

## Expulsionscapes. Logics of Expulsion and Economies of Eviction in Milan (Italy)

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## 1. Introduction

Spaces of the expelled cry out for conceptual recognition  
(Sassen 2014: 222)

- 1 On 9 June 2016, I participated in executing an eviction order from a private home located in a suburban area of Milan for non-culpable non-payment. The forced removal involved a family from Morocco, including two severely disabled elderly women, two young men, a young, pregnant woman and a two-year-old girl. The rather dilapidated house in question stood only a few hundred meters from the offices of the trade union where I was assiduously conducting my PhD research. Fatima,<sup>1</sup> a sixty-five year old woman with a disability, mother of the two young men, had called in the union to help manage the procedure. For over twenty years, Fatima had been employed part-time as a domestic worker in the house of a wealthy Milanese family. In the afternoons she worked in the kitchen of a small Italian restaurant near her house. After developing bone cancer, however, she was no longer able to work and therefore stopped paying her rent, preferring to use what funds she had to meet her and her family's basic needs as well as ensuring water, gas and electricity for the house. She had not been paying her rent for two years. At the time we met, her sons had been working in the local markets selling shoes and bags for two years: they had used their mother's savings to purchase an old van and had begun to work, but they managed to secure only a limited income for their large family. Amalia, a union volunteer, had already stepped in during

the previous months to mediate in the conflict between the owner – to be precise, the negotiations were managed by the owner’s husband – and Fatima, personally taking steps to bring local social services in to address the family’s serious difficulties and thereby make the landlord’s property available once again. Both the owner’s husband and the bailiff had accepted the agreement, provided that Fatima and her family vacated the house before the next time the bailiff came to visit the building.

- 2 The 9<sup>th</sup> of June was the day scheduled for the bailiff’s visit, and Fatima and her family had not yet been contacted by social services. As a result, they had not yet vacated the house. Without going into too much detail, suffice to say that when the bailiff, the police and the owner’s husband arrived, the negotiations became very tense. The situation worsened further when Amalia contacted other union delegates and these latter quickly organized an anti-eviction picket line outside the house where Fatima lived, bringing with them everyone who had been sitting in the union office waiting room at the time. I was inside the house along with Fatima, her mother, the bailiff, the landlord’s lawyer, the landlord’s husband and two law enforcement representatives, Amalia, Piero (head of the local union chapter), and another union volunteer, Valeria. During the negotiations for the enforcement of the eviction order, Valeria and I began to feel that the small living room where the negotiations were taking place was too “crowded” and so decided to go out and join the demonstrators on the street. Once we were outside the house, as I reported in my field diary:

[...] the owner’s husband followed us and shouted, claiming that «people like you [trade unionists, activists but also scholars] need to mind their own business» because he has to pay the condominium fees, and «tomorrow INPS fees will be due and I’ve not received a single euro for two years». A policeman interrupted him to summon him [inside]. He invited him to calm down and not raise his voice, lest he obviously end up being in the «wrong» (field diary, June 9 2016).

- 3 «Mind your own business». This statement struck me a great deal at the time of the fieldwork and I still find it disturbing even now. The owner was partly right: after all, ethnography can be understood as a refined type of research in which not only does «someone not mind his or her own business», but «someone actually minds others’ business». Paradoxically, in order to adopt the landlord’s indelicate suggestion, I would have had to stop doing my job. From the creditor’s perspective, therefore, in a context of vulnerability characterized by deep-rooted forms of social invisibilisation both my presence and that of the trade union ruptured what was perceived as the natural order of events, namely the simple compliance with an order aimed at protecting the owner’s property rights through the implementation of an executive eviction. The exhausted property owner blamed me for potentially bringing further delay to the enforcement of the eviction based on the evidence that I was, albeit in a rather passive manner (that is, without doing anything to hamper the formal process), located in a social space that did not concern me, a space in which I did not «naturally» belong.
- 4 Evictions certainly do not represent a privileged object of study for anthropologists or the social sciences in general. As Matthew Desmond has pointed out, «[e]viction is perhaps the most understudied process affecting the lives of the urban poor» (Desmond 2012: 88). To extend the scope of this argument, however, in cases of social conflict all ethnographers are probably perceived as «out of place», as foreigners, albeit professional ones (Agar 1990).
- 5 The following considerations should therefore be understood as an affirmation of the need for social scientists to «not mind their own business» but rather «mind others’

business» in an attempt to foster a dialogue primarily involving but not limited to the academic community. In specific cases such as this of analysing policies that tend to marginalize individuals and produce social exclusion, mine is an invitation to critical engagement aimed at desacralizing and deconstructing the profound individualism permeating the rhetoric surrounding eviction; individualism that gives rise to forms of abandonment and social invisibilization. This phenomenon has an ever-greater impact not only in Italy but also elsewhere.

