

Book Review Series

Tuff City

Dines, N. 2012. *Tuff City: Urban Change and Contested Space in Central Naples*. New York: Berghahn. 344 pp.

Ah, Naples! Capital of the Italian South, historical port city and Italy's third largest metropolis. Sprawled beneath the looming shadow of the slumbering Mount Vesuvius, it is the birthplace of the Neapolitan pizza, Capodimonte porcelain and actress Sophia Lauren. Exports aside, the name brings to mind a chaotic, but vibrant, street life. One envisages a tangle of narrow, cobbled streets hung with linens and densely packed with tourists and locals; a loud hum of activity from animated, gesturing Neapolitans; and the disorienting buzz of Vespas dodging and darting between impressive ancient piazzas. In the tourist literature, from guidebooks to newspaper editorials, foreigners love to wax poetic about Naples. For instance, here is a brief snippet of cultural advice from the New York Times:

Neapolitans love their traditions and rituals: stores close for the midday pausa, cappuccini are not drunk after 10 a.m. and grated cheese never goes on top of seafood pastas. And on weekends, residents take to the streets for their daily passeggiata, or stroll. If the weather holds up, everyone walks toward the Gulf of Naples, alongside the Villa Comunale park. It's a runway show of sorts: children lick their gelatos, women saunter arm-in-arm in their Sunday best, and men discuss what men in Italy always discuss: politics. It's a true slice of Naples (Santopietro 2008).

What a stunning image of Mediterranean urban life! Like the Spanish *paseo* and Catalan *passeig*, subjects of my own urban ethnography of space and place (Barone 2010), these communal social performances look quaint and idyllic from the eyes of wealthy holiday-makers.

However, this romanticized scene is only part of the urban experience of Naples. It is the darker side of Neapolitan existence that graces the international news and has made the city renowned as backward, disorderly and plagued by social woes. Tourists and locals alike lament a maze of streets clogged with endless traffic and the jarring noise of impatient car horns reverberating through the city center. One imagines a cloud of smog heaving past museums, ensconcing hapless sojourners at quaint sidewalk cafés and adhering black soot to classical monuments. Time, natural disaster and neglect have seen many of Naples' architectural gems crumble in haphazard chaos. Today, Bourbon palaces stand alongside dilapidated tenement buildings sinking into their dangerously decaying foundations. And it just gets worse from there: Pickpockets. Beggars. Endless piles of rotting, uncollected trash. Corruption. Seedy Mafia bribery. An arresting and lively city, it is no exaggeration that Naples is better known for its organized crime and pollution than its culture.

And so Naples' reputation precedes it almost everywhere in the world. Indeed, Italian-Americans and their pop culture representatives are familiar with the vulgar expression used within Sicilian-American communities: *va fa Napoli* ("Go to Naples!"). It can be loosely translated for family audiences as "go to hell" - but likely euphemistic for *va fanculo* (f--- you) - as if there were no worse punishment in life or death than condemnation to the forsaken city. The irony of one mafia stronghold asserting superiority over another is not lost, but it nonetheless attests to some longstanding divisions within and between Italian communities, cross-cut no doubt by class consciousness and levels of education and strong enough to carry over to the new world.

Dines' ethnography shows that similar sentiments about Neapolitan inferiority are fairly common within Italy, too. Naples is situated against northern Italian cities as socially and culturally inferior in the popular imagination of locals and as well as in the minds of politicians looking to bring the city up to "European standards". Recent criticisms from Italian Leftist academics and journalist levied at

failed urban regeneration projects throughout the 1990s (detailed in this book) argue that Naples – and by association, Neapolitans – never changes (p. 295), which is to say it will never improve or progress towards being civilized (p. 289). Such an attitude explains away the sources of failure in urban regeneration projects and obviates the need to find potential solutions for an ailing city (p. 295). The city and its inhabitants are simply labeled anomalous, destined to remain in a state of festering decay and left to live up to this predestined reputation.

