured interviews with various actors, from April 2008 to February 2010; a press review of some local newspapers; a collection of policy documents.

The privileged sites of participant observation were phone centres which, as will be explained later, represent one of the main places where resistance became visible. Other sites included phone centre owners’ meetings and protests, where specific forms of mobilisation could be observed. As far as interviews are concerned, approximately a third of

them were carried out with phone centre owners, including all of the owners from both cities. The majority of them are of Bengalese or Senegalese origin and, on average, they are aged between 30 and 45. Other interviewees comprised different actors that were somehow involved in the conflicts around phone centres.²

A press review was carried out of the main Veronese newspaper, *L'Arena* (for the period November 2003 to April 2010) and of two Modenese newspapers (for the period August 2005 to January 2010): *La Gazzetta*, the main local newspaper, and *L'Informazione*, a local newspaper which is known for being particularly sensitive to residents' complaints.

Finally, policy documents were collected and in particular those relating to the phone centre normative framework and the proceedings of regional and local council meetings in which the debate unfolded.

All data were analysed by means of a discourse analysis, with attention to the dynamics of politics. At the same time, attention was paid with reference to the prevailing well-known theoretical interpretation on immigrants' political engagement: the model of "political opportunity structure".³ According to it, immigrants mobilise when they expect to have some chance of success in advancing their claims, which in turn relates to a given level of openness or closure that institutions show towards them, including not only the existence of mainstream participatory instruments, but also forms of repression and the possibility of counting on the support of relevant allies.

Phone centres as a public space

Phone centres are small family-run shops that offer telephone and Internet services. The first ones were opened approximately 10 years ago, when the demand for cheap telephone calls made them a good business investment. More than 40 could be counted in both Verona and Modena, in 2006, including phone centres and mixed businesses:⁴ it was the boom time for these businesses. Nowadays, there remain 18 in Verona and 17 in Modena.⁵ According to narrative evidence they mostly closed due to business difficulties deriving from a combination of factors: the crisis of the sector, an increase in shops' rental rates and the strict limitations imposed on their activities by the new legislative framework which made the business unsustainable. This will be discussed in more detail later.

Most of the shops are located in the historical centre and in areas with a high percentage of immigrant residents. It is in fact newcomers who make up the largest share of customers and it is they who manage these businesses.

Despite the great array of communication options available, phone centres still provide a crucial support for global social networks: many immigrants regularly visit them to keep in touch with their families in their country of origin. Over time, they have gradually acquired another function: that of veritable meeting spaces. Indeed, it is here that many immigrants meet friends, and it is in some phone centres that small groups of fellow immigrants gather to pray and some caregivers meet on their day off. This testifies that there is a shortage of adequate dedicated spaces for them to meet across the urban territory, as interviews with customers brought to light. There is also another side to the story. Many phone centre owners have started offering support – often free of charge – to fill in and translate paper and electronic documents relating to residence permits, family reunions and other bureaucratic procedures.

From the above, it would be reasonable to define phone centres as a "home territory" (Cavan 1963), that is to say a setting, such as private clubs or neighbourhood bars, "where patrons may stake out proprietary claims and create an order of activity

indigenous to the particular establishment to be defended if necessary against the invasion of others” (p. 205). In fact, while these shops belong to private owners and are in right open to anybody, they are the exclusive reserve of specific customers, to the extent that they offer specific services for them and provide a meeting place for many newcomers.⁶ Policymakers on their side are very well aware of this specific property of phone centres. Interestingly, however, it is this very property that led them to consider similar shops as a sort of public space. This in turn justified the specific normative requirements that they introduced to regulate them accordingly. As the municipal managers responsible for the implementation of the relevant policies explained:

Let’s say that phone centres have turned first of all into meeting places. You have to bear in mind that their [regular] customers work and can either meet very early in the morning or very late in the evening and because of the time difference with their country of origin they might well make calls very late at night. ... They do not necessarily go there to disturb but, you know, for example some black men have a very loud voice. ... I am not suggesting forms of aggregation should be avoided. ... I believe there exists other places where they can meet. ... I mean, I do not think phone centres should have this function. Rules should be clear, maybe strict but clear, because if we start with making exceptions it all becomes complicated (3 February 2010, Verona).