- 6 UN-Habitat has recently declared that forced removals, the arena within which I position the phenomenon of eviction, represent a «global crisis» (2011: viii). According to the agency's data, during the 2000s at least 15 million people were forced to leave their homes. Between 2007 and 2009 alone, this phenomenon affected approximately 4.5 million people. In contrast with the past, today these processes seem to follow «new logics of expulsion» (Sassen 2014: 1) thanks to the development of «predatory formations» (*Ibid*: 14) involving increasingly sophisticated and invasive devices of «accumulation by dispossession» (Harvey 2012). According to Sassen, the transversal logic of expulsion at work in the contemporary world can be seen in multiple disparate and apparently dissimilar processes: the expulsions of migrants, the expulsions of workers from the labour market, the expulsion of entire populations from their territories of origin, and the expulsion of the most vulnerable groups of citizens from cities (Sassen 2014). The argument presented here builds on this analytical framework.
- 7 This process seems to appear, in different forms, in the global South and North alike (see Brickell, Arrigoitia, Vasuvedan 2017). Regardless of the setting, forced removals – whether dictated by mechanisms of land grabbing, resource extraction, policies of urban renewal or gentrification, real estate development or other forces – seem to be driven by this common logic of expulsion. The main outcomes of this process are new forms of social vulnerability, especially housing vulnerability, as an exacerbation of forms of social inequality; at the same time, it also gives rise to strategies and tactics for enforcing, resisting and governing the phenomenon of eviction.
- 8 Against this background, the issues surrounding eviction in Italy take on particularly marked social significance: while in 2005 one eviction was carried out for every 515 families residing in the national territory, in 2014 the rate was one for every 333 and in 2016 one for every 419. Analysing the procedures for emptying residential real estate in the period from 2005 to 2016, the dossier of the Ministry of the Interior (2016) shows that eviction proceedings held fairly steady from 2005 to 2007 (decreasing from 45,815 to 43,869); from 2008 to 2014, however, there was a significant increase (+47.8%), followed by a slight decrease in 2015 (down 16.6% from 2014). In 2017, the total number of eviction orders executed for residential properties totaled 44,553 (61,718 in 2016, of which 54,829 for outstanding rent) (Ministry of the Interior 2018). The enforcement of eviction order by bailiffs increased by 62% between 2006 and 2014 (from 22,278 to 36,340) to subsequently decrease slightly in 2015, down 10.4% for a total of 32,546 evictions carried out (Ministry of the Interior 2017).
- 9 This paper focuses on the city of Milan, the second largest municipality in Italy. Long characterized by a strong administrative tradition by Italian standards, Milan is now undergoing a process of outsourcing the management and maintenance of infrastructure and public services, including housing, through various forms of Public/Private Partnership (PPP) (Carboni 2011).

10 Drawing on ethnographic research<sup>2</sup> I conducted between October 2015 and December 2016, in this article I seek to demonstrate – through an anthropological gaze – that evictions represent a socially and analytically key mechanism in the contemporary world for producing social exclusion, inequality and difference. In the first section I provide some elements of context that are useful for framing the housing issue in Italy while in the second section I outline a set of conceptual and methodological tools drawn from both anthropological and other approaches to interpret the phenomenon of forced housing loss. The third section presents several case studies I identified during my ethnographic research to illustrate four «logics of expulsion» that pave the way for understanding the richness of each «local place» as part of a globally encompassing phenomenon which, borrowing from Appadurai (2012), I have defined in this article as «expulsionscape». While Sassen's approach proceeds by identifying the general characteristics of the phenomenon of expulsion and applying them to individual cases, this construction of a «panoramic view» allows me to begin from individual cases and from there propose generalizations. Indeed, through the study and analysis of specific contexts we can compare case studies that display differences and similarities (Remotti 2019) and are useful in outlining the dialectic of a process that is never either exclusively global or exclusively local.

## 2. The housing issue in Italy: contextual elements

11 In order to develop an analysis consistent with the premises I set out in the introduction, I intend first of all to lay out some contextual elements that should allow the reader to frame the phenomenon of evictions as part of the Italian housing landscape. First of all, it should be noted that Italy has historically attributed a great deal of social, political and economic significance to first home ownership (Tosi 1994), with various political strategies contributing to promoting – and continuing to promote, today – the importance of this form of property and investment, especially through tax benefits. Secondly, in keeping with the principle that homes ideally belong to their inhabitants, Italy has a limited stock of public housing: in fact, its public holdings are less than 5% of the total properties for rent, in line with Greece, Spain and Portugal, as compared to a European average of 25% (Indovina 2005). Moreover, the supply of public housing has been progressively decreasing even as the demand for it increases exponentially, due mainly to the 2008 economic crisis (Cognetti, Padovani 2019). It is thus no longer only the historically weaker classes who are affected by the problem of housing shortages; this issue also extends to average-income families. This point also brings me to a consideration of the economic crisis and its legacy: as a matter of fact, the Italian housing sector is characterized by crisis conditions, that is, a particularly fragile socio-economic configuration due largely to public spending cuts that seriously impacted public housing in terms of both building maintenance and construction as well as governmental assistance policies (Baldini, Poggio 2014). The house, once a safe investment and resource-accumulating asset, has thus been transformed into one of the more marked and dramatic victims of a broader process of impoverishment (Michelucci Foundation 2014). Evictions are not only a consequence of this process of impoverishment, therefore, but also a cause of this process, that must be assessed structurally beginning from the life trajectories of those affected by them (Desmond 2016).