Challenging the presumed moral destitution of Naples, throughout the book, Dines draws his attention directly to the ignored and the disenfranchised members of the city who are otherwise only mentioned when the subject of salacious headlines. It would seem nearly impossible to expel the reader's first impressions of heaps of garbage blighting the urban landscape and the Camorra profiteering from the urban ruin that lay at its feet. And yet somehow its two most distasteful icons can be made somewhat incidental to the story of the Neapolitan people presented here.

Through public spaces and contests over place and identity, Dines takes an alternative look at the city, challenging both local and outsider preconceptions about what it means to live in Naples. Part 1 of the book introduces the reader to the city of Naples with local historical and political information necessary to grasp the political climate of 1990s Naples and upon which the case studies of urban regeneration will be framed. Parts 2, 3 and 4 are devoted to the ethnographic snapshots of significant social spaces in Naples.

The three distinct public realms chosen as case studies – two central piazzas and one reclaimed neighborhood park/civic center – together offer an authentic portrait of contemporary urban life in the European south. The choice of three very different locales all within the center of the city highlights the diversity of Naples and the difficulty of relying on stereotypes to make sense of its urban landscape. Dines provides both synchronic and diachronic reading of the places under examination, thereby framing the entire historic center as a “battleground of

competing claims and interests” (p. 15).

Like most Mediterranean cities, Naples is made up of a patchwork of smaller neighborhoods or *quartieri*. Designated by imperfect physical or imagined boundaries around, for instance, historical expansions of the city, iconic spaces, architectural styles, social class or ethnic identity, these neighborhoods have unique local histories and interrelationships which together make up the urban whole. Expansions in all directions from the old historic center over the centuries – and continuing today – have left an eclectic mix of architecture and peoples inhabiting Naples.

Throughout the text, the author follows the path of the city towards a contestable future. In addition to snapshots of three significant urban places, Dines traces the policies of the local administration which seek to rid the city of its poor international reputation as the “urban outcast of Europe” and, in turn, reclaim its cultural and architectural patrimony (p. 2). The program of urban renewal throughout the decade sought to “clean” the city in a number of ways (see below). The cruel fate that a mere decade later Naples' image would be severely marred by yet another Mafia war (2004) and the ongoing garbage crisis (2007) adds a sad, dramatic irony to the storyline.

In 1993, newly elected Mayor Antonio Bassolino embarked on a project of rehabilitating the physical appearance of Naples to restore a sense of heritage and decorum. In this process, the historic center (*centro storico*) was reimagined and repackaged as the “heart” of the city, imbuing in its inhabitants a shared sense of belonging (p. 82). The objective from above was to eradicate the sense of anarchy and disorder that had long befallen the city and inspired its poor reputation, hoping to transform its public face by building “places of collective identity” (p. 88). This reworking of the tapestry of the urban landscape through ambitious planning was meant to correct the behavior of wayward residents and “civilize” them to European standards. Neapolitan culture was presented by city officials and journalists as something singular and in need of preservation.

As such, in regenerating Naples, the city would have to - intentionally or unintentionally - go about remaking Neapolitans.

Dines draws on the spatial theories of Lefebvre (1991) and Bourdieu (1977, 1984) to present the framework for analysis of "contested spaces" in the city of Naples (pp. 99-105). The ethnographic focus of the book is the *piazza*: "The piazza is one of the most distinctive and emblematic features of the Italian city. [...] Across the centuries, these 'organized voids' have stood as measures of urban beauty, order and harmony" (p. 106). A piazza's symbolism is built upon enduring bonds between citizen and city space. However, the concept of the piazza in Italy, like the *plaza* in Spain or *plaza* in Catalonia, is popularly depicted by intellectuals and local pundits as being under threat from TV, the Internet, cars and modern lifestyles (p. 111), even though empirical evidence suggests otherwise (pp. 91-92). Ideologically, an empty piazza heralds the decline of society. As a result, the past two to three decades has seen a push towards a revival of the piazza or piazza-like culture (throughout Europe as a whole) in an attempt to restore a sense of urban place and memory and to rejuvenate cities with welcoming and enticing spaces for gathering (p. 111).

