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**Journal of International Migration  
and Integration**

ISSN 1488-3473

Int. Migration & Integration  
DOI 10.1007/s12134-012-0254-4



**Journal of International  
Migration and Integration**



 Springer

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## **Urban Conflicts and Immigrants' Engagement. A Comparative Pragmatic Analysis of Two Northern Italian Cities**

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**Abstract** At the beginning of the 1990s, urban safety entered political and media debates in Italy. Since then, an anti-social behaviour discourse has diverted attention towards newcomers who have repeatedly appeared as the main cause of urban safety conflicts. Italian scholars have often described these actors as the passive target of safety policies. The main aim of this paper is to demonstrate that in fact some residents of immigrant origins have engaged in the game of urban conflicts. A comparative analysis will be carried out to discuss contentious dynamics in two Italian cities, by building on ethnographical data collected between 2009 and 2010. The two cities which are the object of the analysis are Verona and Modena. They are situated in the so-called Third Italy, in the north of the country, and are characterised by diverging political subcultures. A consistent part of studies on immigrants' collective action has drawn from the structural perspective and has insisted on political opportunities as a crucial explanatory variable. This contribution will show the added value of complementing this interpretation with a pragmatic sensitive one. Residents of immigrant origins will be observed while undertaking their thorny path of engagement characterised by the capacity to adapt, construct more or less lasting agreements with institutional and non-institutional actors and propose alternative solutions to influence a given context. Ultimately, this will also provide an example of how a pragmatic sensitive stance can help study politics in a continuum with policies, a preoccupation which lies at the core of urban theory.

**Keywords** Urban conflicts · Urban safety · Immigrants' political engagement · Pragmatic sociology · Political opportunity structure

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## Introduction

The insecurity of urban life has increasingly troubled public opinion across Europe. The first concerns emerged in Great Britain, in the 1970s, (Hall et al. 1978; Solomos 1988 cit. Quassoli 2004) as major British cities came to be associated with New York's Bronx; in French metropolitan areas, they were voiced a few years later. Banlieues were then first experiencing urban violence (Mucchielli 2001). In the 1990s, urban safety concerns reached Southern European cities.

The case of Italy is no different. Urban conflicts proliferated as a result, since the beginning of that decade, arising largely from difficulties of pacific cohabitation. Alarmist campaigns increased, taking up issues such as illegal immigration, drug dealing, street prostitution and more broadly neighbourhoods decay and micro-criminality. They rapidly dominated media and political debates in the major cities of the Centre-North (Dal Lago 1999), and they continued to do so in the new millennium.

All urban conflicts in Italy seem to share a specific feature: the emergence of natives' stands against an absolute and indomitable 'enemy': immigrants (Maneri 1998). These actors have been repeatedly blamed by the media as the main cause of insecurity. Italian scholars, on their side, have given only passing reference to them, thus often implying their passivity as political actors. In fact, with the exception of Allasino et al. (2000), Italian scholars have rather focused on other actors such as neighbourhood committees (Della Porta 2004; Belluati 2004; Petrillo 1995), police forces (Quassoli 2004), native residents (Bifulco 2000; Dines 2002; Alietti and Agustoni 2009), and policy makers (Allasino et al. 2000), while somehow eluding contentious dynamics (Vitale 2007), as their British and American colleagues seem to have done (Sempredon 2011).

The main aim of this paper is that of investigating two local conflicts, by privileging their voice, while at the same time throwing light on contentious dynamics, rather than concentrating on the explosion of the conflict itself. Conflicts similar to those under analysis exploded all across the country. Yet, the paper will focus on how they developed in Modena and Verona as they provide for an interesting comparison. These are medium-sized cities which are situated in the so-called Third Italy (Bagnasco 1977), an area of the northeast characterised by a diffused urbanity and the proliferation of a dense network of small and medium units. This context has proven very attractive for immigrants. In 2008, when the research presented here started, Modena and Verona had an incidence of newcomers corresponding to roughly 10 % of the total population (Istat 2008).<sup>1</sup> It offered ample work opportunities, and it was being invested by newcomers' entrepreneurial dynamism (Fondazione Ethnoland 2009). In fact, 80 % of their businesses concentrated in six regions, including also Emilia-Romagna and Veneto, the regions where Modena and Verona are respectively located (Caritas 2009). Against a similar socio-economic scenario, Modena and Verona present diverging models of governance, associated with the 'red political subculture', characterised by the dominance of the Communist party, and the 'white political subculture', monopolized by Christian Democrats.

<sup>1</sup> In January 2011, this percentage had grown to 14.7 % in Modena and 13.8 % in Verona (Istat 2012).

The conflicts under analysis involved phone centre shops. These are small family-run commercial businesses that offer Internet and telephone services. The first ones opened at the end of the 1990s, in residential neighbourhoods located in the urban core or in areas where the percentage of immigrant residents is relatively higher with respect to the rest of town. Phone centres are mostly managed by residents of immigrant origins for whom they represented an opportunity of social and economic integration: they have provided a job, as well as a safe 'professional haven' for an easier renewal of their permit to stay.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the increasing array of communication options available, phone centres have also provided immigrants, the largest share of customers, with an important form of transnational connectivity (Ambrosini 2009). In parallel, another function has developed: they have turned into veritable meeting spaces, as interviews with phone centre owners, police officers and policy makers highlighted repeatedly. They have also evolved as informal help desks for immigrant residents, in contexts which fail to support them sufficiently in carrying out bureaucratic documents (see also Castagnone e Gasparetti 2009). As the number of phone centres rose considerably, native residents became increasingly suspicious about their actual activities, considering the fierce competition they faced within and without the sector. Additionally, they grew intolerant towards groups of immigrants who hung around phone centres, drank alcohol and talked loud, thus disturbing residents. Complaints were increasingly put forward and accompanied by negative press which described them, in both cities, as an 'economic boom full of shadow',<sup>3</sup> a 'dangerous place at high risk of criminality',<sup>4</sup> an 'activity indisputably connected to severe problems of public order'<sup>5</sup> which 'make citizens uncomfortable'.<sup>6</sup> This is how phone centres turned into a site of contention.

