

# Marginal Uncertainties

## Making a Living and Working on the Outskirts of Milan

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**Abstract.** In this article we question the meanings and social practices related to living and working in the Social Housing neighbourhoods of Milan's present-day suburbs. Through the reconstruction of several narratives, we shed light on how uncertainty characterises the professional everyday lives of those social actors who play a particularly significant role in Milan's complex arena of social housing management (social workers; bailiffs; inspectors; "trouble-solvers"). Isolation, neglect and conflict are the main terms used by the social actors, both to describe the ongoing housing precarity of those who are at risk of losing their homes and to frame the current conditions of social housing. These represent crucial interpretative keys for developing a thick understanding of the housing crisis.

**Keywords.** Anthropology; Urban Ethnography; Social Workers; Evictions; Milan.

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### **1. Introduction**

In this article<sup>1</sup> we question the meanings and social practices related to living and working in the ERP<sup>2</sup> neighbourhoods of Milan's present-day

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of a collaborative analysis conducted by the authors. Nevertheless, the sections *Introduction* and *Evicting in the urban margins: work practices of the inspectors for the protection of public assets, bailiffs and trouble-solvers* were written by Giacomo Pozzi. The sections *The housing crisis in the contemporary Italian context*, *Living and working in the urban margins: tenants and social workers of a social housing building in Milan* and *Conclusions* were written by Luca Rimoldi. In 2015, Rimoldi's research project received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013 - MSCA-COFUND) under grant agreement no. 245743 - Post-doctoral programme Fernand Braudel-IFER-FMSH, in collaboration with *Centre Maurice Halbwachs* and this research continues, thanks to a

suburbs<sup>3</sup>. Through a reconstruction of several narratives, we shed light on the uncertainty that characterises the professional everyday lives of those social actors who play a particularly significant role in Milan's complex arena of social housing management.

As we have illustrated elsewhere, the tenants of social housing we interviewed often look back on the past with a gaze permeated by nostalgia, thinking back on the ability to plan for the future they once had outside the walls or gates that now surround their homes [Pozzi and Rimoldi 2017]. In addition, we consider the experiences of individuals tasked with managing everyday life in Milan's outskirts, a field that is defined in public discourse as an emergency. The local government's political actions – especially those related to the welfare system and the governance of poverty more broadly – are guided by the idea of social emergency and housing emergency, which shapes the lives of not only suburban residents but also social workers<sup>4</sup> and the actors we have defined as the «enforcers of eviction orders and forced removals». Indeed, these professional figures are at the centre of the considerations outlined in this article. Although the emergency paradigm thoroughly permeates the sphere of housing and management policies in Milan's outskirts (becoming, in this sense, an emic element of our fieldwork), we believe that it should not be used as an interpretative tool for an in-depth and decentralised anthropological analysis of local contexts. This argument stems from the various critical considerations that emerge from both epistemological and interpretative perspectives. From an epistemological perspective, we believe that local notions (*folk concepts*) are not sufficient to produce adequate conceptual tools for the understanding of a complex context [Waquant 2007]. Folk concepts should be brought into dialogue with broader social dynamics. Moreover, from an interpretative perspective, we argue that the category of emergency as it is articulated in our research contexts fails to convey the structural character of the social and housing problems we have analysed. This deficiency serves to impoverish the complexity of reality and relegate it to the limited yet structuring time-space of emergency [Malighetti 2005].

Both of our ethnographic investigations are based on qualitative interviews, periods of participant observation and an observation of the forms of

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<sup>2</sup> ERP buildings, better known as “social/public housing” [*case popolari*], are those built or renovated using public funds and are the property of the Municipality or, in the case of the Lombardy region, of Aler (*Azienda Lombarda Edilizia Residenziale – Lombard Residential Construction Company*).

<sup>3</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>4</sup> See also Fava 2008 and 2017.

participation we engaged in [Tedlock 1991]. Our aim is to further develop the anthropological understanding of dwelling, understood in the Heideggerian sense [Pozzi 2015], in the margins of the contemporary city of Milan. An analysis of everyday life in these contexts reveals how the practices of people living and working on the outskirts of this city are distinguished by a sense of uncertainty<sup>5</sup> and insecurity. Judith Butler has defined uncertainty as a

process – usually induced and reproduced by governmental and economic institutions that acclimatize populations over time to insecurity and hopelessness [...] – that is built into the institutions of temporary labour, of decimated social services, and of the general attrition of social democracy in favour of entrepreneurial modalities supported by fierce ideologies of individual responsibility and the obligation to maximise one’s own market value as the ultimate aim in life [Butler 2011, 13].