Through selected piazzas of Naples, the reader is given a look into complex uses and representations of these traditional city spaces. Dines' first ethnographic case study of contested space looks at the Piazza Plebiscito (pp. 115-118). Prominently located in the center of the city, the enormous space had habitually been used to hold large cultural and political events (pp. 119-123), but by 1990 it had been converted into a *de facto* car park and bus station due to the city's perennial problems of congestion (pp. 123; 126-8). After an intense clean-up in the mid-1990s, suddenly the newly empty space was awarded the lofty status as an historical icon and urban emblem representing the city on the international stage, no longer to be tarnished with cars or filth (pp. 139-141). To maintain its sterile beauty, the piazza was intentionally left devoid of any structures or organizational elements like benches or flowers, apart from temporary modern art installations or special events

approved by government officials. But public spaces in the Mediterranean are never empty or devoid of meaning, as desolate as they may appear to bystanders.

The restoration of the space and its new "rules" neglected existing Neapolitan life in the piazza for some of its longtime patrons whose patterns of use became visible transgressions of the space (p. 166). Discourse on public activity in Piazza Plebiscito was naturally blind to the hurried youths on Vespas, daytime street vendors, raucous children playing ball games, occasional protesters, petty criminals and nighttime drug users (pp. 151-153), all seen as peripheral to the New Naples. Where actual practices, however longstanding, conflicted with the new image of a beautiful and inviting city, the behavior was seen as inappropriate and inauthentic. What planners overlooked in remaking the so-called civic identity of this place is the personal histories attached to what may seemingly look like empty gaps in the urban landscape to others. Dines shares some of these personal attachments through interviews of city residents (pp. 155-164), including fond memories of the piazza in past years as well as many conflicting ideas of what constitutes "appropriate" or "desirable" behavior within its boundaries.

The second case study focuses on Piazza Garibaldi, the railway station and environs, which is recognized by city residents as the most dangerous, disorderly and crime-infested part of the city (even though this is factually inaccurate, p. 189). The space has historically undergone more than one period of redevelopment, but by the 1980s it was relegated to the "immigrant piazza" known for its hotels, bars and migrant-run marketplaces (p. 171). Dines' ethnography shows that on closer examination the Piazza Garibaldi is now a multifunctional polynational space. It is not simply the domain of immigrants, drug dealers and sex workers, but is governed by overt and unspoken spatial and ethnic divisions (pp. 212-219). As opposed to Piazza Plebiscito, so socially and culturally peripheral is this space that by the 1990s it was no longer even seen as Neapolitan (p. 207). Yet the immigrant social and economic activities taking place there make it closer to an approximation of a

traditional Neapolitan piazza than the carefully staged Piazza Plebiscito.

The author's analysis brings to light the class politics of urban planning. It is clear that the local government did not intend to increase the rates of use of public spaces in the city, which were already being utilized in different ways by many groups of residents, but to reconstruct behavioral guidelines within the spaces (p. 98) to fit with new models of Neapolitan identity. A lack of agency on the part of some inhabitants (namely immigrants) greatly restricts their involvement in urban development (p. 85). At the same time, however, those denied a public voice are still able to powerfully contest their place vis-à-vis other citizens and the urban space itself, carving niches in its landscape, running its most prolific street economy, forming relationships with other natives, transients and locals, and passing their own value judgments on the city's public spaces.