In my view, these are shops which are not only associated with an economic activity but also a chance for social aggregation, that is to say they have a function that goes well beyond that of a shop. ... They might be compared to pubs and restaurants, but they are different because indeed they function as an almost exclusive extra-domestic meeting place. This is why they require a multidisciplinary approach which takes into due consideration issues of commercial regulation, urban safety and their character as meeting spaces too (10 October 2008, Modena).

From the above extracts it is evident that while policymakers in Modena were prone to reflect and deal with phone centres in all their complexity, their counterparts in Verona were more resistant to it, convinced as they were that it is not proper for phone centres to provide spaces for socialisation. What is most curious is that, in spite of this, both municipalities chose to cope with the problems of phone centres by introducing a similar normative regulation.

What problems are we talking about? As newcomers began hanging around phone centres, some difficulties emerged in relation to pacific cohabitation. Native residents hardly tolerate to see immigrants grouping around these shops, talking loudly and, at times, drinking alcohol. To start with they cause forms of disturbance. Additionally, similar forms of sociality have long been abandoned by natives, with the result that such behaviours are not easily understood by them, nor accepted as legitimate. This is how phone centres have turned into a site of contention, eventually a revanchist site of contention, as will be explained.

The literature on revanchism and the missing attention to politics

While Smith referred specifically to New York, and other scholars concentrated on the North American context (Slater 2004, Wyly and Hammel 2005), discussions on revanchism have been also empirically grounded in Britain (McLeod 2002, Macleod and Ward 2002, Atkinson 2003, 2006), Western Europe (Belina and Helms 2003, Uitermark and Duyvendak 2008), South America (Swanson 2007), and India (Whitehead and More 2007), in relation to public space, policing, the housing market and welfare retrenchment.

As for the European context, many scholars have stressed how cities are moving towards more repressive policies. Some of them have explicitly argued for the relevance of the concept of revanchism (Baeten 2002, MacLeod 2002, Atkinson 2003), even though they have carefully avoided adopting the vengeful hypothesis uncritically. MacLeod (2002) did not diagnose a fully-fledged revanchism in Glasgow. On the contrary, he argued that the dismissive treatment of the homeless during the economic recovery in the 1990s was accompanied by a range of policy schemes designed to assist marginalised populations. Similarly, Atkinson (2003) did not detect an outright form of vengeance in the British urban safety policies he identified as infiltrated by strands of revanchism. Moreover, while working on Rotterdam, Uitermark and Duyvendak (2008) found that the revanchism of populist parties was different from that described by Smith, as will be highlighted later.

In spite of their punctual observations, none of the above scholars have paid more than a passing interest to what reaction revanchist policies stimulated on the side of those they are targeted at. Authors such as Mitchell (1997) have insisted on the dark side of renewal: they have highlighted how it “annihilates” urban (public) spaces, thus preventing their use by (some) urban dwellers, including street vendors, beggars, street youth, and the homeless. This strongly promoted a narrative of domination, whereby the roles of “dominators” and “dominated” are already predefined, with no space for any type of negotiation. While this might be representative, at least to some extent, of the revanchist mode, this contribution wishes to question similar interpretations. What I argue is that scholars have shown the tendency to focus on revanchist *policies* alone, while any preoccupation for *politics* has been largely superseded. It has been apparently assumed that revanchism is characterised by predetermined and immutable power structures. I do not wish to deny any existing power asymmetry, nor underestimate it. What I want to suggest instead is that such narratives should not be taken for granted. This can be done by analysing the conflicts that can arise around revanchist interventions, while focusing attention on the dynamics of politics.