- 12 From the standpoint of local politics, housing appears to constitute a right only «on paper»; the application of this right seems to have been emptied of substance. Although housing is outlined as a constitutional right (albeit secondary) in the Italian Constitution, therefore, as a right it lacks truly effective guarantees. This situation appears to be caused on one hand by the lack of a national legislative framework in this area, and on the other hand by administrative segmentation that undermines the consistent enactment of this right.
- 13 From a discursive point of view, public debate, media and political rhetoric primarily casts housing fragility as an emergency, thereby detaching it from the kind of structural assessment that is certainly more suited to understanding its causes, consequences, global and local nuances, and socio-economic as well as symbolic implications. As many scholars have shown from the philosopher Agamben onward, such an emergency framing suggests that we ought to be focusing on the political weight of the housing issue. Several factors would seem to contribute to producing housing emergency discourse and while it certainly constitutes an emic concept to be taken into account, at the same time it is also an analytically fragile construct (Pozzi, Rimoldi 2017b).
- 14 The final point to make in outlining the Italian context concerns broader transformations in contemporary welfare systems and the specific configuration they take on in Italy (Ascoli, Pavolini 2015). Several authors have shown that, in the contemporary landscape of states with advanced capitalist economies, public service procurement and outsourcing interact with an ever greater extent and in some cases even replace public administrations in providing services to local populations. Generally speaking, this shift began to take place in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century following the implementation of neoliberal policies aimed at downsizing welfare and deregulating the labor market, reforms carried out mainly through cyclical periods of austerity imposed at national, regional and local levels. As Vereni (2015) has effectively shown in relation to the Italian case, however, such rationing policies have been accompanied by the emergence of new social risks, especially revolving around employment precarity, and the growing vulnerability of previously well-protected segments, in particular the lower-middle class. The main consequence of this process has been an increase in the demand for social welfare services, leading to an apparently paradoxical situation in which it appears that general expenditures (austerity) can only be decreased by producing, as an effect, an increase in the demand for welfare assistance. The very real risk involved in this paradox is that very objective of such targeting and rationing, that is, cutting public spending, might itself be nullified. Governments have attempted to deal with this paradox through privatization measures consolidated around two very different ways of conceiving the “privatization” of care services: on the one hand, privatization driven by demand, and on the other, privatization driven by supply (*Ibid*: 147-148).
- 15 With these elements in mind we can position the following findings in a specific context characterized by not only a local specificity that no doubt stems from the country’s national history but also global dynamics that inevitably touch on Italy as a whole and Milan in particular.

### 3. Eviction in anthropological perspective

- 16 According to the Italian legal definition, the procedures for authorizing eviction belong to a special sphere governed by the Civil Procedure Code (c.p.c.) in articles 657 and following<sup>3</sup>. These procedures allow a property owner to exercise his or her right to oblige a renter to vacate the property in question. The case is always under the jurisdiction of the court, specifically the court responsible for the territory in which the property is located. In daily practice, the enforcement of the law is entrusted to a bureaucratic system, which – ideally – serves to implement measures in a mechanical and rational manner (Hoag 2011; Pozzi, Rimoldi 2017a). The variability and complexity of real-life cases are managed through a complex, multi-part organizational structure (Crozier 2000). As such, the administrative structure acts as a privileged mediator between the power of a government (be it supranational, national, regional or municipal) and its citizens (see Herzfeld 1992, Gupta 2012, Palumbo 2010).
- 17 For the purposes of my analysis, a legal definition of eviction would be excessively limited, however. I therefore suggest setting out from a definition that expands the spectrum of social and symbolic action associated with the event in an effort to interpret the phenomenon as part of a wider social landscape. Matthew Desmond, who has carried out years of qualitative research on this phenomenon in the United States, instead suggests that «an eviction is when your landlord forces you to move when you don't want to» (Desmond *et al.* 2015: 236). This definition is quite apt for the analysis I present here in that it highlights the position of the subjects involved in the process, first and foremost those targeted by eviction, that is, those who do not want to have to move.
- 18 As Elden has brilliantly shown, from a historical point of view expulsions, removals and evictions are certainly not a new phenomenon: indeed, «conflict over land, at a variety of scales, is a major factor in human affairs and [...] its effects have been almost entirely negative» (Elden 2013: 1). As Brickell, Arrigoitia and Vasuvedan have also noted (2017: 4), the outcomes of these conflicts are thus often deeply entangled with broader social struggles having to do with ownership, possession and use and unquestionably anchored in the local history of the various contexts comprising this «geography of forced evictions» (Ibid).
- 19 According to Aguilera, Bouillon and Lamotte (2018: 29), the phenomenon of expulsion, the arena within which I frame eviction, is characterized by three key elements: first, exclusion from national space, a dwelling or land; second, the use of violence; and third, a process of distancing both spatial and social.
- 20 Analytically, most studies tend to opt for spatial criterion in reading the phenomenon (in most cases, indirectly). Noteworthy examples include national and international studies on processes of gentrification (Perez 2004; Herzfeld 2009, 2016; Semi 2015) and impoverishment (Wacquant 2001; Bourgois 1996; Desmond 2016), urban renewal or resettlement policies (Perlman 1982, Holston 2008, Soja 2010, Portelli 2017), and the accumulation of capital through expropriation (Harvey 2004). These groundbreaking analyses underscore one central point: cities continue to constitute the main vehicle and space for the production and reproduction of global capitalist dynamics (Lefebvre 1991).