In an attempt to address residents' complaints, government agencies introduced a complex and rigid regulatory framework, both at a regional and local level. Its scope was that of preventing groups of immigrants from hanging outside the shops, by restricting shops' licences, thus prohibiting owners to sell any food and drinks. To ensure compliance with the law and to prove to citizens that their concerns were taken seriously, police inspections were organised, and they rapidly intensified to a weekly and sometimes even everyday basis. In 2006, more than 40 could be counted in both Modena and Verona, including phone centres and mixed businesses<sup>7</sup>: it was the boom of these activities. In 2009, there remained 18 in Verona and 17 in Modena.<sup>8</sup> Currently, there are barely any left in either city.<sup>9</sup> According to narrative evidence, closures can be explained with a combination of factors: the gradual crisis of the activity, due to the competition of mobile operators; the increase in computer voice

<sup>2</sup> National Law 189/2002 requires 'temporary' permits to stay to be renewed every year, while 5 years is required for the renewal of 'permanent' permits. Both renewals are subjected to the existence of a regular job contract.

<sup>3</sup> La Gazzetta, Phone centre, un boom pieno di ombre. August 4 2005, 1.

<sup>4</sup> L' Arena, Incontro tra il questore Luigi Merolla e i consiglieri della prima circoscrizione. November 28, 2003, 18.

<sup>5</sup> La Gazzetta, I gravi problemi di ordine pubblico connessi alle attività di questi esercizi, scrive Leoni, di Forza Italia, un dato di fatto oggettivo e incontestabile. November 28, 2006, 10.

<sup>6</sup> L' Informazione, Sono un disagio per i cittadini. June 27, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Shops associating access to Internet and telephone calls with other ancillary services, such as food selling.

<sup>8</sup> Data provided by the Municipalities of Modena and Verona in May 2009.

<sup>9</sup> These data were confirmed by phone centre owners in informal chats held in June 2012, According to them only a few shops were still open and the business was coming to a halt.

communication systems; the rise in urban rental rates; the introduction of a rigid regulatory framework for the sector, including regional and local laws, accompanied by pressing police inspections which deterred customers from visiting the shops.

Against this background, the following questions will be addressed: was there any space for phone centre owners to be heard as the conflicts unravelled? Did they engage at all? If so, how can the deriving dynamics be best analysed in order to make new engagement dynamics surface? Can they be studied in a continuum with *urban policies*, that it to say by focusing on the gap between political ideas and their applications?

## Methodology

An answer to the questions formulated above will be sought by drawing from ethnographical data collected in Modena and Verona, from April 2008 to February 2010. It comprises over 80 semi-structured interviews; field notes from participant observations in phone centre owners' meetings and protests and in their shops, carried out at different intervals from May 2008 to May 2009; press reviews; an array of policy documents.

A third of interviews were undertaken with phone centre owners and customers. With the exception of two, the owners interviewed are all of immigrant origins, including a large group of Bengalese, some Senegalese, Moroccan, Peruvian, Romanians and a few individuals from other nationalities. They are all aged between 30 and 45, they are male, apart from three, and they have been in Italy for over 10 years. Fifteen interviews were conducted with police officers and officials. The remainder were organised with other actors involved in the conflicts, such as policy makers, residents and shopkeepers.

For a stylistic reason, no interview quote will be reported: interviews were undertaken in English and Italian and were often characterised by the (language) difficulty of phone centre owners to express their views. The latter were clarified with informal conversation reported in field notes. In order to make this paper more fluid for the reader it was chosen to omit quotations.

Press reviews were carried out of the main Veronese newspaper, *l'Arena* (November 2003–April 2010) and of two Modenese ones (August 2005–January 2010): *La Gazzetta*, the main local newspaper and *L'Informazione*, a local newspaper which is known for being particularly sensitive to residents' complaints. All reviews were completed thanks to access to online archives. Due to limited temporal access, the Modenese newspapers reviews covered a shorter period. Archive work consisted in a first search focusing on the key word 'phone centre' and a second search highlighting articles reporting previously identified key actors. Policy documents included official legislative texts and the proceedings of regional and local council meetings in which the policy-making debate on phone centre unravelled.

## The Contribution of a Pragmatically Sensitive Approach for the Analysis of Urban Conflicts and Immigrants' Political Engagement

According to the prevailing interpretation, immigrants mobilise when they expect to have some chances of success in advancing their claims, in relation to a given

political opportunity (Koopmans and Statham 2000; Fennema and Tillie 2001; Garbaye 2002) and/or discursive opportunity structure (Koopmans 2004; Koopmans et al. 2005). The paper will show that a 'pragmatically sensitive approach' (Cantelli et al. 2009) can complement this reading, by focusing on the process of politicisation undertaken by actors.

Pragmatically sensitive scholars have been largely influenced by the research work of the Groupe de sociologie politique et morale which was launched in the 1980s by Luc Boltanski, Alain Desrosières, Michel Pollack and Laurent Thévenot. What they share is their interest for a detailed scrutiny of processes of transformation. They do so by promoting a 'sociology of action' which involves observing 'politics in action', through an inquiry into actors' engagements which highlight processes, with all the difficulties and obstacles that characterise them, regardless of outcomes. This does not mean that the latter are considered as irrelevant. If we are talking about immigrants' engagement, it is evident that is ultimately connected to their path towards integration, for example, which is of course the core concern of scholars who research on newcomers' political and civic engagement. From a careful analysis of the processes connected to their actions, what is likely to emerge is the complexity of politics, including a variety of paths that can contribute to promoting or not their engagement in the long term, their access to the rank of political actors, as intended by structural scholars. This means they might contain some seeds of 'successful' as well as 'unsuccessful' forms of integration however they might be defined, with the hints these carry with them in terms of effective social inclusion.