Unfortunately, while during the 1970s research on urban transformations articulated both the dimensions of politics and policy, the most recent analyses tend to ignore the contentious dimension of urban renewal processes, with the exception of some works by Le Galès (2002), as Vitale (2007) supported. This paper will specifically contribute to this line of inquiry, by questioning the narratives of mere domination presented in the revanchist thesis. Certainly, if we understand revanchism as a subset of a larger neoliberal stance, as Atkinson suggested (2006), the work by Crossa (2009) provides an example in this direction. She effectively showed how, despite the regulatory constraints placed on street vendors in Mexico to revitalise the city centre, the latter have enacted survival strategies alongside a variety of forms of resistance. A few more examples are reported by Leitner *et al.* (2007).

Is revanchism applicable to the analysis of phone centre legislation?

In the attempt to address residents’ complaints, local authorities in Modena and Verona eventually resigned to adopt a defensive component. The Veronese municipality introduced an ordinance (Comune di Verona 2009), whilst in Modena a local regulation was passed (Comune di Modena 2007). Each drew from a regional law which provided a general commercial framework for phone centres to be regulated (Veneto Region 2007, Emilia-Romagna Region 2007).

This was thought of as the only possible approach to deal with the problems lamented by residents: their ultimate scope was in fact that of “controlling” the property of these shops as meeting spaces, so as to ensure residents would not suffer from any disturbance in their neighbourhood. In practice, the laws mainly restricted shops’ licences, thus prohibiting owners from providing any ancillary services besides telephone and Internet access and from selling any food products and in particular alcoholic drinks. The first prohibition was justified particularly in light of the fact that phone centres used to offer money transfers, which were understood by policymakers as very delicate services that could attract money laundering and similarly illegal affairs. The second prohibition went in the direction of preventing drunk people from hanging around the streets.

As for the local regulation and ordinance, they spelt out specific requirements, such as the definition of opening and closing times. In addition, they further regulated the shops with the introduction of structural requirements, such as the dimensions and the number of toilets they should have. These measures were all part of an enforcement plan for phone centres. Interestingly, however, while trying to put to value their capacity to aggregate newcomers, the local regulation in Modena required owners to create a waiting zone inside the shop so that customers could comfortably sit while waiting to access services. Owners, on their side, felt it was rather a way to keep them off the street, out of “sight” and “earshot” of neighbours. This suggests a first element of revanchism, which was apparently aimed to “tame the wild city”.

Some more convergence can be found in the revanchist character of these policies, if we compare them to those analysed by Smith and other revanchist scholars. According to Atkinson (2006), revanchism can be studied along three main strands. First, relevant policies can be understood as programmes designed to secure public space, with the aim to “beautify” cities. Phone centre regulations are commercial in nature and do not explicitly refer to the securing of the shops and the street outside them. Yet, as explained above, they were meant to impact on this very issue. As for their objectives, no specific objective, nor any economic one, is evident in the relevant documents. However, during an interview (3 February 2010, Verona), the policymaker responsible for the implementation of the Veronese ordinance explained that, as she understood it, the Veneto regional law was going in that direction, in the measure that it had spelt out that municipalities should decide where phone centres could be opened.⁷

Revanchist policies can be also intended as a mode of governance, resulting from an increasing decentralisation. In the case of phone centre regulations this is clearly observable if we consider them in the context of national law 81/1993. With the introduction of this piece of legislation, mayors were accorded larger discretionary powers. Since then, they have been the recipients of residents’ demands about local life, hence the achievement of consensus has been the result of their capacity to respond quickly to them (Pavarini 2006). Unsurprisingly, at a time when predictability and safety are non-negotiable principles of social life, residents’ complaints on phone centres have been increasingly legitimised, particularly in coincidence with the electoral period, as will be seen.

