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– NEIGHBOURHOODS AGAINST THE STATE: Reversing Territorial Stigma in Casablanca and Beyond

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Abstract

Neoliberal urban interventions are perceived as authoritarian by the people affected—regardless of whether they are implemented by an autocrat, a dynastic king or an elected government—because they are supported by narratives designed and imposed from outside which contrast with local perceptions of space and social life. Fieldwork reports from two displacement processes implemented by an authoritarian state—Morocco—are compared with similar observations in two allegedly 'democratic' countries—Italy and Spain. In all cases, the residents respond with counter-narratives that highlight the importance of local social structures based on strong personal ties and the collective use of resources that enable them to survive neglect and stigmatization. A common trope is the idea of a 'big family' of neighbours struggling against a state that refuses to acknowledge the dignity and value of local social life, thus betraying and alienating its own citizens.

Introduction

It is an ironic twist of urban history that pushes us to call urban interventions in African, Asian and Latin American cities 'authoritarian' when they are directly based on planning policies developed by European and North American 'democratic' governments and institutions. The mass demolition of self-built houses, evisceration of working-class districts to build avenues or boulevards and neglect and disinvestment in high-rise council buildings which have become impossible for their residents to manage—all leading to the forced displacement of local residents to remote parts of the city—are authoritarian policies per se, regardless of whether they are implemented by a dynastic king, a self-appointed autocrat or an elected prime minister.

I will discuss here two urban interventions I witnessed in Morocco's economic capital of Casablanca, one in the centre and one in the periphery, briefly comparing them to similar processes of demolition and forced removal I studied in Italy and Spain (Catalonia). The similarities I found in how the people affected perceive urban interventions in an authoritarian country such as Morocco (Bogaert, 2018), and in the two Southern European urban contexts usually considered to be democratic, allow me to extrapolate the existence of an authoritarian character inherent to these urban policies, not to the specific governments that apply them, nor to the North/South divide (see Koch, 2022).

What is authoritarian in contemporary neoliberal urbanism is the cycle of neglect-disinvestment-reclaiming of a portion of urban land that is crucial for the production of a 'rent gap' (Smith, 1996), always designed by forces external to the place itself, and justified through a rhetoric that obliterates local perceptions and social worlds. Authoritarianism is a function of neoliberal capitalism, which increases the extraction of profits by systematically keeping fractions of the city and its population outside the production of value, only to later 'cannibalize' them when the potential to generate profits has grown enough (Fraser, 2023). Although the speed of the process, the number of people affected and the harshness of the repression against those who

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oppose it obviously present radical differences between different countries or cities, the authoritarian character of this urban dynamic does not lie in the amount of individual suffering that specific urban interventions imply, but in the fact that they all alienate a sector of the population from crucial decisions over their living environment.

The rhetoric through which exclusion is justified employs different forms of 'territorial stigma' (Wacquant *et al*., 2014), depending on the local discursive strategies that are most effective at any given moment. It can invoke urban disorder, decay and crime (promising a 'security fix'); ecological sustainability (a 'green fix'); social diversity and *mixité* (a 'social fix'); or else it is predicated on gender equality, national identity, religion, purity and the sacred, as well as immanent concepts such as beauty, design, citizen participation, culture and art. It is not the specific 'fix' employed that is relevant—so-called democratic states, for example, recently shifted from a securitarian to a social discourse (!)—but the fact that local communities are systematically represented as unable to deal with the constraints of the contemporary world and hence lacking the ability to 'decide by themselves' about the territories they inhabit (see Milstein, 2020). These inhabitants are depicted as inherently doomed to suffer decay, crime, violence, infection or whatever the hegemonic negative values for the corresponding wider society may be. Fabian (1983) famously called a similar epistemic violence the *denial of coevalness*, through which a specific area or group of people is presented as 'out of history' and thus desperately in need of the only force able to bring them into the present—be it colonialism, urbanism, gentrification or whatever policy the elite wishes to apply.

