

## Creative urbanity. An Italian middle class in the shade of revitalization

Monica Jansen

To cite this article: Monica Jansen (2019) Creative urbanity. An Italian middle class in the shade of revitalization, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 24:1, 204-207, DOI: [10.1080/1354571X.2019.1550885](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2019.1550885)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2019.1550885>



Published online: 07 Feb 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 19



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

South Africa or Germany after the Second World War? Moreover, it is problematic when the author refers to state crime in Italy where 'the law has played a constitutive role in crimes against humanity' (pp.8–9), or refers to Mafia criminality in terms of 'state-sanctioned terror' (p.131).

Mourning and reconciliation are central themes in the theory of transitional justice, and are recurrent themes throughout the book. Yet, the theoretical framework hinders the author from considering alternative feelings, such as rage, indifference or fear, which are relevant in the Sicilian context as promoters or obstacles to value change. Moreover, to what extent are Sicilians 'mourning' and in need of reconciliation with their Mafia perpetrators?

Research methods, which are scarcely described, are another weak point. How will theory be used? How were the interviewees selected? What is the empirical support for the conclusions? The author explains that she has used 'a type of chiaroscuro technique to portray figures' (p.137). What does that mean more concretely?

References to existing anti-Mafia research are also missing in some chapters. For example, the chapter dedicated to female martyrs ignores existing research, which could have helped the author to relate the chapter to a broader theoretical and empirical context. Addiopizzo's story is documented in other scholarly work and the chapter does not add any further knowledge. The interviews with activists are biased, and the author does not address the limited success of the initiative in certain areas, sectors and social strata.

In spite of these reservations, the author has written a rich and comprehensive book that consists of a selection of interesting narratives of non-violent civic resistance to the Mafia in Sicily. The book is probably written more for scholars in public education than researchers on organized crime and anti-Mafia. It provides some interesting examples of public pedagogy and its role in democratic societies, and may serve as a first introduction to readers who are unfamiliar with the civic anti-Mafia movement in southern Italy in general and in Sicily in particular.

Carina Gunnarson  
*Uppsala University*

© 2019 Carina Gunnarson  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2019.1550884>



**Creative urbanity. An Italian middle class in the shade of revitalization,**  
by Emanuela Guano, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017,  
242 pp., \$59.95 (hard cover), ISBN: 9780812248784

Professor of Anthropology Emanuela Guano starts her study on Genoa's revival as a city of culture with a 'confession': 'The temporal depth and the emergent quality of several of the ethnographies in this book stem from my own

biography as a diasporic Italian. Genoa is not only my field site; it is also my hometown' (p.18). Guano chooses to focus on a decade of ethnographic research on Genoa's *centro storico* in order to narrate the often neglected contribution of an 'Italian middle class' to the process of urban 'revitalization'. One of the strengths of this study is the care the author takes to nuance the terms she adopts for her theoretical framework, confronting them continuously with the 'living material' of the city centre as a historically layered and experiential space:

I often started tackling a topic only to realize that the realities I was analyzing were no longer quite as current, and something new had already entered the scene. My way of overcoming this impasse was to destabilize the ethnographic present by incorporating temporal depth whenever possible. (pp.18–19)

With 'creative urbanity' Guano refers to Richard Florida's concept of 'creative class' as well as to Marxist approaches to urban ethnography, with the intention to show how the local characteristics of Genoa's middle class demand a different, participative, interpretation of 'urbanity'. Against the image of passive consumers Guano constructs her middle class subjects as 'both purposeful explorers of the urban experience and creators of a range of material and immaterial cultural goods and services capable of enacting an aestheticization of the city that is largely independent from corporate dynamics' (p.4).

In a certain sense, the 'creative urbanity' Guano is looking for combines the opposite poles of consumerism and resistance. On the one hand, it stems directly from the *passeggiata*, that aristocratic urban stroll performed by an Italian middle class that had emerged from Italy's economic boom, and on the other it taps into Genoa's image as the 'city of shattered mirrors' (as it was called by writer Maurizio Maggiani), or as the 'ghost city' convulsed by strikes and protests (Ginsborg 2003, p.17, cit. in Guano, p.37) Guano narrates how in the 1980s the urban everyday of Genoa's residents was disrupted by *cortei* brought from the industrial peripheries to the city centre by the *sopraelevata* junction (p.39). However, instead of adopting the mythology of Genoa as the 'divided city', Guano proposes in her study to shift focus and to look for the unique combination of both opposed qualities in those creative middle-class individuals who settled in the *centro storico* from the 1990s onwards. Highly qualified and at the same time precarious, living hand-to-mouth, drawing on their talents and sensibilities, they contribute 'to remaking the city from the bottom up by cultivating its economy of culture' (p.193). What's more, these 'creators' decided not to relocate, and not to take part in the *brain drain* of the Italian diaspora of the late twentieth century: in 2012 'Genoa's population dropped to a headcount of 580,000. Out of those who stayed behind, one fourth were over sixty-five. Hope, for those who left, was elsewhere' (p.59).