In this broad perspective, uncertainty reveals both the structural character of the phenomena being analysed and the hermeneutic circularity that constructs anthropological knowledge. In fact, the analysis of uncertainty allows the emic (from within the experience of research participants) and etic concepts (from outside their experience) that emerge in research fields to interact [Geertz 1988]. Moreover, the term “precarious” was first used in the 17th century as a legal term to describe the situation in which a tenancy was held by a third party [Vasuedan 2014, 14]. The term describes that which is ‘obtained by entreaty, depending on the favour of another, hence uncertain’ while its Latin etymology *precarius* (from *prex - prayer*) confirms the reference to «a state of insecurity that is not natural but constructed» [Ibid].

After outlining key data regarding the current housing situation in Milan and highlighting some of the policies directed at resolving the so-called “housing crisis”, the first part of the article describes the case of an ERP apartment block situated on the outskirts of Milan by piecing together some of the issues that contribute to creating a sense of uncertainty in various living and working situations. The analysis of these discourses and everyday life shows that marginal urban spaces represent a privileged point of observation. In these narratives, the idea of uncertainty is not limited to the fate of a single individual but rather «extended to the image of a future world, to the way of living in it and to the parameters that define correct and incorrect behaviours» [Bauman 1999, 61].

The second part of the article concentrates instead on describing the working practices of the so-called “enforcers” of eviction and forced

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<sup>5</sup> Necessarily, we refer to different forms of uncertainty in relation to the two social groups considered. In example for the “executing” subjects, precarity is embodied in the ambiguity and in the inaccuracy of the few legal norms that coordinate their professional activities; for the “victims”, uncertainty is related to a wider state of institutional abandon and violence in which they perceive to live in.

removal procedures<sup>6</sup> in contemporary Milan: more specifically, we refer to the inspectors tasked with safeguarding ERP's public assets, bailiffs<sup>7</sup> and "trouble-solvers"<sup>8</sup>, that is, professional figures who work in the third sector and play a role in executing the aforementioned eviction orders. An analysis of the everyday lives of these social actors clearly reveals how the institutional management of these precarious living situations is characterised by extreme uncertainty for the "executing" subjects and "victims" alike, effectively producing an unstable and constantly shifting arena [Malighetti and Molinari 2016].

## **2. The housing crisis in the contemporary Italian context**

We both conducted ethnographic research in the same urban area during the period referred to as "the housing crisis" [*crisi degli alloggi*]. The recent economic crisis has not only caused the real estate market to collapse, it has also made it more difficult for tenants to bear the economic burden of paying rent [Marotta 2015]. The data presented in the last annual report by the Ministry of the Interior confirms that there were 32,249 requests for eviction orders during the year 2015 in Milan alone [Ministry of Interiors 2016]. At the same time, data from the municipality of Milan shows that an increasing number of citizens are applying to be assigned ERP housing. At present, in fact, more than 25,000 families are registered on the waiting lists, causing an already slow and highly bureaucratized<sup>9</sup> housing allocation system to become even more congested [Éupolis Lombardia 2015].

After being assigned a council house, tenants often end up living in old and poorly maintained buildings; in the residents' perception, these material conditions contribute to reinforcing a sense of neglect and social marginality. Moreover, in Milan many different professional figures work on a day-to-day basis in these apartment blocks: besides educators and social workers, in fact, recent changes in the model for managing ERP's assets in Milan have created a role known as "inspectors for the protection of public assets". These professionals are responsible for implementing the new policies that monitor

<sup>6</sup> In the local context, eviction [*sfratto*] is the procedure through which the landlord removes the tenant from rental property, while forced removal [*sgombero*] represents the same process in relation to squatted property (private or public).

<sup>7</sup> In the Italian judicial system, the Bailiff [*ufficiale giudiziario*] is an official, an auxiliary of the judge and public prosecutor, who is in charge of the Office for Notifications, Executions and Complaints (UNEP) and arranges for the execution of the judicial authority's orders and other executive procedures (enforced execution) such as evictions. The bailiff therefore authorizes executive procedures and can call on the police and the public prosecutor's office for assistance.