These legitimating discourses, mainly expressed by state actors and the media, are tailored to the specific cultural parameters of the local middle class. Violence and authoritarianism thus tend to be much more visible when the representations that conceal them do not appeal to one's own sensitivity. The same observer can feel horrified at the suffering caused to thousands of local residents removed for the opening of Avenue Royale in the centre of Casablanca, then stroll happily across Barcelona's Rambla Raval, which caused a similar amount of forced displacement and disruption.[1] The Catalan anthropologist Manuel Delgado described urban interventions in the inner city as modelled on the Christian ritual of exorcism: the purpose of chasing evil from the soul (of the city) justifies the suffering inflicted on its body (Delgado, 2014). I believe that our attention should go to the suffering of the body, shifting our focus from the discursive strategies that legitimate policies to their consequences for the people affected. It is not a coincidence that areas threatened by neoliberal urban interventions very often present social, cultural and political features that draw the attention of urban anthropologists or scholars interested in alternative forms of urban life (e.g. Stavrides, 2019).

The communities that fall into the 'rent gap' cycle of authoritarian urbanism have typically been condemned to neglect, disinvestment and isolation by the state and private investors. More than other groups, their members have had to rely on their own social and cultural resources rather than the state or the market; consequently, they have learned to develop autonomous ways of managing their spaces and social relations. It is for this reason, it seems, that many communities targeted by neoliberal urbanism express a special attachment to the portion of the city they inhabit, an attachment that is often coupled with an awareness of possible alternatives to the 'solutions' envisaged for them by planners and investors (even if their members may be reluctant to express this publicly). These features are directly linked to the consciousness of waging (or having waged) an everyday struggle to survive disinvestment, neglect and territorial stigma. State authorities cannot acknowledge this perception, because it would entail

1 The demolitions for Rambla Raval and Illa Robadors in Barcelona began in 2001 and affected an area of 30,000 m^2 (3 ha), demolishing more than 110 buildings for a total of around 1,400 flats. The demolitions for Avenue Royale, as will be detailed later, began in 1996 and affected 30 ha. Only 2,500 of the planned 12,000 families were displaced.

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admitting the neglect, disinvestment and 'cannibal' features of public policies. Hence these representations are confined within the borders of the areas affected by urban policies, only available to their residents and to those researchers that manage to access the intimacy of their local worlds.

I will focus here on two specific 'narratives of displacement' (Pull *et al.*, 2020) I found in Casablanca, highlighting resonances with previous research I conducted in Southern Europe. The first is the use of the trope of the 'big family' to convey the importance of the social interactions within a neighbourhood; the second is the expression of grief for the planned destruction through the idea of having been betrayed by the state. Neighbourhoods affected by authoritarian urbanism often represent themselves as a big family struggling against the state: it is an image that many people who suffer the harshest consequences of neoliberal urbanism have developed to convey their attachment to their houses, streets and spaces and thus their visceral opposition to planning policies that doom these to destruction.

The neighbourhood as a family

The central city of Casablanca, or *medina*, is a dense space mostly inhabited by the working classes, who are traditionally associated with economic activities linked to the port, commerce and, more recently, tourism. In the 1980s, King Hassan II gave orders for the construction of what would be the biggest mosque in the world, on the medina's waterfront. This mega-project, with its 151 m-tall minaret, partially drew from European waterfront redevelopments aimed at attracting capital and tourists to areas formerly inhabited by the working classes, such as Barcelona's Vila Olímpica or Marseille's Euromediterrané. However, state authorities and the media justified it as a 'religious fix', drawing on the idea of re-confessionalizing a city perceived as secular, and hence unfaithful to the religious authority of the king (Rachik, 1995; Mounfiq, 1999; Cattedra, 2001). The huge change of scale represented by the mosque was taken a step further by Hassan's son, Mohammed VI, who in 1996 inaugurated another ambitious project: a 1.5 km-long Haussmannian boulevard called Avenue Royale, cutting through the city centre to connect the Grand Mosque to the business district. Around 60,000 residents were directly threatened with displacement by this project and thousands more living in nearby neighbourhoods were affected indirectly. The first 530 households were relocated to the residential estate of Attacharouk in the late 1990s, while 2,000 more were displaced to the far-away district of Hay Nassim in the 2000s (Hauw, 1995; Azar, 2001; Berry-Chikhaoui, 2010; Bogaert, 2018; Portelli, 2023).