Third, revanchist policies can be associated with a prophetic dystopian image of a downward spiral of social relations, in which vengeful polices are thought of as ameliorative of public places, seen in turn as representative of an urban malaise. If we look at phone centres, it can be noticed that some native residents have increasingly voiced the perceived cultural distance between themselves and immigrants, by pointing to behaviours considered as illegitimate, thus calling for their disciplining through some legislative framework. This happened against a background in which the cohabitation of natives and

non-natives is generally understood within the dominant framework of safety, whereby the presence of newcomers is seen as a threat to urban safety (see Dal Lago 1999, Maneri 2001).

In spite of the above, it can be argued that the literature on revanchism requires amendment on some accounts, if it is to grasp the local contexts of Verona and Modena. To start with, the target groups of the revanchist project are not the same as in New York and other cities. While Smith referred to all minority and vulnerable groups as the victims of revanchism, phone centres in Verona and Modena are seen as spaces that need to be cleansed specifically from ethnic others (see also Uitermark and Duyvendak 2008). Moreover, revanchism in the two Italian cities under analysis finds most of its supporters among various segments of the native population, rather than middle classes alone.

Are phone centres a revanchist site or are Verona and Modena revanchist cities?

Verona was governed by Christian Democrats for over 40 years. In 1999, a centre-right Forza Italia coalition won the election (58%).⁸ Berlusconi's party had appeared on the national scene some years earlier. In the meantime, during a centre-left Ulivo coalition spell, the party won increasing consensus, as it was able to catalyse the expression of increasing tensions, particularly those between natives and immigrants, among popular classes. In 2007, its candidate, then the regional health councillor, was elected mayor of Verona (60.69%). The new centre-right coalition built its program on an anti-immigrant stance, by spelling out clearly that the local welfare service provision had to privilege native residents over those of immigrant origins. Moreover, similarly to the electoral campaign, it stressed urban safety as priority number one.

Among other aspects, it focused on a spatial control strategy aimed at "re-conquering public space". Since the beginning of the mandate, it translated into actual policy interventions, including the installation of CCTV cameras and unfriendly park benches, the restriction of the homeless food service delivery to specific areas out of the town centre, and specific actions targeted at immigrants, such as fines to eliminate the phenomenon of street vendors and the regulation and monitoring of "ethnic shops" such as phone centres and kebabs. These are all clear examples of a revanchist mode that made repressive and disciplinary measure a corner-stone of urban policy. Additionally, they mark a shift from the approach of the previous coalition which had barely pressed the key of urban safety.

The Modenese scenario appeared very different. Following the crisis of the Communist party, some voters flew into the Democratic Party of the Left; others, more loyal to communist ideals, founded the Communist Refoundation Party. In 1995, a centre-left coalition won the elections (59.9%). In the same year, in an attempt to respond to new emerging demands, the mayor approved the project "Città Sicure", with the aim of rethinking urban safety policies. A few actions of a revanchist character, such as the banning of peddlers from the streets, can be linked to this period. However, "Città Sicure" was a pilot project in Italy which promoted an approach based on spatial control alongside mediation types of interventions. Additionally, contrary to Verona, it should be noticed that Modena has come to be known over the years as a laboratory for local immigration policies which encouraged the settlement of newcomers rather than privileging the rights of autochthonous residents.⁹

In 2004, a new left-wing coalition won the election (63.8%). It comprised the Democrats of the Left, La Margherita, Italia dei Valori, Socialisti Democratici Italiani, Verdi and two more radical left-wing parties. The new mayor has been operating along the same lines of his predecessor. It was in this period that a legislative framework was

developed to regulate phone centres. This might suggest a radicalisation of the local authority's revanchist approach but I believe there is another explanation for it. Opposition parties, and in particular the Lega – which in the meantime was infiltrating the areas traditionally heralded by the Communist party – started putting increasing pressure on the local authority, while criticising its ineffective approach to safety. Pressure came also from another actor: neighbourhood committees. These are groups of residents who first got organised at the beginning of the 1990s to put forward their claims and who have since been granted increasing legitimacy by the municipality. They declared themselves apolitical but in the last years they have grown more politicised. At the end of 2008, at the beginning of the electoral campaign, under pressure as he was, the mayor confirmed he would keep his promise and pass a regulation on phone centres.