<sup>8</sup> During the interviews, our interlocutors used the expression "trouble-solver" [in English] to describe their job.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.comune.milano.it/wps/portal/ist/it/servizi/casa> and <https://goo.gl/aD4tdM> (last accessed May 07, 2017).

and seek to curb illegal residential occupations of municipal property [MM 2016].

In this frame of reference, given the structural configuration of housing deprivation [Tosi 1994], eviction orders have a highly significant social impact [Tosi Cambini 2014; Desmond 2016]: while in 2005 there was an eviction for every 515 families residing on national territory, in 2015 the proportion was one to 399. If we analyse the procedures for allocating housing assets in the period between 2005 and 2015, the files from the Ministry of the Interior [2016] indicate that the number of eviction orders served between 2005 and 2007 remained steady (from 45,815 to 43,869); however, between 2008 and 2014 there was a significant increase (+47.8%), followed by a slight decrease in 2015 (-16.6%, compared to 2014). Furthermore, between 2006 and 2014 the number of evictions carried out by bailiffs increased by 62% (from 22,278 to 36,340) before decreasing slightly in 2015 (-10.4%, equal to 32,546 evictions) [Ministry of the Interior 2016].

### **3. *Living and working in the urban margins: tenants and social workers of a social housing building in Milan***

In the late Sixties, the areas around the Bicocca district in the northern outskirts of Milan were earmarked as sites to construct social housing designed to accommodate the families of men and women who worked nearby. The urban marginality characterising these areas could be interpreted as the product of the transformation and decentralisation of local industries; like other peripheral areas, it appears to reflect both geographical stigmatisation [Wacquant 2007] – and the subsequent construction of a stigmatising vocabulary – and a loss of identity among workers [Rimoldi 2011, 2014, 2017a, 2017b]. The nine buildings in which this research was carried out were built in the early Seventies, the era of the *boom* in Italian public housing development and a few years after the huge wave of migration from the south to the north of the country [Fazzi 2008]. In that period, public housing represented a strong dimension of intense growth [Foot 2010]. As Alberto, who has worked for over twenty years for one of the tenants' unions, told me: «Over the following decades, these buildings were occupied by many families who had recently migrated from the south [of Italy], new arrivals who had no home, who were perhaps on the lists for public housing but were not at the top of the lists at that time...» [Alberto, 1952, 01/09/2015].

During the Eighties and Nineties, thanks to two amnesty measures covering illegal occupation (1983 and 1990), most of these occupants were allowed to regularise their status and currently still live in these tenements. In recent years, however, the tenements have become spaces of social marginalisation and social abuse in internal and external relations. In response, both public

and private actors have implemented projects aimed at managing the local area and its inhabitants, thus generating a series of educational and social assistance apparatuses revolving around this space.

Today, in this context, those who enter or work inside these buildings are met with a scenario of progressive impoverishment in which the inhabitants adapt to extremely poor living conditions. They face daily dangers in the form of «rubbish, objects laying around, weapons and drugs» (Arturo, 1977, 29/05/2015). A stigmatising lexicon amplifies the identification between the *waste* accumulating in the courtyard and the *wasted lives* of its inhabitants. This same identification is also incorporated and shared by the tenements' residents. As Manuela (1985), one of the educators who has worked for years on a project involving the tenement's children, told me: «Here there are people who occupy the spaces in the courtyard flagrantly, and people who try to make themselves invisible». In Arturo's words:

The courtyard was seen as an additional place of reclusion even by the condominium dwellers themselves because it is a place of transit for those in the condominium who cared more about their image, were more frightened by what happened, who worked... Who didn't have time to spend all their days, from morning to night, in the courtyard... For those who didn't have a job, the boys acted as lookouts, as sentries, the cellars were a bit like places of sorting and recycling for illegal activities... And some of them were under house arrest [Arturo, 1977, 02/06/2015].

Isolation is a recurring and central issue in daily discourses in the tenement. While the tenants' narratives show that this isolation has enabled illegal activities to become stratified and consolidated [Pozzi and Rimoldi 2017], social workers tell the story from a more multi-faceted viewpoint that justifies their presence and work but also reinforces the idea of the tenement as an isolated, uncertain, precarious and poorly managed world. During a conversation about her relationship with the tenement's managing entity, Aurora, a coordinator of the social intervention projects being carried out in the building, said:

For us, Aler [*Azienda Lombarda Edilizia Residenziale* – Lombard Residential Construction Company – the tenement's managing entity] was a ghost, a very distant entity... It was an entity that we asked to give us a space on several occasions... Which we also met with more than once... For us it is essentially an entity that is disinterested, distant... However, its absence has allowed us to do many things. Where the condominium management is active, we wouldn't have been able to do half of the things we have done... We would have had to ask for permission a thousand times, for a thousand things... And it would have been a presence that would have slowed us down and limited us with a whole series of bureaucratic restrictions on the use of spaces. There, it was a bit of a no man's land [Aurora, 1972, 09/06/2015].