Finally, the last contested urban space under examination is the social center and park complex known as DAMM in the *quartieri* of Montesanto (p. 265). Once a decayed zone in a depraved and neglected outlying neighborhood (labelled a "slum"), it was reclaimed by local residents and turned into an active civic center in 1995. Entirely self-run, the many successes of the civic center include bringing together the local community, regenerating the park and keeping it safe for local children (pp. 271-277), all without the assistance of the local government who continued to ignore demands to renovate the park. While much of the city's governing classes demeaned this community and its residents (p. 278) and literally feared entry into the area, DAMM cleaned up the park and instituted a number of vibrant social and after-school programs. The local volunteers took it upon themselves to remedy the neglect of their working-class residential neighborhood while expensive, superficial renovations of touristy piazzas took priority for the Mayor. This example contests the very ideas of urban "degeneration", "inclusivity" and "civic participation" (p. 283) and represents an ethnographic vignette of real Neapolitan experiences that can be easily lost in the broad strokes of political debate over the past decade.

Dines calls for "measured, critical analysis" (p. 295) of this period in Naples' recent history. He is clear on the inconsistencies and imperfections in policy-making as well as mixed popular perceptions of the Mayor's attempts at reforming Naples. The account is highly class-conscious and particularly sympathetic to the underrepresented. Thus, in all three case studies, Dines draws his attention to those citizens of Naples who are not likely to find their streets in tourist guidebooks; to the kids who defiantly climb on art installations (pp. 142-3); the street hawkers who smoke hashish under cover of the colonnade in the Piazza Plebiscito at night (p. 164); and the Eastern European migrants or Senegalese traders that carve niches in the Piazza Garibaldi, making use of the tried and true survival tactics of Neapolitan life (p. 217), whether or not they are denied the label of official citizen.

Tuff City is as much a history of the political Left in Naples as it is an analysis of everyday Neapolitan life. A sizeable portion of the text is devoted to Neapolitan and Italian political historiography, especially of Left-wing and communist parties, which may be taxing to follow for those not conversant in the specific events of Italian history. That said, the case studies, interviews and vignettes of space and interaction in the city make powerful statements about immigration, crime, degeneration, social exclusion and a number of other themes that produce a strong ethnographic text for Mediterranean and urban anthropologists alike.

Mediterranean anthropology is not as fashionable as it once was. Perhaps scholars think that the region has been "done" for some time or that cheap flights to sunny resorts have ruined the mystique. But this book offers a necessary contribution to the field: a recent take on a Mediterranean city that many people might rashly presume to know by reputation alone. Naples, the shameful, uncontrollable and uncontrolled metropolis is certainly prime fodder for anthropological study. At the same time, and helpfully for urban anthropologists, Dines seeks to dismiss Naples' exceptionalism, presenting it instead as an "ordinary city" (p.

17).

Without diminishing the power and pervasiveness of corruption, the role of the Camorra, or masking the clear inefficiency of local administrators, Dines treats the reader to an authentic story of the Neapolitan people that is more inclusive than the reworked, pre-packaged notions of citizenship bantered by local politicians. One cannot help but conclude that it is perhaps their permanently stigmatized and downtrodden state which inspires in Neapolitans a stubborn perseverance in the face of its many detractors. In *Tuff City*, we learn that the persistent failure of Naples to “civilize” has likely confounded both local and international observers because the debate frames hyperlocal realities in absurdly foreign terms.

Even though it “was born out of the particular field of Italian studies”, the author hopes that the text will “contribute to a more general meta-methodological critique of how we *write* about the contemporary city” (p. 25). He achieves this by utilizing public spaces as windows to the city, and by interweaving alternative, personal narratives into the wider story of Naples’ stagnating development. Thankfully, it is not just another pretty story. We read little about the *passeggiata* except in nostalgic flashbacks. The reader quickly discovers that what passes as a harmless blurb in a NY Times travel guide is actually teeming with contradictory and conflictive symbolism: by no means is “everyone” in Naples represented in the leisurely stroll in the Villa Comunale. In light of this book, such a romanticized scene instead comes to reflect another aspect of exclusionary politics and the powerful divide between “us” and “them” in Naples.

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