Having said this, his electoral program did stress, among other issues, urban safety, and yet it was not blatantly revanchist in character: it suggested a complex approach, integrating situational prevention with conflict mediation. A revanchist mode was again observable in January 2010. At the end of the first year of his second mandate, he passed an anti-alcohol ordinance.

What emerges from the preceding paragraphs is that, regardless of their diverging political subcultures, both local authorities have been insisting that urban safety is a priority issue to be dealt with, as it is capable of raising large consensus among voters. In other words, a revanchist mode can be identified in both contexts, well beyond the phone centre issue, with a difference. In the case of Modena, revanchism was not systematically privileged: it rather seems that a number of repressive policies have been adopted over time to “re-order public space”, among which phone centre regulation remains a specific example. On the contrary, a revanchist mode seems to prevail in Verona, to the extent that the city can be described as an actual revanchist battleground. Furthermore, no sign is visible at present of any changing trend, in spite of the fact that revanchism does not necessarily follow a dominant or unalterable trajectory in public life (Atkinson 2006).

The engagement and resistance of phone centre owners

In the face of the revanchist scenario described above, phone centre owners did engage and resist the introduction of the new legislative framework and the implications it carried with it. Rather than homogenising resistance into one specific type of action, they exercised it in multiple and yet simultaneous ways. In this paper I will not dwell on all of them, but rather concentrate on those forms that are most specific in terms of phone centre owners' opposition to the tentative annihilation of their shops as public spaces. This is not to say that no other types of engagement were carried out. In fact, at an individual level, various owners confronted face-to-face with neighbours with respect to their complaints. In addition, many of them enacted a form of resistance against the anti-terrorism law that will be mentioned in the next sections, along with the fight of undocumented migrants. Reference to these actions can be found elsewhere (Semprebon 2010), where an alternative interpretation to that of the political opportunity structure, which goes beyond the scope of this paper, is also presented.

Institutional forms of engagement in Modena

In Modena, part of phone centre owners' struggle took place in the formal institutional sphere. Following the receipt of an increasing number of complaints, the local authority decided to set up a participatory process in order to draw up the above-mentioned local

regulation. Initially, some negotiations resulted: it was mainly agreed that this piece of legislation would not prohibit owners from offering money-transfer services, on the basis that it was vital for their customers to send remittances back home. They did not go any further. Other crucial aspects that seriously compromised their business, for example, were left unexplored.

The great majority of owners commented that this was nothing but democratic hypocrisy. According to them, everything had already been decided prior to any consultation: the regulation was to be passed to provide an answer to residents' complaints and it had to be done before the electoral campaign started.

Phone centre owners also looked for the support of local councillors. It was the representative of Lapam, a federation of local associations that represents all various entrepreneurial sectors, who linked them up. One of the councillors – of the leading coalition – managed to punctually report the difficulties experienced by phone centre owners during a municipal debate, thus trying to give a voice to them. Unfortunately her efforts went unfulfilled. The representative of Lapam could not be of any further help either. His support had to be of an informal nature, as the sector of phone centres attracted the mistrust of various associate members. Some of them were reticent towards entrepreneurs of immigrant origins; others were specifically reticent towards phone centre owners, as news had depicted them rather negatively: Modenese newspapers, such as *La Gazzetta*, for example, identified them with a phenomenon “objectively and indisputably connected to severe problems of public order” (La Gazzetta 2006) which “makes citizens feel uncomfortable” (L'Informazione 2008). Moreover, the proliferation of these activities was described as “a [economic] boom full of shadow” (La Gazzetta 2005).