These workers, educators and social custodians also spend part of their days in this or similar contexts. Many conversations we had with them suggest that

there is a widespread sense of alienation from the context in which they work, often described as «crossing the threshold into another world» where their categories of thought are put to the test.

And then the custodians find themselves in more proximate situations: they monitor the homes... Perhaps with the excuse of checking blood pressure... they enter the houses. Meeting someone at the help desk is one thing, going into their home is another... I always say that you meet people using your «five senses» because you see the context, «you smell it...» By now, they recognize the stagnant smell of urine, alcohol, ingrained dirt... I remember them saying that the houses have been untouched for years...you realize that the objects have just been sitting there, maybe it's just dust... The house might be tidy but very dusty, as if it were uninhabited [Alberta, 1976, 06/07/15].

The social workers' narratives – collected during fieldwork – reveal how their professional lives have often been influenced by their direct experiences. In these cases, the general perception is that the architectural structure of Milan's social housing tenements jeopardises relationships between neighbours and, in general, a sense of solidarity in these homes:

Social housing arranged around a central courtyard has made communication easier... But the towers and the apartment buildings are crammed with people... There are people who don't know each other, hundreds of families living there... It's a form of construction that has functioned to fill up [the space]... I was born and raised in the social housing tenements in the South of Milan [...]. It's very important for those who live in social housing to come up with an exit strategy [...]. Like I did, I made a choice. It could have been very easy for me to end up in a drug ring because they've always been around and I have friends that, historically...but also as a child I remember that, at one point, some guys disappeared...they died or were sent to jail... I had the chance... Surely your family can make a difference...But having said that, I didn't have two great parents... They did give me the possibility to realize that perhaps I would've been happy having other experiences as well; having done those, you move on from the choices you've made... [Alberta, 1976, 06/07/15].

As Manuela recounts:

I was raised in the outskirts. My school was in the centre... I mean, it was the last school in Milan, near the bridge of Viale Forlanini that continued and connected with various places in the suburbs, which are not on the outskirts because they are still considered to be in Milan but for where they're positioned, they turn into a social suburb. It's all public housing. When I was a kid I had a boyfriend from Trecca [an ERP area in Forlanini neighbourhood], and I knew the environment of those homes very well... Also because we went to school together. I remember that many of my girlfriends were all pregnant by the end of middle school... The same thing happens in this neighbourhood [referring to the block of flats], there's no difference... [Manuela, 1985, 24/07/2015].

Thus, while the rest of the neighbourhood has lost its identity as a working class neighbourhood by becoming an urban space for advanced tertiary services, some of these units' inhabitants expressed a strong sense of

discomfort in relation to their current housing situation. These buildings have retained such a constant link with squatting that they continue to be known as «the occupied houses» [*le case occupate*] even today, despite the fact that most of the inhabitants have regular rental contracts. The inhabitants refer to the tenements as the «neighbourhood» [*il quartiere*], using a metonym to confirm that they identify the buildings and their courtyard as the only habitable space and stressing the symbolic boundaries delimiting their homes.

Many of the discourses about daily life in the ERP buildings reveal the sense of neglect that the inhabitants and social workers experience, a sensation which is also nurtured by the perception that the entities and institutions responsible for managing these spaces are wholly absent. Alternatively, if we shift our point of view, we see that the professional figures in charge of doing surveillance and protecting these areas maintain a constant, embedded and pervasive presence. In our opinion, the apparent paradox of institutional presence/absence is only an illusion; in reality, it is more common for multiple control apparatuses to emerge when there is a structural deficiency in *taking care* of the area (maintenance, welfare, work). We agree with Wacquant when he states that: «Neoliberal penalty is paradoxical in that it purports to deploy ‘more state’ in the realm of the police, criminal courts and prisons to remedy the generalized rise of objective and subjective insecurity which is itself caused by ‘less state’ on the economic and social front in the leading countries of the First World» (Wacquant 2008, 56). And yet the devices created to govern the precarity of these places end up doing exactly the opposite, as they tend to reproduce and intensify insecurity, generating a loop that reproduces the social and economic vulnerability of the city’s outskirts. Our analysis of the phenomena of eviction and forced removal is thus positioned in this frame of reference.