- 21 In Europe, research addressing residential expulsion has focused mainly on «habitat domination» (Aguilera, Bouillon, Lamotte 2018: 20): from various forms of removal from rented or illegally occupied housing (Desmond 2012, Tosi Cambini 2014) to urban renewal policies and their associated forms of expulsion (Harms 2012, Appadurai 2014, Vasuvedan 2017), and from squats to bidonvilles (Bouillon, Muller 2009; Cattaneo, Martinez 2014; Starechesky 2017).
- 22 In the US context, in contrast, expulsion has been explored as part of a national process of governing poverty that unfolds along ethnic, class and gender lines (Desmond 2016). Scholars have read the housing precariousness caused by a large-scale use of the eviction system as intimately linked to other phenomena which dialectically produce social exclusion and profit, such as mass incarceration or urban segregation for example (Wacquant 2007).
- 23 In settings in which housing precariousness constitutes a «permanent crisis» such as the Global South and beyond, scholars analyzing the systematic implementation of eviction policies have shown that the political relationship between development, urbanization, neo-liberal economic policies, migration, ethnic and class stratification and the rationalization of urban space actually cuts across national cases, thus revealing the global and transnational character (given the national and local specificities) of policies designed to govern poverty (Pozzi, Rimoldi 2017a: 115). Consider, for example, findings from Brazil (Valladares 2006, Holston 2008), South-East Asia (Harms 2012, Schwenkel 2012, Herzfeld 2016), Chile (Murphy 2015), or the Indian subcontinent (Appadurai 2000, Dupont 2010). In these spaces, housing vulnerability (the larger context in which people face a constant risk of expulsion) has been read as a structural trait of the capitalist economic policies characterizing the living conditions of a large part of the world's population (Davis 2006, Roy 2011). This ubiquity (albeit conditioned by historical-geographical differences) would seem to confirm the claim Engels made almost a century and a half ago (Engels 1872), that housing is central to the reproduction of the mechanisms involved in the exploitative relations and production of capital. As Vasuvedan has pointed out, expulsion policies therefore represent the «product of recurring cycles of creative destruction and accumulation by dispossession, which have repeatedly condemned significant numbers of people to misery and prompted many to seek informal forms of housing and shelter» (Vasudevan 2015: 29). This perspective has also been substantiated more recently by Sassen and Desmond as they reveal the «holistic» character of this issue:
- Eviction is not only the consequence of poverty. It is a cause of it too. It affects people's mental health; it causes people to commit suicide; it drives educational outcomes for kids because they are tossed around from one school to another; it breaks the fabric of the community; leads to higher crime rates in the area; it turns residents into strangers; it drives families to lose their things and homes; it marks people with a record that stays in the court systems which pushes families to live in dangerous neighborhoods and prevents them from accessing government systems (Sassen, Desmond 2018: 233-245).
- 24 Generally speaking, in the Italian context the expulsion-triggered social dynamics that Sassen and Desmond so clearly explain also appear to be linked to the fact that familial investment in residential and investment property has historically played an important role in social and economic terms and identity construction (Tosi 2008). These dynamics have converged with the current economic crisis plaguing the country since 2008 in all of its different local, regional, national and transnational configurations.



## 4. The expulsionscape in Milan

- 25 Sassen's recently published arguments, presented in the introduction, have certainly contributed to creating a transversal analytical framework that allow scholars to interpret different local specificities through a shared lens. According to Sassen, we find ourselves in a global system fueled by systemic logics of expulsion: «logics that have arisen under contemporary neoliberalism and globalization as opposed to the post-War, Keynesian welfare state era which was “driven by a logic of inclusion” (Sassen 2014: 212)» (Watt 2018: 68). According to the analysis conducted in the book, Sassen's analysis seems to proceed from the general to move towards the particular; however, thus making it difficult to develop an approach to the phenomenon of expulsions that begins with local specificities and the daily experiences social actors have with them. In so doing, Sassen's expulsion logics seem to hang like a sword of Damocles over the heads of social actors, denying them the agency all subjects rightly possess.
- 26 In order to avoid this risk, I suggest that these logics be approached not so much as elements navigating through the global ether, but as elements which constitute a particular «scape» in the sense suggested by Appadurai. Specifically, they comprise a panorama we might call an «expulsionscape». This allows us to identify a set of expulsion logics beginning from the local specificities such logics produce and within which they act, interact and are contested. Ultimately, there is a clear epistemological need to reverse the process through which we produce conceptual tools for understanding reality. Specifically, we might strive to reveal the micro-logics of expulsion (in this case, associated with cases of eviction) that can be deployed as dense analytical tools and the result of a dialectic between experience-near and experience-distant concepts.
- 27 It is in this spirit that I present the following analysis of four expulsion logics identified during fieldwork in the Milan area, a set which is obviously not exhaustive but does effectively account for all the evictions I was able to observe during 15 months of research. I believe that the sum of these, rhizomatic and effervescent rather than mathematical, provides a fluid social vision of the «expulsionscape» characterizing the city of Milan and, possibly, Italy more broadly.