In principle, the struggle of owners could have benefited from the existence of a consultation body that was set up a few years ago, whose members can take part in municipal debates, in spite of the fact that it does not hold any decision-making power. Nonetheless, during interviews it clearly emerged that phone centre owners' relationship with this body was, to say the least, loose: some of them did not even know it existed at all, and others had hardly had any contact with it, thus suggesting a fragmentation of the system of immigrants' representation in Modena.

No participatory nor consultative process was set up in Verona, where the institutional channel was completely closed not only to phone centre owners themselves but also to phone centre owners as residents of immigrant origins. To cite an example, before the election of the current mayor, a consultation body had been created by members of various immigrant communities, with the support of the then-leading coalition. After the elections, they asked for a meeting with the mayor to express their concerns, in an attempt to build a collaboration with him. Narrative evidence highlighted that it was part of their priorities to discuss with the mayor regarding the unceasing inspections that had been targeting “ethnic shops”. However, their request to meet him went unfulfilled, thus frustrating their efforts and expectations, while ultimately denying them an opportunity for their voice to be heard.

Phone centre owners getting organised with classical forms of resistance

As anticipated, the struggle of phone centre owners took various shapes. A few years before Veronese and Modenese residents started advancing any complaint, a first form of associationism among owners could be traced in both cities. Various informal meetings were organised in phone centres for reasons that had nothing to do with the legislative framework, which was actually introduced later. Owners met to try to elaborate a

common informal commercial code in the effort to avoid forms of unfair competition among them. Over time, however, two associations were created: IP Associati and the Coordinamento gestori di phone centre.

The former was established formally in 2006, in Modena. An Italian was nominated as president. He was a telephone lines agent who had ventured into the business of phone centres. This arguably facilitated a closer and regular contact with them, well beyond a relationship of a commercial nature. The association is not hierarchically organised. The president was mainly nominated because owners thought it was important to have an official representative, possibly someone who could speak the language fluently. In fact, it was he who mostly linked up with the municipality even before the participatory process was set up. Unfortunately, the president was never recognised as representative of the owners, among other things because of his nationality. This possibly went further to the detriment of their demands being taken into due consideration.

The Coordinamento gestori di phone centres was founded in Verona in the same year as IP Associati. Contrary to the latter it is an association of an informal kind. One of the members acts as a coordinator and enjoys the recognition of all colleagues as representative of the association. It is he who has spent the most time organising meetings and keeping everyone informed.

It is hard to argue that the frequency of meetings and participation in them was constant over time, in either city. Initially, associational activities were organised at regular weekly intervals. As time passed, owners lost confidence that anything could be done to improve their situation and this resulted in the slowing down of their activities, even though a few very committed ones kept insisting on mobilising.

Meetings represented an opportunity for owners to give vent to their worries and to benefit from the solidarity of other colleagues. Otherwise, they often served as an opportunity to confront on their shared experience or to decide the steps to be followed every time they felt a legal action should be presented against fines they were delivered for non-compliance with the new regulatory framework. While owners in Verona repeatedly called for lawyers to draw up appeals, their counterparts in Modena eventually decided to challenge not only unjust fines but also the local regulation, which they felt was unduly strict. The decision by the regional court is still pending.

Other classic forms of resistance were organised by owners. In both cities, protests were organised. Veronese owners joined one, in December 2009, to reclaim the rights of immigrants as a collective group and to oppose the anti-immigrant stance supported by the mayor. On that occasion a few representatives of immigrant communities managed to meet the prefect. Two representatives of phone centre owners succeeded in drawing his attention to the escalation of harassing inspections that targeted their businesses. Yet, inspections did not come to a halt, nor did forms of harassment. This is why, after a number of heated discussions, they decided not to build on persistent claims over their rights.