#### **4. Evicting in the urban margins: work practices of the inspectors for the protection of public assets, bailiffs and trouble-solvers.**

The etymology of *sfratto*, Italian for eviction, seems to express the meaning of forced removal, that is, that the residents of a house which they no longer have the right to inhabit will shortly be forced to leave. In this essentially juridical sense, the bailiff represents the institutional figure in charge of implementing such an action (Art. 480 c.p.c.<sup>10</sup>; Art. 482 c.p.c.; Art. 608 c.p.c.; Art. 609 c.p.c.; Art. 611 c.p.c.). After having observed the work of the inspectors for the protection of ERP assets, we believe that, even though they legally “embody” the authority of the managing entity and not that of governing institutions, they too can be understood as playing a juridical

<sup>10</sup> Code of Civil Procedure [*Codice di Procedura Civile*].



role. The context of Milan also comprises a third figure, tasked with taking part in the execution of eviction orders and forced removals. The hybrid nature of this figure makes it difficult to classify. These are the professionals who work for tertiary entities, foundations and associations and who are being increasingly involved as conflict mediators during the implementation of executive procedures. Adopting the definition given by some of our interlocutors, we might define them as “trouble-solvers”. These subjects are particularly interesting from an interpretative point of view. Their function represents the tension between the public and private spheres, as they are located precisely in the ambiguity of the institutional approach for managing precarious housing. They operate within the *grey area* – to use the words of our interlocutors – to the point of actually reproducing it. These three groups of workers have very different institutional skill sets and roles. However, they participate equally in the complex social and political configuration that generates “homeless” subjects – whether evicted or forcefully removed – in the local context. In view of this dialectic relationship, we have chosen to consider their different behaviours within a single frame of reference.

According to both the dominant juridical perspective (from an operative point of view) and widespread common sense [Herzfeld 1992], these subjects are often described as “mechanical executors”, “cold bureaucrats” and “immoral people”. Some of them, the inspectors and trouble-solvers in particular, also work for private entities that are entrusted with managing “the squatting emergency” on behalf of the municipality. It is thus interesting to explore how one group of social workers constructs their representations of others. For example, Gerardo, a trouble-solver who works for a third sector foundation and participates in the evictions as a conflict mediator, when talking about the inspectors for the protection of ERP assets, states:

The various conflicts between Aler and the Municipality of Milan at a certain point made MM the managing entity of the municipality’s housing. MM creates a team of people administered by a supervisor, a bit like “The Untouchables”. Have you seen the movie? I’ve worked with these people. Individually they are good people. But you work for a private entity. And the law of the market wants you to pursue your aim. So these gentlemen in a more or less arbitrary way, at any rate on the basis of whatever the reasons and considerations of a private entity are, and I don’t want to speak of being right or wrong, doing their job [Gerardo, 1978, 20/06/2016].

Gerardo’s words highlight the ambiguity that characterises his professional conduct during the execution of evictions and forced removals, uncovering the arbitrariness that reigns in this professional setting.

In contrast to general common sense, at a first level of analysis all these professions would seem to be characterised by the construction of a strong professional morality articulated on the basis of differentiated value models. In some cases, their professional ethics are structured according to a strictly

economic model, as Gerardo speculates when speaking of the inspectors. In other cases, their approach is closer to a civil rights protection model, as the inspectors believe, for example, when referring to the job of bailiff. However, we hypothesize that these different moral codes, understood as the result of a professional learning process, tend to produce a convergence among the workers' *habitus* and establish a model for managing people's social lives that is ethical and disciplinary. *Habitus*, which Bourdieu [1980] defines as a structuring structure, is produced through professional behaviours; this production presupposes first of all a certain level of performative agency. We can relate this agentivity to the arbitrariness described by Gerardo. Raimondo, a bailiff who works in the province of Milan, described his daily job as follows:

[my job] is to apply the law, because the law cannot foresee all the different situations. There are not many legal parameters that regulate the bailiff's jobs and so essentially it's you who has to invent the rules on the spot [...]. Let's say that the law alone is not enough to act justly. Because obviously the law cannot predict every situation [...] [Raimondo, 1962, 16/12/2016].