As suggested by Leftwich (2004), politics is and has always been about power, its genesis, its acquisition, its forms and uses. It is about who wields urban political power and how urban citizens affect and are affected by related dynamics. However, structural and contentious politics scholars do not pay enough attention to what happens in the field. Politics for them is mostly considered as the monopoly of the state around which forms of competition between members and challengers of the political system unravel. In a pragmatically sensitive interpretation, politics is more than this. It is intended as the horizon of a coordination among actors in which they share common norms within a given conflict, more than any consensus originating from a collective experience (Cefaï 2007). In other words, it is considered as a process of de-individualisation towards 'becoming public', an idea implying that a public does not exist a priori but becomes such through the publicisation of a social problem and its engagement in it (Cefaï and Pasquier 2003). Such a perspective can arguably point to new approaches for studying *urban politics* in a continuum with *urban policies*, that it to say to address the gap between political ideas and their applications. In fact, it can give rise to an understanding of how all actors can contribute, through their engagement, to alternative categorisation of a problem and how they can in turn influence the policy-making process, both in terms of policy content and participatory instruments.

In order to help highlight how various engagement forms and dynamics can surface in contentious settings, the empirical analysis will be conducted with the support of an analytical framework presented next. The latter was elaborated by two pragmatic scholars, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), in their effort to show the

‘critical’ and ‘moral’ competence (Boltanski 1990) that is required by actors to engage.

‘Critical competence’ is associated with the capacity to shift from one ‘regime of engagement’ to a plurality of others, according to the ways individuals interact with their environment. The authors identified three types of them: the ‘regime of familiarity’, the ‘regime of regular action’, and the ‘public regime of justification’. In the former, people interact in a community of proximity and personal attachments. Similar actions are generally defined ‘practices’, but they do not conform to any social order, nor can they be associated with a Bourdesian habitus as they are not embodied in individuals nor in any routine. They often risk being discredited or underestimated because they recall individual forms of socialisation, incompatible with any claim for a common good (Trom 1999); hence, they are most likely to escape the attention of researchers, even though they are arguably crucial to understand the difficulties faced by actors in their effort towards politicisation.

Some researchers have been using a dynamic micro-sociological approach to investigate these familiar environments<sup>10</sup> but they have largely done so in a ‘constructivist’ fashion. Similarly, many studies have problematised and analysed public problems as a ‘social construction’, but this interpretation does not allow for the fact that public problems in fact spring out of ‘experiences’ made by actors in different situations, as the heritage of pragmatism showed well (Cantelli et al. 2009, p. 9).

Engagements in the familiar world transcend also the idea of social action, in the Weberian sense, which is more closely enacted in the ‘regime of regular action’. The latter, however, is not completely dependent on functional efficiency. It mirrors a conception which is widely explored in the philosophy of action: the economic theory defines related deliberations as an individual calculus, but the regime of regular action has its own specificity in the measure in which is it inscribed in a frame of judgement as the familiar and public regimes of justification.

The third regime, the public regime of justification, can be discerned in disputes where actors prepare for action by qualifying their arguments according to a precise ‘*order of worth*’ (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), that is to say a criteria, an evaluation, linked to a form of generality, with reference to the public good. This is necessary for them when they are criticised or advance a criticism to ensure their arguments can be qualified as legitimate by other parties, in a horizon in which coordination is sought after in the form of a ‘*test*’ (ibidem). Coordination here should not to be understood as involving a formal mechanical agreement. What should be stressed is that tests can be passed, but they can also be failed or sneaked off, and it is precisely this uncertainty, its complexity and the difficulties it carries with it which are of overarching interests to pragmatically sensitive scholars.

The second form of competence on which Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) reflected is ‘moral competence’ which is coupled with actors’ capacity to move between various ‘orders of worth’: the inspired world, the domestic world, the world of fame, the civic world, the market world and the industrial world. For the sake of synthesis, only the last three will be sketched out as they are relevant to the empirical analysis of this paper.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview, see Colombo and Semi (2007).



In the civic world, actors sacrifice immediate personal interests in the name of collective goals, as militants generally do. In the market world, conflicts are governed by competition. Actors interact in a situation of rivalry where the prevailing form of worth is represented by price. The industrial world comprises technological objects and scientific methods. Its ordering is based on the efficiency of beings, their performance, their productivity and their capacity to ensure normal operations while responding effectively to needs.

Far from promoting a rigid prescriptive model of action, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) provide a useful analytical framework which encourages researchers to reach out to scenes of contention by taking all regimes seriously, as this can help discern the thorny path which accompanies any process of politicisation and the multiple contradictory lines of contention.

It might be questioned whether orders of worth propose a pattern which is strictly Western in nature. While this criticism might have been valid when the framework was first defined, further works followed which contributed to testing and confirming its flexibility for application to other cultural contexts (Lamont and Thévenot 2000).

### **Political Subcultures and Localism in Italy**

In the 1960s, a strand of research took off with the aim to examine the interlinks between economic development and cultural background. The initial debate focused on the delayed development of Southern Italy to then shift to the process of industrialisation of the northeast which was eventually associated with the successful economic model of the so-called Third Italy (Bagnasco 1977). As anticipated, both Modena and Verona are situated within it and are hence equally characterised by diffused urbanity and the proliferation of a dense network of small to medium production units. Bagnasco (1977) argued that the success of this area depended on endogenous and exogenous economic factors. His interpretation was revised with further investigations (Trigilia 1981; Bagnasco and Trigilia 1984, 1985) which pointed also to the role of local politics, structured around specific 'territorial political subcultures', that is to say local political systems with a high level of consensus for a given party and a high capacity of aggregation and mediation of local interests (Trigilia 1986). The so-called red and white subcultures are a typical example in this sense. The former relates to areas in central Italy where the Communist Party prevailed and the second to areas where the Christian Democrats dominated.