In Modena, owners took part, in October 2008, in a demonstration organised by various local associations and immigrant communities to promote the rights of immigrants. Unfortunately, contrary to their expectations, they could not voice their specific concerns, as the municipality supported the event, hence organisers were not willing to voice any protest against the local government. Determined as they were to make their voice heard, phone centre owners also organised two protests themselves. One took place in February 2008, shortly before the local regulation was approved. The second took place at the end of the same year, shortly before the local regulation came into force. This time it was anticipated by a lockout: all of them decided to close down the shop for a day. They

wanted to give a precise message to the local authority and to residents: they were ready to give up a day of business to show their activity was crucial not only to immigrants but also to many native residents who could count on cheap Internet access and, in the case of mixed businesses, on cheap food too.

On-site resistance

Besides seeking leverage with local councillors and other allies and at the same time organising protests, phone centre owners engaged in an on-site form of resistance to deal with the implications deriving from the implementation of phone centre legislation and in particular from the resulting run of inspections.

The local police were entrusted to check on owners' compliance with the newly introduced regional laws and local regulations. However, it needs to be specified that another body of police forces took up responsibility for inspections in these shops: the national police. It did so following the approval of Anti-terrorism Decree 144/2005 (Italian Government 2005), to make sure that owners identified and registered customers, as required, prior to their access to telephone services. In fact, investigations had identified phone centres as potential hot spots of terrorism that needed monitoring accordingly.

It is hard to give any precise data on these inspections, as access to police databases was not allowed. Police officers admitted that the number and frequency of inspections had increased considerably, particularly since the introduction of the new legislation. Narrative evidence by phone centre owners suggested that inspections in Verona concentrated in summer and autumn 2007, soon after the election of the new mayor, while inspections in Modena concentrated in September 2006, in coincidence with the first national police run, and in 2008, shortly before the local regulation was introduced. What is important is that many of them reported having had up to three inspections per week. Cases were not missing in which even more inspections on the same day had been experienced.

According to most phone centre owners, it was the first run of inspections that stimulated their mobilisation overall. Inspections very much disrupted customers, who did not like to be interrupted while accessing Internet and telephone services. Some of them also confessed that they were very much annoyed by the fact they constantly had to show documents, even in phone centres. This is how, over the recent past, these shops have gradually lost their social function as a meeting place. Various customers have actually stopped going to phone centres. It is the case for those who experienced a harsh police inspection. In various interviews they were described as frightening and humiliating. Some reported that they had been traumatic enough for them to think twice before going to the same phone centre again. This happened particularly in Verona, after the election of the new mayor, who accompanied policemen during inspections and whose attitude was recalled as very patronising and aggressive.

Customers did highlight that phone centre owners always tried to make sure inspections were not too unpleasant, by doing all they could to speed up the policemen's work and by openly contesting any disagreeable conduct on their side. The limited fluency in the Italian language often prevented owners from confronting police officers in the face of harsh inspections. For the same reason, customers rarely supported their claims in the quality of witnesses. This fuelled a growing sense of injustice on the side of the former who increasingly felt the need to do something about it. Some owners did succeed in confronting police officers on a number of abuses they claimed, including, for example, the fact that inspections were often carried out by various police officers, irrespective of

their specific competence. The lack of answers to many of their questions encouraged them to bring their claims further. Meetings with the chief of the local police were called for accordingly – with little results.

Owners invariably admitted that they found it very hard to ask anyone for documents, as they grew aware that customers can hardly understand any such request. Some of them even preferred taking the risk of being fined because of non-compliance with the anti-terrorism decree. They have been particularly sympathetic with undocumented immigrants and have refused to “hunt” them. In fact, they all know what it means to be constantly stopped and asked for documents. Therefore, they often refused to take up a role they associated with policemen: that of checking immigrants for documents. In their view, in fact, such responsibility should lie exclusively in the hands of police forces and they were not ready to do it.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has provided an example of the various ways in which revanchism has made its way to Southern Europe, and in particular to Italy. While no systematic comparative analysis was carried out, the specificities and nuances observable in two local contexts have been pointed out. While the case of Verona does suggest a shift towards forms of repression, an attempt to discipline the urban undesirables, particularly those of immigrant origins, can be equally noticed in both contexts. Moreover, it was clearly demonstrated that revanchism should be intended as a modulating feature of urban life: it can portray an upward trend, as in the case of Verona, but it can equally come hand in hand with policy interventions which are not revanchist in nature. It is evident that while phone centres have clearly been a revanchism site, this does not necessarily mean that the cities they are in are a revanchist battleground, on the contrary.