### 4.1 The logic of failure

- 28 I met Marco in November 2015 at an illegally occupied building in the innermost suburbs of Milan (see Pozzi 2018). The squat mainly sought to serve families that had been evicted and were waiting to be assigned public housing. The seven-story building once used as a call center housed people who had been forcibly removed from their homes – even though they were already on a waiting list for units in public residential buildings – because they had been unable to keep up with rent or monthly mortgage payments. Marco had lost his job some time before and with it the house he lived in with his wife and children, as it was owned by the cooperative he had worked for; he was no longer able to provide a domestic space for his family. The family found a place to live in the squatted building, but they were not together for long because after a few months Sara, Marco's wife, decided to leave and take their children with her. After

several months of research, when we had developed a solid, trust-based relationship, I asked Marco if I could interview him. When asked to talk about his eviction experience, Marco told me:

The main thing, I think, is probably the shame. Because in that moment you feel you have failed. You feel like a good-for-nothing, miserable, *una merda* [a piece of shit]. Because you say to yourself: «I have made so many sacrifices, I work every single day, I run all around all the time, but I can't keep up with the payments, because I have made my own debts, I have done this, or that...» (Marco, Interview by the Author, 5 January 2017).

- 29 Marco's account reveals the symbolic repercussions and significance – always public, albeit invisible (and invisibilized) – of losing one's house. In a context in which the father figure is expected to meet the basic need of guaranteeing a home for his family, the act of eviction seems to represent first and foremost a symbolic despoiling of the individual, a sort of social downgrading suffered when a person does not know how to adequately provide for his or her family unit. In keeping with a neoliberal rhetoric in which it is up to individuals to meet their own needs, Marco recalls the embittered sense of failure that accompanied the eviction process. Indeed, the moral impact of eviction on the people who find themselves forced to move out, and especially fathers (in coherence with a patriarchic frame) highlights a logic of expulsion that is especially keen in the Italian context: the fact that it is the individual who is responsible for ensuring the good that is housing. This logic pervades eviction proceedings, making it all but impossible to render this phenomenon social and increase its public visibility; at the same time the logic also permeates the period preceding the actual removal, preventing the debtor from seeking legal support or advocacy in the delicate (but lengthy) phase leading up to the actual evacuation. On multiple occasions the people I met took responsibility for having lost their housing onto themselves, thus completely de-legitimizing the systemic and structural nature of the phenomenon. Failure, shame, and even dishonor feature prominently in the dense web of meanings that are attributed to the process of eviction, thus reinforcing a logic of expulsion that casts the individual as deficient in facing the (assumed to be shared) rules of the real estate market and, more deeply, those of leading a «good life» in society. The habitus of individual failure is not only a consequence of eviction but a logic of expulsion, based on the idea of heightened individual responsibility on the part of the person who – inevitably – proves unable to materially and symbolically control the forms of violence and structural exclusion triggered from the outset by the accumulation of debt.

## 4.2 The logic of exclusionary inclusion

- 30 This point calls for shifting my attention to the policy level. Based on the principle of the sacredness of private property, eviction represents not the consequence of a wider form of poverty but one of its causes. In the face of a dizzying rise in eviction rates, tools developed to safeguard property seem to prevail over those meant to protect the ever-growing mass of individuals who fail to «respect» the rules of the market<sup>4</sup>. Sassen argues that, in the past, welfare states formulated what she terms «logics of inclusion», a series of political devices meant to curb the selectivity inherent in the capitalist system – although not, clearly, meant to undo it. In the context of housing policy, such devices include various apparently unrelated (and certainly problematic in multiple senses) policies such as tax breaks on the first home and public housing. In the

contemporary post-welfare state, however, inclusionary policies appear to have turned into exclusionary policies. That is, in a moment of undeniable social vulnerability, the policies governments put in place seem to exacerbate this fragility rather than seeking to resolve it or at least render it bearable.

- 31 The systematic nature of exclusionary policies and, at the same time, the problematic nature of inclusion-oriented policies are clearly expressed in the words of Giorgia, a woman who used to work in the entertainment industry and has two girls, one of whom suffers from a serious mental illness. Sitting at the table of a cafe in a northern Milan neighborhood near her ex-husband's house where she had temporarily lived with her daughters following the eviction, Giorgia told me about «her misfortunes», as she so liked to define them in the period when we talked:

The disaster arrived in 2009. The landlord started pressing me so I was forced to leave the house. He started raising the rent. Rent that went on rising at 1,200 euros per month. We started from 300.000 lire [approximately 150 euros] in 1984 and in 2009 we had reached at 1.200 euros. This was done with the intention to say to me: «get out of the house». I started searching for a new house. And I discovered that, as a lone woman without a job with two children, one of those with a handicap, [...] nobody rents a house to you, because they are afraid that you won't pay [...]. So, in 2009 I lost my job. In 2010 I was still able to go to work and to give myself a push. Then in 2011 and 2012, which we remember as the black years of the crisis, you could say, there were no jobs at all. So, I got to a point where I couldn't work and the rent was higher and higher. Then my lease contract came to an end and the landlord decided not to renew it. Then he asked me to pay the rent without a contract for two years and arbitrarily decided that the rent had to go up to 1,500 euros. [...] So, since I didn't have a contract and I was not «evictable», let's say, I decided not to pay him anymore. And here we are, after three years of waiting, three years of tension, three years of postponements, three years in which it was impossible to work, three years in which my life went on with my daughter's sickness.... The eviction process is so stressful. So stressful. [...] Then I found the behavior of the social services to be crazy. [...] What they said to me before the eviction was: «Since in this moment you are not working and you have many difficulties, we can take your daughter and put her in an institute...». Are you kidding me?! You take my daughter?!?! I gave up everything for my daughter, before, I used to act in six movies a year and now I can't because of this problem... And now they decide to put the mother to the side! [...] Since I decided to refuse this proposal, they told me the worst thing. That I was a bad mother, that I thought the Municipality of Milan was supposed to bring me «coffee and a pastry», and so on... (Giorgia, Interview by the Author, 10 October 2016).