The emergence of these subcultures was explained with the integration, at the local level, of emerging social groups which could not be integrated in a fragile national system (Trigilia 1986). The main mass parties, the Communists and the Christian Democrats, granted the mediation of local interests through the co-optation of regional élites, thus acting, at a national level, as spokesmen. They also assumed a crucial role in the coordination of social, cultural and economic institutions which testifies their radicated presence on the territory (Trigilia 1981). Over time, they showed a different capacity to resist to the crisis of the political system (Diamanti 2009). It was first the Christian Democrats who lost consensus. It happened at the beginning of the 1970s, due to a variety of reasons, including an increasing delegitimation of the Church who had been vehiculating consensus, a growing

secularization of the country and the fact that the party, who was then leading the national government, resented from the conflict centre-periphery. The Communist Party resisted longer thanks to its capacity to promote a strong civic culture and to build solid relationships with local institutions (Baccetti 1997). However, at the end of the 1980s, its stability began shaking: the inspiration provided by real socialism started fading with its collapse, various social transformation invested the country and found the party unprepared to cope with them.

These two subcultures have contributed to the promotion of specific modes of political regulation and local development, which correspond to diverging administrative styles. Messina (2001) opposed an aggregative style to an integrative one. In the former, linked to the 'white subculture', local government agencies are scarcely interventionist, and the pressure for social demands is mainly delegated, more or less formally, to a dense network of associations, including particularly catholic ones. In the latter, linked to the 'red subculture', the local authority assumes a proactive role in the promotion of development, and the main political party has a crucial role from an organisational point of view and in terms of building the local identity.

These differences are still relevant to date. In spite of the collapse of both mass parties, the models they proposed are still entrenched in local politics (Ramella 2005).

### Verona and Modena, Two Diverging Political Subcultures

Verona was governed by Christian Democrats for over 40 years. In 1999, a centre-right Forza Italia<sup>11</sup> coalition won the election (58 % of votes).<sup>12</sup> During a centre-left Ulivo coalition spell (2002–2007), the Lega Nord, a regional party with an ethno-centric ideological matrix (Diamanti 2009), started gaining consensus. The then regional Health Councillor was presented as its candidate for the 2007 elections and was very successful (60.69 % of votes).

The new coalition led by the Lega built its electoral campaign, and the program which followed, by insisting on a securitarian stance, with spatial control interventions, aimed at demonstrating citizens their complaints were being addressed; and an anti-immigrants discourse, according to which natives' access to housing and social rights had to be privileged over newcomers.<sup>13</sup>

The Lega was founded at the end of the 1980s, following the dissolution of the Christian Democratic Party, in coincidence with a growing dissensus towards the traditional political system and an increasing loss of legitimacy of the central state. Its electoral basis was similar to that of the Christian Democrats, including lower middle classes and small entrepreneurs, but it gradually changed to become more popular thanks to the development of a specific territorial identity, as opposed to a political one (Diamanti 2009). What eventually became a government party started opening local branches to be more present on the local territory.

<sup>11</sup> Forza Italia is Berlusconi's party. It appeared on the national scene in 1992, while proposing a series of liberal reforms, with no link to a specific regional identity. It gathered consensus from contrast voters of the post-communist left and voters of the Lega Nord.

<sup>12</sup> Electoral data by the Ministry of Interior. Available at: <http://amministrative.interno.it> [Accessed 5 June 2009].

<sup>13</sup> Comune di Verona (2007). Linee programmatiche di governo per il quinquennio 2007–2012.

The church has been another crucial player: while its religious function has shrunk, it still represents a key actor who contributes to social control through the promotion of social cohesion and integration (Pace 2002). This is particularly true as far as immigration-related issues are concerned. In fact, together with trade unions, catholic associations have been filling the vacuum left by local institutions, by creating specific services for newcomers.

In Modena, it is the Communist Party who dominated since the Second World War. With its local branches, it held a crucial function from a social, cultural and economic point of view. Following its collapse, those more loyal to the communist ideals founded the Communist Refoundation Party, while other voters into the Democratic Party of the Left. In 1995, a centre-left coalition led by the latter won the elections (59.9 % of votes). In the same year, the new mayor approved the project 'Città Sicure', a pilot project which aimed to rethink urban safety in order to address emerging demands by citizens (Interview, officer, Urban Safety Policy Department, April 8, 2008). He promoted the first urban safety partnership in Italy with the involvement of the prefecture and a dedicated department for Urban Safety Policy which was created, as part of the project, with the main goal of collecting citizens' complaints. Following the adoption of an approach based on spatial control and mediation, he started insisting on situational prevention (*ibidem*). In the meantime, at the beginning of the 1990s, a new actor emerged: neighbourhoods' committees (Della Porta 2004).

These groups comprise residents who declare themselves apolitical, even though, more recently, as local officers discussed during interviews (see for example Interview, officer, Urban Safety Policy Department, April 8, 2008), they have grown politicised. They have been putting forward claims on issues ranging from quality of life to safety, etc. Over time, they have gained considerable legitimacy in the eyes of the Municipality, to the point they were invited to join council meetings. In spite of their informal nature, limited membership and scarce financial resources (deriving mainly from self-financing), they have proven able to formulate constructive proposals (*ibidem*).