In 2018 I began interviewing residents who had been relocated to Hay Nassim from the central city 20 years before. Collective transportation constantly brought people back into the medina; I rode a taxi in which all the passengers as well as the driver himself were displaced residents from the medina. People vividly remembered their former neighbourhood and many still had their friends, family members or meeting sites there. The former residents recalled a lost landscape of intimacy and an abundance of relationships, occasions and social interactions, conveyed through the metaphor of the family. Here is an ode to the medina's social life, from an interview with a woman who relocated in her 50s:

> Life was beautiful. There was a boy whose sister studied with me, his father sold bread; life was beautiful. This man was called B.A. and worked in A.G.'s cafe. He was a waiter for my father-in-law, and as I grew up and married, people called my father-in-law 'L.'. And this cafe belonged to W.M., who apparently lived in Italy. We'd known him since we were children; he chased us from the cafe when we went to play there. We went to the park and to Derb Sofi, very near to our home. We were like a family: our friends talked to us very kindly, they would

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never hurt us; life was very nice, the market was very close, everything was cheap, the port was nearby, people could go to work there, they bought and sold, others studied, some became judges, others architects…[2]

These representations are so common among displaced people that I find it difficult to reduce them to rehearsals of nostalgia as some scholars do,[3] not least because they are often rehearsed by people who are *still* living in neighbourhoods targeted by demolition and displacement.

I take the example of another Casablanca neighbourhood—Derb Cuba—a small group of around 30 single-storey houses on the shoreline of Casablanca's medina, which was indirectly affected by the building of the Grand Mosque. First started as a 'company town' of the colonial city to house the workers of a French manufacturer, it outlasted the factory and continues to house a group of neighbours who mostly inherited the houses from their parents or grandparents. The neighbourhood now stands between the site of the mosque and the new whitewashed luxury towers of the Marina waterfront development. While its inhabitants shift from neglect to the threat of demolition, they feel like a family in danger: 'The whole neighbourhood is like a family', one of its residents told me. What follows is an excerpt from the transcription of a conversation I had there in 2018 with two residents:

'We wish they could just leave us here. Because there's no place we'd rather be. There is no place like the medina.'

'You can go out at three, at four in the morning, even at five…'.

'You'll find shops, food…'.

'Transportation is near, do you understand?'

'The hospital is also near. The police station, everything, do you understand? Schools, mosques…'

'There is everything you need in the medina. Everything is near.'

'And people have lived here for over thirty years. If they move, they will have to find new neighbours and new people. It's not right, you know what I am saying?'

Life for Derb Cuba's residents was bearable despite their economic impoverishment, because over decades the space had been moulded to their needs: the trope of the family conveys the idea of the neighbourhood holding values that go beyond the simple proximity to other people. 'The residents of the neighbourhood', wrote a French researcher who worked there in the early 2000s, 'developed relationships similar to those that exist within a big family' (Anglade, 2006: 126). These relationships also include care for deviant members such as drunkards: 'If a scandal happens', she continues, 'public rumours would consecrate Derb Cuba as a neighbourhood where residents are unable to regulate exchanges, events, and conflicts' (*ibid*.). The values that are conveyed in this image of the neighbourhood are non-monetary, but may be reflected in economic values. For example, residents can feel that the legitimacy they have created by holding together the space and the relationships for a long time justifies their low rents:

2 Unless otherwise stated, all quotes come from fieldwork interviews by the author in Hay Nassim and Derb Cuba in September 2018.

3 In Italy, for example, sociologist Franco Ferrarotti (1981: 19–20) described as 'nostalgia for the shack' the inexplicable attachment that relocated slum residents expressed for their former neighbourhoods.

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> 'People here inherited their houses from father to father, from grandfather to grandfather. We have grown old here and we had enough space. And we pay rent.'

> 'We don't pay much because we have been living here since 1961. My parents moved here when I was two years old, around 58 years ago.'

> 'People have lived here for over 30 years. If they move, they will have to find themselves new neighbours and new people.'