It might be argued that the revanchist thesis was originally developed for the analysis of a very large metropolis which experienced dynamics of gentrification and that, as a result, it cannot be transported to small-to-medium-sized cities. In fact, this paper showed that attention should be placed on them too. The cases of Verona and Modena revealed how cities of similar dimensions can work these forces up in an equally aggressive fashion, regardless of whether there is any dynamic of gentrification at work.

Apart from undertaking an analytical discussion to verify the applicability of Smith’s thesis to the Italian context, this contribution was willing to shed light on the politics of revanchism. As was discussed, scholars have barely touched upon this aspect, with the result that the whole debate has been characterised by a narrative of domination. No space was allowed to bring the target of revanchism onto the stage and to question their status as mere victims. On the contrary, this paper highlighted that phone centre owners have not been the mere recipients of a policy conceived by others. They have enacted forms of engagement and resistance, through various types of actions, some of which reached beyond the institutional channels which were available in Modena, to include not only associational activities and more classical repertoires of collective actions, such as protests, but also on-site forms of resistance which aimed at countering the “cleansing” of phone centres.

It is worth noting that in spite of a different level of openness on the side of institutions, and in spite of the fact that, contrary to the Veronese authority, the Modenese one did provide some space for the grievances of owners to be raised, phone centre owners in both cities got organised with very similar forms of collective action. This suggests that their engagement cannot be framed in a mere binary system of power where the

oppressed react to domination, but rather as a more complex set of dynamics that involve various urban actors and that need to be studied while observing the emergence and unfolding of urban conflicts.

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Notes

1. This term refers to ownership of the shop's licence rather than ownership of the actual shop.
2. These included: internet point owners; lawyers; representatives and founding members of the Coordinamento Migranti, an association that supported phone centre owners in Verona; the president and some founding members of IP Associati; the president of the consultative body of immigrants in Verona; the secretary of a workers' union in Modena and a trade unionist in Verona; five shopkeepers; five representatives of neighbourhood committees in Modena; various members of the national and local police forces; policymakers involved in the definition of the normative framework of phone centres at the regional and local levels; and a variety of actors who were involved in two specific conflicts that took place in a neighbourhood in Verona and another in Modena and that were analysed to dig out specific political dynamics.
3. See Koopmans and Statham 2000, Fennema and Tillie 2001, Garbaye 2002.
4. These were phone centres that associated phone and Internet access with other ancillary services, such as food store, money transfer, video rental, etc.
5. The most recent data by the Municipalities of Verona and Modena date back to May 2009 for the former and January 2009 for the latter. The last interviews with phone centre owners, in May 2010, confirmed these data were still representative of the situation.
6. The reader might wonder why no pictures or graphics are included in this paper to provide a better idea of what phone centres are and look like. Unfortunately, phone centre owners and their businesses have been very much subjected to considerable media attention, through articles and photos published in local newspapers. For this very reason they would not like to have pictures published anywhere else, regardless of the motivation, nor would they be ready to provide the authorisation for anyone to take pictures and publish them.
7. Eventually, following an appeal by phone centre owners in Padova, a city in the Veneto region, this article was declared unconstitutional (Italian Constitutional Court sentence 25/2009).
8. Electoral data from the website of the Italian Ministry of Interior (2011).
9. It suffices to say that a local authority in its provincial area first experimented with the "Consiglieri Aggiunti", that is to say the possibility of endowing representatives of immigrants' communities with consultative powers during municipal meetings.

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