In 2004, a new left wing coalition won the election (63.8 % of votes). It included the Democratic Party of the Left, La Margherita, Italia dei Valori, Socialisti Democratici Italiani, Verdi and two more radical left wing parties. In 2009, it was reconfirmed, but its consensus shrank (50.19% of votes). Among other things, the Lega had been infiltrating the 'red area' and catalysing the expression of increasing tensions, such as those between natives and immigrants, thus pressuring the local authority and blaming its ineffectiveness in this sense.

Scholars have often uncritically associated the 'red political subculture' with a more open and tolerant attitude towards immigrants and marginalised groups, in that the 'concept of subculture' has been generally treated as ipostatic, (Barberis 2007). Undeniably, the Modenese Municipality has been proactive, by promoting, for example, immigrants consultation bodies, but with the emergence, at the national level, of the binomial immigration-safety and the spreading of citizens' fears, its most recent interventionist approach is more in line with that implemented in Verona, in spite of diverging political subcultures. In general, both cities have faced difficulties in dealing with immigration issues, as the increasing anxieties expressed by voters towards newcomers have pressurised local government agencies into action. Additionally, local immigration policy in these cities still suffers from a weak national

policy framework. It is therefore plausible that policy officers have drawn from the more general social domain, that actually suffer a similar limit (see Kazepov and Genova 2005), thus promoting pre-structured path-dependent approaches in both localities. In other words, political subcultures in themselves cannot explain the full picture.

## The Empirical Findings

This section will highlight forms and dynamics of engagement by residents of immigrant origins as they emerged in the conflicts on phone centres in Via Rossa (Modena) and Via Bianca (Verona).<sup>14</sup>

Via Rossa is located in a quiet residential neighbourhood, with a low percentage of immigrant residents.<sup>15</sup> A few phone centres existed here: one in Via Rossa and three in adjacent streets. The former was situated on the ground floor of a building block, and over time, it evolved into a mixed business, thus becoming the target of residents' complaints. The latter, on the contrary, were rarely referred to by neighbours.

Via Bianca is similarly located in a residential area, but it has the second highest percentage of immigrant residents.<sup>16</sup> It enjoys a good quality of life and yet is still well known for its history of drug dealing, dating back to the 1980s. Two phone centres were situated in the street: one faced the public garden and transformed from a clothing shop, to a food store and eventually a mixed business; the other, just off the corner, was actually a food store.

### The Explosion of the Conflicts and the Emergence of Neighbourhood Committees

According to a young Lega Nord sympathiser who lives in Via Rossa, perceived problems in the area related to issues of urban decay and pacific cohabitation (Interview, December 4, 2008). They increased in 2006 and were eventually voiced by calling for police patrol which, however, did not contribute to improving the situation. In the meantime, the Municipality contracted out a mediation project to a local co-operative. This certainly suggested the opening up of a political opportunity for phone centre owners but it proved otherwise. All parties were invited, including owners, residents and the young man. The latter did not join and, in parallel, he managed to collect the disappointment expressed by participants (*ibidem*) who soon moved out of it (Interview, co-operative operator, December 3, 2008). The project was eventually called to an end as will be explained later.

Except for the most disillusioned, who retrieved to their private lives, participants largely agreed with the young man on the need to address disturbances with a different approach: their voice was to be heard more forcefully. This is how they

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<sup>14</sup> Street names are invented.

<sup>15</sup> The immigrant population in this neighbourhood corresponded, in 2008, to 9.61 %, against an average of 12.57 % in town and 20 % in some neighbourhoods (data provided and elaborated by the Settore Sistemi Informativi e Servizi Demografici of the Municipality of Modena).

<sup>16</sup> In 2007, 17 out of 100 residents are of immigrant origins, compared to 21 out of 100 in the neighbourhood of Veronetta (data elaborated by the Ufficio Statistica of the Municipality of Verona on the basis of statistics provided by the Registry Office).

created a neighbourhood committee (Interview, committee member, December 3, 2008).

The young man offered to take up the leading role and co-ordinate activities. He forwarded official letters of complaints to the Urban Safety Policy Department, and they were rapidly addressed with the re-activation of police patrols. He was soon invited, together with other committees' leaders, to attend relevant council meetings and collaborate on monitoring the problems lamented by residents. In fact, various committees had been emerging in the city and had gained increasing legitimacy in the eyes of the local authority as they showed willingness to collaborate (Interview, officer of the Urban Safety Policy Department, December 15, 2008).

The voice of the Via Rossa phone centre owner also reached the Municipality but indirectly, at least initially. As she noticed the committee leader hanging around her shop repeatedly, the young Bengalese woman eventually confronted, in a familiar regime of engagement (committee leader, December 3, 2008; phone centre owner, April 28, 2009). As she first approached the young leader, he recalled a civic order of worth by claiming that the owner should take up responsibility for the common good of the neighbourhood by acting against disturbances. The latter, on her side, showed awareness and concern on the issue, which she also suffered from, but disagreed on the potential solution. In the leader's view, she should have stopped selling beer to discourage any form of problematic social aggregation deriving from alcohol abuse. She explained that a similar action was detrimental to her business which faced the competition of local supermarkets, thus introducing a market order of worth. At the same time, she asked for the leader's collaboration in reporting residents' complaints and suggested a meeting should be organised to discuss the matter into depth with other residents too. Following an initial phase in which both subjects were favourably disposed to come to terms with each other, the idea of the meeting was eventually rejected, and no co-ordination was reached due to the patronising attitude of the leader. He refused to welcome the owners' argument and qualified it as illegitimate in the measure it expressed an individual commercial interest. He also insisted on natives' rights to quietness in the neighbourhood, thus fuelling the resentment of the owner. Most importantly, he failed to discuss the alternative perspectives she strived to raise: she insisted that disturbances were connected to the fragility of the residential area characterised by difficulties with car access, including the delivery of goods to the shop and residents' parking, thus stressing the need for traffic regulation. She then explained that phone centres' association with disturbances derived from their adaptation to an urban context which failed to provide immigrant residents with an adequate meeting space and that owners were eager to address emerging problems to find new alternative ways to suit everyone.