'Finding new neighbours' may appear a trivial issue, if we don't consider the time and effort it took to transform the community of neighbours into something like a family. The loss of such a thick social fabric is often perceived as experiencing a death (Berry-Chikhaoui, 2012: 127–8), as in Fried's (1966) account of 'grieving for a lost home' in Boston. What residents seem to grieve, however, is not so much the loss of their homes, but the loss of the social relationships they enjoyed through them, thus of the 'big family' that helped them to survive. As Fullilove (2004: 4) puts it for the displacement of African American communities from the 1950s to the 1960s, grief is due to 'the loss of a massive web of connections—a way of being'.

The metaphor of the family also recurred in my work on the Barcelona neighbourhood of Bon Pastor, where I conducted research between 2004 and 2019 (Portelli, 2020). Similarly to Casablanca's medina, the neighbourhood endured decades of institutional neglect and was demolished amid a pervasive territorial stigma that depicted it as derelict, backward and dangerous. Residents, however, self-represented themselves as 'a big family here' (Portelli, 2015: 195–205), and described some of their neighbours as 'almost parents' or 'almost relatives'. The language of friendship constantly shifted to one of familiarity, both before and after the demolitions.[4] The feeling of having enjoyed, or of enjoying, a specific social fabric requires a metaphor that conveys intimate social relationships such as those that develop within a family; this trope expresses a particular type of interaction that develops in neighbourhoods such as Casablanca's medina or Barcelona's Bon Pastor—places neglected by the state and thus compelled to maintain strong bonds of mutual help and respect, or at least non-interference, over decades. These interactions, moreover, are often also expressed as an economic resource, as the woman from the medina explained:

> It was our life, a very simple life, a life better than in Hay Nassim, both economically and socially. A thousand times better. The houses in Hay Nassim are better. But the medina is the most beautiful thing in the world. Its economy is the best. The standard of life for the poor was good; the best economy for the poor was in the medina. They sold the land for millions; now they are building big projects there.

When the authorities enforce a process of demolition, they necessarily overlook this web of connections that is highly meaningful to the people who benefit from it. Sociologist Peter Marris compared the demolitions in Boston's West End with slum clearance in Lagos, acknowledging a 'conflict between incompatible conceptions of the place itself ... The redevelopment authority could not allow itself to see that it was destroying anything of value ... To defend the constituency of its own conception of society, it had to deny any continuity in the experience of those it expropriated' (Marris, 1974: 56).

The profit that developers make by dispossessing neighbours of their living space in order to exploit the rent gap can thus be seen as turning into monetary value,

4 I observed the effects of demolition and relocation in Bon Pastor from 2004 to 2019 and was thus able to compare how the discourse on the transformation of the neighbourhood changed following the demolitions of 2007 (Portelli, 2020).

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and appropriating, the non-commercial but invaluable wealth of social relationships that thrive in many disinvested working-class neighbourhoods, and that also help to guarantee economic survival.

Betrayal by the state: no home means no homeland

In September 2018 I witnessed the mass eviction of the neighbourhood of Douar Wasti, a self-built settlement in Casablanca's northern periphery that housed approximately 1,300 families (Arrif, 2001; Portelli and Lees, 2018; Guarino and Portelli, 2021).5 All of the houses had been evicted overnight, and the bulldozers were still tearing down the last walls when I arrived. Only a small red mosque was left standing in the enormous clearing, while hundreds of people, including children, collected their belongings from the rubble and piled them on the pavement. Ambulances came and went with people who fainted, while policemen and soldiers patrolled the area, pushing people away from where their homes had been. A man climbed to the top of a building screaming he would commit suicide; some said there were snipers targeting them from another building. The area swarmed with terror and panic, like a bushfire in an anthill. Dozens of families had erected makeshift huts on the pavement and intended to spend the night there. A boy displayed a sign written with a black marker: *man lā sakana lah lā waṭana lah* 'Those who have no home have no homeland'. None of the local or international newspapers sent their journalists to the site, nor did they report about it.[6]