- 32 Several elements can be seen in Giorgia's narrative. As member of the middle class, her story shows the chain of exclusion that takes form beginning from the threat of eviction. Certainly, her situation also displays other emerging or existing factors that exacerbated the family's vulnerability (her daughter's disability, job loss, divorce, economic crisis). The most palpable element, however, is the fact that she was not able to make use of social cushioning devices that would have made the process of losing her house and moving less «stressful», in her words. At the same time, her story also speaks to the clear lack of socio-economic measures for protecting vulnerable subjects from market violence, thus effectively illustrating that the forced loss of housing is based on the alienation of the home as a good (Madden, Marcuse 2016). The fruit of unequal relations among social classes, the real estate market works to relocate and drive off disadvantaged (structurally or even temporarily, as in Giorgia's case) individuals so that it might restructure itself for better profit production.

- 33 Viewed in this way, the logic of including exclusion can be seen to give rise to a system which threatens to expel or does actually expel people from the market only to – through an exceptional relationship – then reinsert the same subjects back into the market, only this time in a position of socio-economic subordination. In Giorgia’s case, for example, the only policies to be implemented were social services interventions meant to provide familial support. Although such policies are designed to foster inclusion as a remedy to previous exclusion, they instead tend to solidify this same exclusion as part of a historical process of housing vulnerability management in which fragile subjects are produced so that they can then be protected and reintegrated into the market and society (Pozzi 2019). The policies are based on the assumption that the individual in question is incapable of acting as an autonomous subject. On the basis of this point, one could argue that the policies enacted around evictors and the evicted serve to exacerbate oppression, stress and social exclusion instead of soothing the wounds caused by the «root shock» of eviction (Fullilove 2004).

### 4.3 The logic of economic temperature-taking

- 34 In Italy, bailiffs play a professional mediating role in carrying out evictions. As state officials responsible for protecting both parties involved in forced removal (both creditors and debtors), these officers also play a fundamental *social* role. In fact, it is up to bailiffs to act as mediators between the parties in the attempt to pursue the least harmful form of intervention, especially for the debtor. Moreover, bailiffs constitute highly refined antennas with the ability to sense how the economic winds are blowing in the local area beginning from the indicator of how well local residents are able to meet and satisfy contractual terms of whatever type.
- 35 To illustrate this logic, I focus on the case of Roberto, a bailiff with whom I worked during my fieldwork. Roberto operated in an area comprising a dozen small towns in the western part of the province of Milan. The socio-economic context of this field was quite different from the urban areas in which I had worked up to that point, as during the 20<sup>th</sup> century it had hosted a number of leading industrial players. As reported by Roberto and other interlocutors living in the area, the markedly elevated economic standing of the local population made the area’s real estate market quite lively. From the 1970s onward, however, the secondary economic sector had gradually petered out, leading to the closing of large industrial plants in particular. A dense web of small and medium-sized enterprises formed over time, operating mainly in the narrowly focused markets that grew up to replace the Fordist model. At the same time, the tertiary sector had gained in importance, coming to match the employment levels formerly displayed by the industrial sector. While up to the seventies and eighties the only immigration was made up of Italian nationals from other areas of the peninsula moving to this area in search of work, today the demographic configuration has changed significantly following an influx of extra-European migration.
- 36 As I accompanied Roberto in his daily activities, I was able to observe that most of the eviction or foreclosure cases in the area affected this population. In most cases, families reinforced by stable jobs in small or medium-sized local businesses had rented or purchased a house thanks to the availability of mortgages. The economic crisis that began in 2008 hit these companies hard, with serious repercussions on people’s ability

to keep up with mortgage and rent payments. Indeed, the bailiff's full schedule of appointments was tangible proof of this impact.

- 37 Bailiffs represent important actors for assessing the economic performance of a given town or city. They explore cases rather than data. Roberto confided to me that he had perceived the coming of the crisis well before 2008 due to a sudden increase in residential evictions and, above all, an enormous wave of foreclosures against companies. A journalist had told Roberto that, in her opinion, bailiffs act as highly accurate «economic thermometers» capable of sensing the «socio-economic climate» of a local area well before expert analysts. In an autobiographical essay, Roberto likewise talked about this prognostic ability of bailiffs:

[...] As we are the legal officers responsible for serving court documents and recovering debts through foreclosures and the execution of evictions, we measure precisely the overwhelming temperature of the recession, we monitor its vigorous and unceasing beats; so, we could venture, according to her, predictions about the economic development of the next few months more reliable than the ones made by an important professor, a CEO from the European Central Bank or a witty journalist. She said to me on the telephone: «You rummage in people pockets, you enter into their houses and their companies, you go through their drawers; you know their dramas, their anxieties, their imminent failures. In a nutshell, you hold the situation of stagnation of this country»<sup>5</sup> (Roberto 2015: 124).