The details of the confrontation between the owner and the committee leader show the complexity of the issue of phone centres and the fact that it boiled down to more than disturbances or mere forms of racism by residents, as often implied in discursive accounts of similar conflicts (see also Colombo and Semi 2007). Alternative categorisations of the issue were proposed by both parties and were eventually filtered to policy officers through the committee leader who attended council meetings. The phone centre owner, on her side, repeatedly explained her view to police agents when patrolling the area (Head of Local Police, April 24, 2009). Eventually, the leader's

idea might have fed into the policy-making process as the Municipality decided to implement a regulation against alcohol abuse, a few years later, by prohibiting its consumption in public space (Interview, committee leader, December 3, 2008). To the author's knowledge, the phone centre owner's suggestion to provide immigrant residents with a meeting space has not been translated into any policy initiative yet, but it has been addressed by officers following insistent reference to it by various owners (officer of the Urban Safety Policy Department, April 8, 2009). In fact, when the actual confrontation with the committee leader came to a stop, a few owners of the area decided to visit the Urban Safety Policy Department in order to report directly their views and to gain direct contact with officers, rather than leaving it to the discretion of the local co-operative, which had run the mediation project.

In the case of Via Bianca, the first complaints on disturbances were first raised by a shopkeeper, whose shop was located close to the phone centres. In the summer of 1995, he encouraged residents to sign a petition he promoted to ask the *Circoscrizione*<sup>17</sup> for police patrols. A few weeks later, their request was addressed and implemented, with hardly any improvement in the disturbances suffered by residents (Interview, shopkeeper, July 25, 2008). Contrary to the Modenese case, the signatories did not try and discuss issues directly with phone centre owners, nor did any other resident. The following year, as soon as a new wave of trouble was affecting the area, police patrols were again called for. No effort was done to identify alternative solutions that could prove sustainable over the long period. Residents and shopkeepers were convinced that police inspections were the answer for these 'evil shops' (Interview, shopkeeper, August 12, 2008) and that they only required continuity over time.

#### 'Institutional' Versus 'Non-institutional' Actors in the Use of Participatory Tools

Mediation projects have been implemented in Modena since 2002. The local authority had realised that urban conflicts were mostly connected with a differential use of urban space, rather than actual crimes, thus it started privileging a mediation approach which involved all parties. The same happened in Via Rossa. The first to be approached were residents and in particular those who were complaining: among them a few to-be committee members could be counted too. In a second moment, it was the phone centre owner to be contacted, and meetings were scheduled for them to discuss. No one was quite satisfied with it as they felt no progress had been achieved in addressing their concerns (Interview, resident, December 5, 2008). Participants expressed contrasting opinions based on civic, market and industrial orders of worth, as they did later through direct confrontation. Nonetheless, the mediation process came to a halt, due to increasing tension among the parties (Interview, co-operative operator, December 3, 2008).

Similar processes require considerable time for any small step forward to be made. The local co-operative operators explained that a minimum of 6 months would have been necessary to implement it adequately (*ibidem*; January 15, 2009). Yet, participants were urging for a quick resolution; hence, they eventually moved out of the project, and co-ordination was searched for through familiar channels of engagement,

<sup>17</sup> This is a sub-municipal unit which is responsible for some decentralised administrative functions.

as indicated above. New dynamics of engagement followed in which the owner and residents felt increasing 'ownership' (Interview, owner, April 28, 2009) over the issue of phone centres and felt as 'protagonist' of it (Interview, resident, May 5, 2009). As a result of this, mediation tools have been the object of careful reflections by operators and officers: the actual failure of the project represented a crucial learning experience for them against the apparently more fluid confrontation which took place between the committee leader, residents and the phone centre owner, in the absence of a third party. As the operators explained, owners had underlined their disappointment by stressing the project had not allowed for any direct contact with local authorities but only through a third party whom they felt had the task 'to get information *from* them' rather than solve the issue *with* them' (Interview, December 9, 2008). This certainly suggested a possible way forward for the local authority as far as consultation with immigrant residents is concerned. It will be interesting to see whether this feedback will be actually used and translated into new participatory tools in any way.

The Modenese Municipality created another institutional venue for owners and residents to confront. Policy officers set up a participatory process through which various actors were consulted on an individual basis, including the Urban Safety Policy Department, the Local Police, the Local Health Authority and IP Association, the association of phone centre owners.<sup>18</sup>

The project was the second potential political avenue opened by the Municipality to cope with the issue of phone centres. However, for the second time, owners felt a missing will on the side of policy officers to work *with* them. This became particularly evident in a meeting that was organised to conclude the participatory process. All parties were invited but the debate, that everyone expected, in fact evolved into a presentation of the mere technicalities of a new regulatory framework the Municipality was defining for the sector of phone centres (Interview, President of IP Associati, November 9, 2008; officer of the Local Health Authority, May 7, 2009). No space was provided for actors to bring in their opinion and raise in generality, thus preventing any co-ordination to be achieved. The association of phone centre owners still strived to find an agreement thus proposing itself a sort of self-regulation that owners had thought of to show their willingness to 'integrate' (President of IP Associati, June 21, 2009). Their main idea was to re-define opening times to best fit customers and yet avoid any disturbance for residents,<sup>19</sup> while imposing a fine onto owners who would not respect them. Additionally, they suggested to 're-imagine' their business as a 'bazaar' which can provide a variety of services to customers, ranging from telephone and Internet services to money transfer to food and drinks. In their view, this would allow their economic sustainability over time, but above all, it would respond to the needs of many town centre residents. Elderly people, in particular, can hardly find any small food store in the urban core as most of

<sup>18</sup> As residents' complaints and police inspections grew more frequent, phone centre owners founded IP Associati, a formal association that represented their sector. It included the large majority of owners in town, a group of about 30 people, who had already grouped up to define a common commercial code to avoid the drawbacks of competition among them. Their scope was to have an official voice for presenting their instances in official channels, such as the press, and it mostly remained unchanged.