The demolition was enforced as part of the national programme Villes sans Bidonvilles (VSB, or Cities without Slums), kickstarted by King Mohammed VI in 2004. Following Navez-Bouchanine's (2003) early insight that resettlement projects in Casablanca prioritized the clearance of working-class neighbourhoods over the improvement of their lives, the contradictions of this programme have been widely analysed from the point of view of the people affected (Zaki, 2007a; Navez-Bouchanine, 2012; Bogaert, 2018; Beier, 2019). VSB formally responded to the World Bank's 2000 'Cities without Slums' directive, but in fact mirrored a more local concern to establish what Bogaert (2018) dubbed 'globalized authoritarianism'. It originated in the securitarian turn set in place after the deadly terrorist attacks of 2003 in the central city, turning the original idea of refurbishing and resettling the inhabitants of 'insalubrious' neighbourhoods *in situ* into a mass demolition project and the relocation of over 800,000 Moroccan families in less than a decade. This overambitious programme received praise from UN-Habitat, despite the evident territorial stigmatization of the *bidonvillois(es)*, who were associated with Islamic terrorism in the midst of the US-led 'war on terror'. No reliable information was ever disclosed on the effectiveness of relocations in fighting terrorism, thus the 'security fix' soon shifted back to a 'social fix' focused on the struggle against poverty and unhealthiness (Zaki, 2007b). Nor was any evidence of improvement in the residents' conditions ever produced: in one report (World Bank/Kingdom of Morocco, 2006) the World Bank acknowledged the total lack of social follow-up to the relocations and the absence of any evaluation, while in another (World Bank/International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2013) it stated that Morocco's Gini coefficient was lower than that of Mali and Chad, and inequality 'stubbornly high'.

Just like the residents of the French bidonvilles of the 1960s, most of the displaced inhabitants of Douar Wasti were descendants of migrants from rural areas who had arrived in the city in previous decades. The long process of overcoming the stigma of their rural origins by reclaiming a place in the city went together with the physical

5 See also this video made with the interviews I collected *in situ*: Mass eviction in Douar Wasti (Ain Sbaa, Casablanca) [WWW document] URL https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1mFe3n-lLE (accessed 30 September 2021).

6 The only journalist who attended was *LeDesk* reporter and activist Omar Radi, who was later persecuted for reporting on land grabbing, corruption and protests in the Rif area. Radi was arrested in 2019 and again in 2020, and has been held in prison ever since. See El Azouzi and Moussaoui (2020) and El Haies (2021).

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refurbishing of the self-built houses erected by their parents and grandparents. As the makeshift settlements of rural migrants turned into small 'villages' (*douar*)—humble, but adequate for urban life—their residents experimented with obtaining the same inclusion into citizenship and 'right to the city' that Castells and Lefebvre first described in France in the 1960s and 1970s (Naciri, 1985; Rachik, 2002; Navez-Bouchanine, 2003). Instead of completing this process of inclusion, however, as the relocations from French bidonvilles did, the Moroccan VSB removal project breached it: residents had no clear information about the compensation they would receive for leaving their houses, and six months before the eviction the relocation site was still not ready and residents were asked to seek provisional accommodation at their own expense. The authorities finally offered a plot of land on which to build one house for every two families—in a semi-rural area called Sidi El-Hajjaj, which was part of a former riverbed and lacked both electricity and water.

The spectre of resettlement 30 km away from Douar Wasti, and the requirement to start building again, struck a collective nerve: people felt pushed back to their families' rural background, interrupting the two parallel processes of becoming urban and becoming citizens. The residents I interviewed described the relocation area as *mashi haḍaria*—'not urban', but also 'not civilized' (as in English, the Arabic word for 'civility' stems from the root of 'city'). While in France relocations after slum clearance were presented as the definitive inclusion of migrants into metropolitan life, for the residents of Douar Wasti to be pushed out of the city meant to be pushed out of the civil community, 'to the desert' (Beier, 2019). The evicted obsessively repeated the term *citizens* in my conversations with them: 'We are no longer citizens'; 'This ID card is useless: we have become refugees'; 'We are no longer Moroccan, because they transfer us to a rural region. We will be like in the camps of Tindouf' (where exiled Saharawi live in Algeria). One of the most important slogans they chanted during their protest paraphrased the 2011 Arab Spring slogan, *Esh-sha'b yurīd isqāt el-niẓām*, 'The people want to get rid of the system', which became *Esh-sha'b yurīd isqāt el-jinsiya*, 'The people want to get rid of the nationality' (Guarino and Portelli, 2021). The state that tore down their houses could no longer be considered their homeland.