- 38 This capacity on the part of bailiffs speaks to a third micro-logic characteristic of the Milanese expulsionscape: the «temperature» of the economy. With this point I would argue that evictions do not represent an emergency whatsoever; rather, as stated above, they are the outcome of a real estate market that relies precisely on these forms of expulsion in order to guarantee selective access to the market based on social class. The economic temperature thus represents the set of unquestionably long-term systemic conditions that contribute to maintaining the most vulnerable segments of the population in a state of constant housing precariousness while dialectically fostering the well-being of others, mainly those who live thanks to the poisonous fruits of the real estate market.

#### 4.4 The logic of intimate de-territorialization

- 39 Finally, the last logic I have identified has to do with the socio-spatial dimension of Milan's expulsionscape. As mentioned above, several studies on housing vulnerability have stressed that the spatial factor is particularly key in producing social exclusion. Evictions do certainly substantiate this argument. In this case, however, it is not my intention to illustrate how policies govern urban space by raising the value of certain areas with negative consequences on the lives of local inhabitants. Instead, I seek to shed light on a more intimate, symbolic, and emotional process of deterritorialization affecting evicted people. A process which, in my opinion, has an even more profound impact in the daily lives of those who have been forced to leave their homes. The account by Marco, presented above, may help clarify my point:

And then, from one day to the next, someone knocks on your door and says: «You have to go». And takes from you that little space in which you could close yourself, your home, where you can take refuge, where you can feel safe. A shield, a shield against what is outside, that can give you safety. I'm talking about all the problems that you can find on the street or in a normal life. But when you are at home, it is like being in a bubble of protection. And when they knock on your door, they take

this bubble from you. And when you lose that, you lose everything (Marco, Interview by the Author, 5 January 2017).

- 40 This narrative clearly shows how central contemporary forms of expulsion are to the construction of urban subjectivities. Many of the people I met during my fieldwork echoed Marco's sentiments, in different words. A sense of loss, of abandonment, of being driven away from an intimate space – domestic space – that granted stability to their life paths.
- 41 This distancing is more than the cause or consequence of the process; it is a fully-formed logic underlying the process consisting of a constant threat, hanging over the heads of citizens, that they might be downgraded or their position in social hierarchies be called into question should they prove individually incapable of managing the home-asset. Belonging to the community of «responsible» citizens depends on an individual's ability to effectively adapt to the real estate market, that is, essentially, to adapt to the neoliberal economic system currently in place. Belonging thus appears to be a changing process, with the risk of deterritorialization – usually entailing displacement towards the «peripheries» of the collectivity to which people belong – acting as proof of the system's exclusivity and unequal manner of ensuring access to and permanence in residential spaces.

## 5. Conclusions: Expulsionscapes and Economies of Eviction

- 42 In this essay I have sought to map the social production of what I have termed an «expulsionscape», a socio-political landscape inhabited, produced and endured by social actors who are forcibly removed from their homes. On one hand, as discussed above, this landscape rests on a local fabric characterized by specific temporal and spatial traits in terms of housing; on the other hand, it is unfolding towards an ambiguous future imagined mainly in terms of emergency, precariousness and vulnerability. A future which, in light of the points made above, already seems to have arrived (Bellagamba 2019).
- 43 My main objective has been to take up Sassen's call «to make visible the crossing into the space of the expelled – to capture the visible site or moment of expulsion, before we forget» (Sassen, 2014: 215). I have therefore sought to show how the passage, the crossing, the process of producing an eviction event also entails the production of a category of citizen subordinated to market logics and the commodification of housing and, in anthropological terms, of living itself. This commodification operates not only materially but also and above all, as I have tried to demonstrate, in terms of morality, symbols and values, through certain logics of expulsion. However diverse and volatile these logics might be, it is still possible to reveal, identify, and analyze them through fieldwork. In this article I have identified four of them<sup>6</sup> in particular; four logics that enact and feed back into the panorama of expulsion: the logic of failure, the logic of exclusionary inclusion, the logic of economic temperature-taking and the logic of intimate deterritorialization. I argue that this set of logics produces the Milanese expulsionscape and endows it with a specificity that is local but can only be effectively read through a dialectical approach that also takes into account the global scale of the phenomenon.