Without ignoring that revitalization is also a socio-economic change imposed 'by financial and political interests that extend well above the reach of most city residents' (p.194) – Guano in her urban *flânerie* is in search of those creative elements that can continue to revitalize Genoa's 'Chronotopes of Hope' (chapter 1). While in the 1970s and 1980s the *centro storico* had to cope with the reputation of being infected

by drug use, crime and political violence, from the 1990s onwards it witnessed the rise of a new 'affective urbanism', promoting hope as 'infrastructural to urban change' (p.45). Not able to materialize the promises of a bright urban future showcased internationally with a series of great events, these initiatives of revitalization from above did nothing to prevent the exodus of young educated adults looking for an alternative abroad to continue in the present.

One of the most dramatic episodes of shattered hope has been Genoa's 2001 G8 Summit that went down in history as the 'battle of Genoa' (p.61), and which is discussed in chapter 2, 'Genoa's Magic Circle', a title that refers to the inscription of 'an ideological map onto a cityscape that had been transformed for the occasion' (p.78). Drawing on a well documented analysis of the 'state of exception' created by fear, Guano focuses in particular on the experience of Genoa's residents who were systematically excluded from the event, thus allowing 'the suspension of normal life' to contribute 'to the onset of liminality in downtown Genoa' (p.65). Genoa's drama without closure, localized in the 'spaces of death' of piazza Alimonda, the Diaz school and the Bolzaneto barracks, lives on in the city's memory as 'an open spur of a wound' (p.82).

The reconstruction of hope is to be found in the *centro storico* as the result of a 'Gentrification Without Teleologies' as is described in chapter 3. In a critical debate with North Atlantic literature on gentrification, Guano identifies the figure of the 'marginal gentrifier' as adequate to describe a process that does not follow the neoliberal rationality of 'displacement' but rather that of an 'assemblage' of heterogeneous connections between 'spaces, things, logics and subjectivities' (p.86). These include the exposure of many young and educated new residents 'to diversity in the form of proximity to immigrant communities' (p.93).

Chapters 4 ('Cultural Bricoleuses'), 5 ('Touring the Hidden City') and 6 ('Utopia with no Guarantees') contain the stories of Guano's 'ethnographic subjects' (p.194) and narrate 'vulnerable' trajectories of hope which, maybe, could bring Genoa 'back on its track to a luminous future' (p.195) as she states in the final sentence of this rich volume. With 'cultural bricoleuses' the author identifies a group of 'educated and yet severely under- and unemployed middle-class women' that succeeded in meeting the need for 'cultural intermediaries' in the process of 'turning postindustrial Genoa into a city of consumable heritage' (p.118). Also the Genoese walking-tour guides analysed in chapter 5 are mostly women and subject to precarious labor. Thanks to their creative storytelling practices, these guides exploit Genoa's reputation as 'hidden city' thus transforming the city's public image (p.154), and at the same time as they are working within the limitations of flexible work earning a modest livelihood (p.151). Larger societal changes in terms of 'the negotiation of regional and national identities in the Italian context' (p.172) are however expected to happen thanks to the 'heterotopia' of the Suq discussed in chapter 6, a multicultural festival which since 1999 takes place every June at the heart of Genoa's Porto Antico marina. Created as a polemic alternative against the backdrop of the creation in the early 2000s of Genoa's shopping malls (p.185), the 'culture' that is put on display at the Suq is not only meant 'for public enjoyment and

consumption but also for public recognition' (p.184). Guano underlines the importance of the keyword 'contamination' for the ideation of the Suq, 'which constantly attempts to identify the contaminated "roots" of Genoese culture as a model for an open society where ethnic groups can not only coexist peacefully, but also and above all mingle in mutual appreciation' (pp.165–166).

The conclusion is, as the other chapters, preceded by a quotation from Italo Calvino's *Le città invisibili*, which tells of Marozia's destiny according to an oracle: 'I see two cities, one of the mouse, one of the swallow. ... It is time for the century of the mouse to end and for that of the swallow to begin' (Calvino 1972, p.189). Guano, finishing her book in 2015 when the recession was said to be approaching its end, dares to express her hope that Genoa could become again the city of the swallow. Unfortunately, recently another catastrophe hit the city with the 14 August collapse of the Morandi bridge killing 43 people. The mice will run again 'through tunnels of lead' until, hopefully, the swallows will reappear, 'in the summer sky, playfully calling each other' (Calvino 1972, p. 189).

## References

- Calvino, I. 1972. *Le città invisibili*. Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore.
- Ginsborg, P. 2003. *Italy and its Discontents: Family, Civil Society, State*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Monica Jansen  
*Utrecht University*

© 2019 Monica Jansen

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2019.1550885>