'The most important word in our constitution is "dignity"', said one man. 'The King said it and repeats it in his speeches, and we voted for it. But in this case there was no dignity, nothing. They sold us at a very low price. We are not citizens anymore: we have lost our dignity'. After having been a cornerstone of the 2011 protests throughout the Arab world, the term *karama* ('dignity') was included in the opening paragraph of a new Moroccan constitution to signal the beginning of a new alliance between the monarchic state and its citizens; one not based on submission but on the acknowledgment of rights. By invoking *karama*, the people who suffered eviction and demolitions declared a rupture of this alliance. This perception was also confirmed by the fact that one of the first protests that the evicted performed was the attempt to march to the Spanish frontier of Ceuta to request political asylum. The police did not even allow them to leave the neighbourhood, but the protest shows that the demolition was considered sufficient reason to 'get rid of the nationality' and thus to break the social pact that connected them to the state.

It would be important to follow the evolution of this perception in the years after the relocation. Nonetheless, the perception of the demolition of a neighbourhood as a breach of an alliance with the state was also present in the Barcelona neighbourhood of Bon Pastor. As the relocation programme fragmented the community into conflicting groups, wiping out the enormous amount of material and symbolic resources that most families had invested in their neighbourhood, it also shattered the relation with the state, leaving space for an enormous resentment that closely recalled that of Douar Wasti. 'We have been abandoned' said a woman in her 70s; 'they have always put the (rental) prices they wanted, but now they want to rob us. They want to steal our dignity,

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and everything else: they are thieves'.[7] Residents similarly felt that their feelings and perceptions towards the neighbourhood were obliterated by the authorities enforcing the demolitions: 'They walled up our houses as they walled up our words', wrote a young resident (Portelli, 2015: 16, 286).

A more striking parallel to what I observed in Douar Wasti can be found in another Southern European episode of displacement, this time in Italy. Exactly three years after the demolition of Douar Wasti, I attended a demonstration in front of the Italian parliament building, where several hundred residents of illegal houses from the periphery of Naples protested against the threat of demolition that was affecting all their houses.[8] A woman screamed to the police and to the politicians entering the building: 'You stripped us of our dignity!', closely recalling the mention of *karama* in Douar Wasti. The illegal houses had been built as a response to the lack of public housing and planning policies in very deprived areas of Southern Italy,[9] but the authorities that closed an eye to illegal construction (Berdini, 2010) now reclaimed their demolition, plunging thousands of working-class families into despair and a sense of betrayal. 'It's like the Nazi with the Jews! Do you think we are not human beings?', screamed another woman, echoing a sentence I recorded in Douar Wasti: 'They are renovating the zoo, while they evict human beings?' (Guarino and Portelli, 2021: 68). 'You are forcing people to emigrate', said another woman in the Italian protest; and in Casablanca: 'When you push people out in this way, you invite them to emigrate' (*ibid*.).

In Morocco, just like in Italy and Catalonia, people who manage to survive state neglect may feel that they have reclaimed a form of dignity that was denied to them. A house standing despite the threat of demolition, even if illegal, may embody an entitlement to rights that were not granted, an acknowledgment obtained through hard work, the communal care of space, and collective negotiations with the state. Protests against the demolitions respond to the violent imposition by state authorities not only of a planning policy, but also of a narrative which breaks off this negotiation by stigmatizing the neighbourhood and representing it in misleading ways. The obvious response to this lack of acknowledgment is a spectacular lack of acknowledgment of the authority of the state.