- 44 Expulsion landscapes are not simply the product of analytical speculation; they appear to act so deeply within social contexts that we might even argue that they give rise to specific types of economy that could be defined as «eviction economies». I propose this expression to capture the entire multi-jointed chain running from the act of executing a forced removal all the way through the process of dealing with – through institutional or informal channels – the people removed from their respective dwellings, that is, the evicted. This economy seems to take shape in a way that is conditioned by different contingencies, needs and responsibilities and according to a peculiar, localized rhythm.
- 45 First of all, the eviction economy is structured along material lines, that is, through the circulation, sale and financialization of goods, skills, professional ethics and practices on the local real estate market, both public and private, formal and informal. Formal aspects include, for example, access to public housing, the public and private management of local-area welfare services, the subset of lawyers specializing in accompanying property owners as they execute eviction orders, the wages earned by bailiffs, door-to-door social services workers, locksmiths, real estate companies, debt collection agencies, and foreclosure proceedings. Informal practices, on the other hand, include the off-the-books rental market, the growth of networks of mutual aid and exchange, the unauthorized accessing of water or electricity, and the emergence of groups focused on creating collective employment to protect society's most vulnerable members.
- 46 Secondly, the eviction economy is structured along social and political lines, obliging us to approach both the vulnerability produced by evictions and forced removal as well as housing policies beginning from a consideration of the way social hierarchies, class relations and various communities of practice end up being reconfigured when an eviction order is authorized and served. At the same time, the eviction economy also takes part in producing new social categories, giving rise to subjects with differential statuses. The status of belonging, whether externally granted or claimed by the individual for him/herself, is what makes it possible to negotiate access to, stable residence in or exclusion from one of the many levels that make up the local real estate market.
- 47 Thirdly, the eviction economy is also structured on the basis of a moral order, an order defined by the various constellations of morality and values that operate in the specific configuration I have analyzed here. This configuration appears to be the product of a continuous dialectical tension between the world of moral economies, understood as the «production, circulation and appropriation of values and sentiments concerning a given social theme» (Fassin *et al.*, 2015: 9), and the ethical subjectivities that act within this world, defined as a set of «processes through which individuals develop ethical practices in the context of relationships with themselves and others» (Ibid). These moral worlds and ethical subjectivities cannot be reduced to tidy dichotomies or banal stereotypes; indeed, they reflect a manifold and patchy image of social reality.
- 48 In conclusion, the expulsionscape and eviction economies seem to constitute predatory devices for the neoliberal management of contemporary urban settings. Consistent with an anthropology that has no interest in «minding its own business», as asserted in the introduction, social scientists must engage in studying these phenomena in the knowledge that housing issues make an appearance in almost all contemporary forms



of impoverishment and that quantitative tools are unquestionably not up to the task of capturing the prismatic complexity of this phenomenon.

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## NOTES

1. All the names in the article have been replaced with pseudonyms.
2. I structured my fieldwork beginning from a meeting with a committee organizing residential squats to house evicted families. Thanks to the social networks of the committee, during my fifteen months of ethnographic research I was able to make contact with different social actors involved in eviction processes: evicted families, social service workers, lawyers, bailiffs, social guardians, third-sector operators, politicians, law enforcement agents, people working for the agencies managing social housing, activists and volunteers. I spent time with each of these subjects, listened to their stories, participated in the activities they were involved in, and shared moments of their lives. The data I collected included both field notes and semi-structured interviews, in most cases conducted at the end of my research period, when my relationship with the interlocutors was already solid and based on mutual trust. In addition, I gathered a host of written sources, specifically newspaper articles, social media posts, flyers, press releases, and legislative texts as well as archival materials.
3. These procedures include, for example, the upholding of an eviction notice for non-payment (art. 658 cpc), following an expired lease (art. 657 cpc) and, finally, the eviction of tenants for whom use of the property represented payment for services rendered, when such services cease (art. 659 cpc).
4. Although insolvent debtors are also protected by law and the Municipality of Milano promoted some local policies that seem to be insufficient (see Pozzi 2019).
5. This text is presented in an anonymous form to protect the identity of its author.
6. Those logics belong to three different episodes of eviction, being one episode meaningful for two logics.

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## ABSTRACTS

Drawing on ethnographic research carried out between October 2015 and December 2016, in this article I employ an anthropological gaze to show the socially and analytically central role evictions play in the contemporary world as a mechanism for producing social exclusion, inequality and difference. In the first section, I outline some contextual elements to frame the housing issue in Italy, while in the second I bring certain conceptual and methodological tools from both anthropology and other disciplines to bear on interpreting the phenomenon of

residential eviction. In the third section, I present several case studies investigated during my fieldwork to illustrate four «logics of expulsion» that pave the way for understanding the richness of each «local place» as part of a globally encompassing phenomenon which, borrowing from Appadurai, I have defined as *expulsionscape*.

A partire da una ricerca etnografica condotta tra ottobre 2015 e dicembre 2016, in questo articolo intendo mostrare – attraverso uno sguardo antropologico – la centralità sociale e analitica degli sfratti nel mondo contemporaneo come meccanismo di produzione di esclusione sociale, di disuguaglianza e di differenza. Nel primo paragrafo fornisco alcuni elementi di contesto utili a inquadrare la questione abitativa in Italia. Nel secondo paragrafo tento di delineare alcuni strumenti concettuali e metodologici di carattere antropologico – ma non solo – per interpretare il fenomeno della perdita forzata dell'alloggio. Nel terzo paragrafo, attraverso alcuni casi di studio emersi durante la ricerca etnografica, illustro quattro «logiche di espulsione» che dimostrano la possibilità di identificare la ricchezza che caratterizza ogni «località» all'interno di un fenomeno che ha una portata globale e ho definito nel corso del testo come *expulsionscape*, riprendendo gli stimoli di Appadurai.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** evictions, logics of expulsion, *expulsionscape*, ethnography, Milan

**Parole chiave:** sfratti, logiche dell'espulsione, *expulsionscape*, etnografia, Milano

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