<sup>19</sup> Immigrants often call late at night due to work engagement and to the time difference with their country of origin.

them closed down following the opening of shopping centres in the peripheries. In other words, they offered an alternative interpretation of phone centres which valued its specific assets for various segments of the community rather than acting strong to 'discipline' them. Their proposal was not addressed. Electoral pressure was mounting, and this largely influenced policy strategies. As an officer confirmed (Interview, October 10, 2008), they were focused on passing a regulation for the sector. What they needed was a quick tool to demonstrate their capacity to solve residents' complaints as oppositional parties were putting increasing pressure. Needless to say, none of the phone centre owners has acquired citizenship yet, hence, they had no voting power to influence the process. As a phone centre owner reported later (August 6, 2009), a few of them brought up the proposal again once elections were over. Unfortunately, at that stage, disillusionment on the side of owners was too strong to bring the issue any further, and the economic crisis was starting to hit hard on their businesses thus occupying them with more urgent worries.

In Verona, while the press was giving ample coverage to the conflict in Via Bianca, a new group of actors appeared on the scene. It consisted of young residents who had been active in the local church and were eager to dedicate their time to the promotion of social cohesion (Interview, group member, April 29, 2009). With this aim in mind, they ventured to organise a local festival. In that occasion, they also approached the two phone centre owners as the event was taking place in the square right next to their shop. This provided a chance to familiarise with both and gain their support. A year later, as the group was planning the second edition of the festival, residents started complaining about phone centre disturbances. The festive collaboration between the group and the owners turned into a channel for engagement (*ibidem*).

Residents had never expressed their complaints directly to phone centre owners. At the same time, the latter had been repeatedly informed on them by police agents who patrolled the area. Over the weeks, the situation had worsened alongside residents' increasing intolerance about phone centre customers who were held responsible for leaving garbage around, getting drunk and causing fights.

It was growing harder for owners too, as some residents were threatening to ask for the closure of their shop and as police inspections continued on an everyday basis (Interviews, phone centre owners, June 5 and 7, 2008). Eventually, they asked the church group for advice on why their attempts to speak to residents had been unsuccessful (*ibidem*). New engagement dynamics emerged at this stage.

The group decided to get involved, in order to be coherent with their integration goals. As suggested by the phone centre owners, they took up the role of mediators between owners and residents, without any involvement of the *Circoscrizione*. Some of the residents were known to be in open contrast with their representatives due to opposing political views; hence, involving local officers could bring in added tensions (Interview, church group member, April 29, 2009).

Two young men accompanied the phone centre owners in their visits to the shopkeepers next door and to a few residents of the building blocks above them. The owners did manage to discuss with all the mentioned actors thanks to the support of the two young men who helped them with language difficulties. They mostly listened to the arguments of residents and shopkeepers which all referred to a civic order of worth, by insisting on the need to protect the neighbourhood, and in



particular the public square, from urban decay and uncomfortable forms of disturbance. It soon became evident that the parties had a different idea on who was to blame for the problems experienced by residents. The phone centre owners explained they had repeatedly been confronted with drug addicts who had also stolen from their shops. Residents expressed their surprise in this sense: they had only noticed 'black men' going in and out the shop, and they thought they were all immigrant customers (*ibidem*). Owners, in turn, advanced their arguments by addressing an industrial order of worth. As they underlined, they had been offering customers, not only of immigrant origins, services that the *Circoscrizione* had failed to provide them with: bins for the garbage and a toilet close to the public garden which was not equipped with any service at all. In their opinion, the situation was to be re-read in terms of poor urban planning, and they suggested highlighting this in a new shared petition. Residents were ill at ease against this proposal. They feared this was a strategy by owners to shift attention away from them and possibly to hide illegal activities (Interview, shopkeeper, May 7, 2008). Due to mistrust, owners' position was barely considered. Residents and shopkeepers closed up in a rather stiff attitude and declared police patrol would continue monitoring the area. Seizing the chance of the continuous presence of police agents, owners tried also to confront them. They managed to come to terms with the fact that problems were largely caused by drug addicts, whose life stories were all too familiar to agents (Interview, police agent, May 28, 2008).

In the meantime, owners found out that many of their colleagues in other areas of town were actually suffering from similar problems with residents and were equally being monitored with constant police inspections. Soon a few of them decided to call for a meeting. It was hosted by the *Coordinamento Migranti*, a local association which offers legal and bureaucratic support to newcomers and which has been active in the organisation of protests to claim their rights. Here, they decided to invite all phone centre owners in town to form an association which could represent their rights. They asked for an official meeting with the Head of the Local Police, but their request was initially ignored as they were not a formally registered association, as was later explained to them (Interview, phone centre owner, May 16, 2008). Upon their arrival at the Local Police office, a few days later, the Head was 'forced' to receive them. It was the beginning of a more collaborative relationship.

Inspections continued, as defined by the newly elected Mayor. He wanted to demonstrate policy coherence with respect to the anti-immigrant stance spelt out in his electoral program. Yet, owners managed to ensure that inspections would be led in a manner more respectful of their customers. In addition, they succeeded in confronting openly with agents on a variety of issues relating to immigrant communities in town with the result that a few of them have become 'informal informants' since and that some police agents were later described (*ibidem*) as having adopted a mediation rather than punitive type of attitude when approaching residents' complaints on disturbances similar to those reported on phone centres.