Conclusions

With the risk of generalizing specific observations I collected in multiple sites, I believe that during the time that rent gaps grow, people targeted by gentrification manage to survive disinvestment and neglect by elaborating techniques of cohabitation that allow them to cope with the absence of state funding, planning policies and private investments. This acknowledgment should obviously not serve as a justification for disinvestment, red-lining or 'domicide' (Porteous and Smith, 2001) in working-class districts: unequal investment in urban areas is a form of classism and should never be endorsed as a legitimate policy. Nonetheless, it is important to note that when people are 'left to their own devices' (Berner and Phillips, 2005) and have to maintain, sometimes build (or rebuild) their houses and their spaces, they develop careful forms of negotiation around spaces, borders and thresholds, delicate networks of mutual help (or at least non-interference), and temporary or permanent alliances that support work on common resources. These strong interactions may turn into permanent resources in the face of new difficulties: once the neighbourhood is established, people may employ the same networks of mutual help to deal with deviant and anti-social behaviour (including gender violence, racism, drugs and alcohol), to integrate newcomers, to cope with natural hazards, or to resist organized crime taking advantage of institutional neglect.

7 Interview by the author in Barcelona, 12 July 2004.
8 The demonstration took place in Rome on 22 September 2021.
9 Interview by the author in Naples, 12 March 2022.

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Beyond Suttles' 'social order of the slum', this 'paradise built in hell' (Solnit, 2009) helps to reduce harm to members of the community, and may be used for political negotiation or protest.[10] These activities cement relationships and create an ownership of the place that is easily interpreted by locals as a form of self-government (Portelli, 2020). Relations with the state may be considered bearable because they are a product of the collective bargaining that compensates for the power imbalance, not of individual relations that would confirm it. These factors—relations with space, internal relations, relations with the state—conform to specific cultural configurations in which local cultural practices flourish with relatively low institutional interference. The institutional forces that officially govern the place can never acknowledge these lifeforms, however, since it would entail admitting the neglect and disinvestment which are constitutive of the neighbourhood's everyday life. These dynamics are thus invariably misinterpreted by public opinion as signalling a lack of formal organization, deviance, or 'exclusion'.

Hence it is not by chance that the stigmatized spaces reclaimed by gentrification are often particularly interesting for researchers of local cultures or forms of social organization: they host communities that were able to escape state organization, or capitalist appropriation, for a longer time than the rest of the city. Planners and investors systematically deny these social features so as to present these spaces as inherently derelict or conflictive for the sake of legitimating the planned policies. As urban scholars we should instead study how communities left to develop their own dynamics can succeed in managing their environment, their complex social compositions, their gender issues, their social integration. When the forces of capital accumulation and state repression appear, they mostly do so under the guise of gentrification, which exacerbates all the negative social dynamics in order to enforce a revanchist structure of accumulation through dispossession and displacement, thus limiting these communities' freedom for the future. Authoritarianism in urban planning stems from this underlying pattern: similar to medical metaphors for war such as 'surgical strikes', the discourse that legitimates gentrification helps those responsible for inflicting suffering to tolerate it because it allows them to pretend they are pursuing the good of those who suffer. The latter, though, have completely different parameters: residents of the neighbourhoods affected are mostly unable either to envisage the salvation they are offered, or to visualize themselves as being 'out of history'.

I consider it useful to keep calling this process 'gentrification', despite the European origin of the word and those who first observed it. In fact, this term allows us to maintain a class analysis of these urban dynamics, even where the class structure is very different from London in the 1960s when it was first coined. Classism in these urban processes is not necessarily due to the 'gentry' moving into the neighbourhood, but to the fact that the financial capital, rhetoric and policies are owned and exploited by a higher social class. I believe that recent debates about what amount of universalism and particularism we should attribute to each specific process of gentrification or dispossession (Cartier, 2017; Ley and Teo, 2020) risk taking up time and energy we could otherwise devote to a more useful and timely task: accounting for the specific injustice, abuse and suffering that this class-based authoritarian model of urban intervention produces in each context, and developing a counter-narrative that highlights the values, social worlds and urban alternatives that are threatened or destroyed by it. Scholarship has the duty of 'imagining the reversal of the current situation', as Lefebvre put it (cited in Lees *et al.*, 2016: 226). I believe we have enough information to do so.

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10 An ideal example is Barcelona's neighbourhood organizations of the 1930s, which later served as a structure for sending volunteers to the war against Franco (Portelli, 2015).

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