## Conclusions

A first structural reading of the contentious dynamics presented in this paper highlights diverging structures of political opportunities for newcomers in Modena and

Verona, even though favourable opportunities in the former were more so in principle than practice. The paper also suggests that policy makers in both contexts have been short of instruments to cope with immigration issues, and this could have been counterproductive for the mobilisation of phone centre owners in both cities due to a lack of policy awareness. If we look at discursive opportunities, Veronese owners were faced with an institutional setting characterised by a strong anti-immigrants stance which certainly did not encourage their engagement. Modenese ones, on their side, were constrained by electoral pressure: oppositional parties influenced discourses and related policy strategies, and no space was left for their voice to emerge—as they do not enjoy any right to vote.

Against this background, no form of political engagement would be expected from phone centre owners. However, this contribution argues that the above structural interpretation is best integrated by a pragmatic one. As the empirical evidence shows, owners have engaged in both contexts in spite of generally unfavourable opportunities and have largely done so with noninstitutional actors, outside mainstream channels. Discussably, these forms of engagement can easily escape the attention of structural scholars as their analysis concentrates on forms of contentions which reach the public arena, that is to say contentious actions that take place in institutional settings involving necessarily institutional subjects. On the contrary, the paper looks at all the phases of politicisation undertaken by phone centre owners, including actions that took place in a more familiar regime, involving the space and the community of proximity.

While the pragmatic perspective does not ignore or deny the importance of outcomes, it is rather on processes that it focuses, independently of end-impact on policy making. In fact, in line with Hamidi (2006), the empirical evidence shows that there is an intermediary step between individual socialisation and the process of politicisation, that is to say a vision of the world that requires a practical rather than political competence to be used in situated interaction. Arguably, this competence can be explored through the lens of engagement regimes and the search for co-ordination (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). As explained throughout the empirical part, phone centre owners have strived for co-ordination in a variety of regimes. In particular, while confronting in a familiar context, they demonstrated their capacity to adapt to the context and their effort to modify it by advancing proposals and by trying to achieve an agreement on the way forward for the phone centre issue.

In Modena, owners had already shown a form of adaptation to the context by facilitating the evolution of their shops into a form of meeting space for newcomers. As complaints increased in relation to disturbances caused by their customers, the owner of the Via Rossa shop pointed to alternative solutions to police patrols by suggesting traffic problems should be addressed and by recalling attention to the yet undealt need of newcomers for an adequate meeting space. Additionally, as a result of consultation among them, IP Associati proposed a self-regulation that was yet another alternative solution demonstrating their capacity to adapt: in this case, they adapted to a context in which a prescriptive approach was making its way through policy officers.

In Verona, owners put forward their own interpretation of disturbances by suggesting a planning approach to regenerate the public space facing them. An alternative solution was also proposed with respect to the mode of activating the Municipality on the phone centre trouble. Interestingly, they approached residents who had been

accusing them for the disturbances and proposed the presentation of a petition, the same instrument the latter had used 'against them', by further suggesting they all should join their voices in the same endeavour.

Modenese and Veronese owners reached policy officers, directly or indirectly, and they grew policy officers' awareness on a number of issues while at the same time providing policy feedback. Yet, they did not impact on the policy process to date. Nevertheless, the observation of the situated engagements of owners allows to reconcile policy and politics by re-reading them in a continuum which highlights how political ideas can turn or not into implemented policy initiatives and what obstacles they encounter in this direction. In fact, pragmatically sensitive scholars treat instances of agreement reaching and critique as intimately linked to occurrences within a single continuum of action. In their view, engagements in all regimes can only be studied as an interrelated process in which multiple and fragmented actions in familiar regime can filter to other channels and combine alongside trajectories characterised by unexpected dynamics and outcomes, thus showing how urban citizens and residents are affected and can in turn affect the policy process.

To conclude, through the adoption of a pragmatic perspective, a different picture of phone centre owners has emerged: far from overly stressing their engagement potential, this contribution highlights how they actively engaged through various channels, while encountering a range of obstacles, thus accompanying the reader in the discovery of the paths of possibilism (Hirschman 1986) that can go beyond political opportunities and that any probabilistic reasoning would exclude. What is most relevant is that through their engagement, owners have actually come to exist as political actors, while they were previously unknown. In this sense, new political dynamics have made their way through: in Modena, it became clear that owners prefer bypassing the mediation of third party while having a direct contact with policy officers. In Verona, repeated confrontation with police agents, during inspections, led to an increasing collaboration between the latter and owners who have been increasingly asked for support to 'access' their communities and 'negotiate' with them.

Arguably, the pragmatic perspective is most useful to observe marginal actors, and in particular immigrants who, by definition, do not have access to formal political rights, and are more likely to engage in dispersed forms that cannot be easily tracked down. A last question needs addressing on this point: 'Can being engaged in a familiar regime be a sufficient condition for the integration of immigrants?' The paper does not show conclusive positive evidence on this, but it provides an example of the difficulties that these actors can encounter in their path of political engagement hence pointing to the potential seeds of a more or successful process of integration.

**Acknowledgments** The earliest version of this paper was presented in September 2009 at the International Conference of the Italian Society of Political Science in the workshop "Contentious dynamics in local contexts" chaired by Tommaso Vitale e Noemi Podestà. I wish to thank both of them as well as all the participants, including, Marc Breviglieri, Donatella Della Porta, Maria Fabbri, Luca Pattaroni, Mathieu Pelletier, Luigi Pellizzoni, Pedro José García Sánchez, Catherine Trudelle. for the very useful comments and for the encouragement to progress with my work and publish it. I also wish to thank those who read later versions of this paper: Ilenya Camozzi, Daniela Cherubini, Letterio Panto, Davide Però, Fabio Quassoli, Tommaso Vitale, Roberta Marzorati. Finally I am very grateful to Jennifer Rowland for her precious proofreading.

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