Raimondo's statement invites us to think about how the uncertainty of the contexts where these professional figures operate is socially constructed. Considering his awareness of the dry legal regulations that define the execution of eviction and forced removal orders, or the paradoxes produced by the inconsistency of these regulations, Raimondo believes that enforcers must necessarily operate by means of original and situated performative actions that "invent the rules on the spot". As Gerardo points out, these practices seem to be premised on arbitrariness, structural violence (in Graeber's definition [2016, 54-55]) and the principle of the moral righteousness of their actions as judged from the standpoint of the enforcers themselves.

At the beginning of our research with the inspectors for the protection of public assets, their head of staff, aware of the arbitrariness and violence inherent in this job, felt it necessary to neutralize our point of view as researchers and our analytical perspective. In his exact words, he suggested that we «free ourselves from ideologies and ideological prejudices regarding their work, because a certain authority is necessary for their job to be effective». The boundaries of *necessity* within which this consciousness is constructed neutralize the principle of arbitrariness and limit individual agency to the categorical imperative of economic effectiveness.

As we mentioned above, these critical issues seem to be a product of institutional (municipal, regional and national) policies that tend to give rise to a *grey area* – which leaves ample room for agentivity – around the structural phenomenon of housing insecurity. However, this possibility of exercising agency in everyday life is articulated through a precise social hierarchy that

takes shape within the broader paradigms of emergency and security. In this uncertain arena, the enforcers are undoubtedly in a privileged position compared to the tenants, the evicted and those who have been forcefully removed. Gerardo's words are emblematic of this point:

We enter a context no one wants to work in. Because the police don't jump at the idea of going to a squatted house. We are not over the moon [*Non facciamo salti di gioia*] when going to a squatted house. People working in the processing facilities do not jump for joy [*non fanno salti di gioia*] when there's the need to process [clients]. But the fact is that the only institution that has decided to enter this system, which is a rotten system, is the security department [Gerardo, 1978, 20/06/2016].

From a security, conflict mediation and social services standpoint, these statements invite us to focus on the social workers' moral difficulties («we are not over the moon [*Non facciamo salti di gioia*]») when acting in complex social arenas such as those produced by housing scarcity. Furthermore, it is once again clear that the insecurity of these living and working contexts plays a central role. The institutional neglect characterising these contexts has been counterbalanced by the security entities that have taken over. It is in this sense that the social actors who operate in the field of housing insecurity tend to act arbitrarily. On one hand they seek to fill the gap left by the structural shortage of governmental policies, while on the other they reproduce processes leading to the inequality and criminalization of the precarious inhabitants of Milan's outskirts.

## 5. Conclusions

Judith Butler has argued that performativity develops and takes shape in a dialectic relationship with the perception of insecurity and precarity [Butler 2004]. The ethnographic cases we have described would seem to corroborate this insight. The first case study, conducted in one of the ERP buildings in Milan's outskirts, shows how a social and economic context characterised by widespread vulnerability and a constant perception of uncertainty encourages social workers to re-appropriate a logic of planning and integrate it into their respective working practices. Even though the fact that the appointed entities regularly fail to intervene leaves room for social workers to operate, at the same time their sense of neglect and alienation from their workplace affects how they perceive the meaning of their work in these areas. Moreover, the lack of institutional social interventions in marginal contexts merges with the remarkable changeability of the legal apparatus to contribute to the reproduction of forms of exclusion, criminalization and precarity. The second case study shows how residential evictions and forced removals, framed within the broader *grey area* produced by the lack of structural intervention, become spaces for observing asymmetrical forms of negotiation between

different social actors as well as heterogeneous perspectives of uncertainty and processes of construction of the self. In both of the cases these processes, which we might define as anthropopoietic or, in other words, processes of constructing a specific form of humanity [Remotti 1999] and sociality [Butler 2011 in Vasuvedan 2014, 15], appear to be based, on one hand, on a materially and symbolically authoritarian and violent performative model and, on the other hand, on a model of rethinking their respective life trajectories.

As Francesco Remotti [2016] reminds us, Martin Heidegger held that «dwelling is the essence of man» [1954, 99] while Walter Benjamin [1979] understood the practice of living as the «matrix», the «shell» from which the broader process of social construction of the self arises. Isolation, neglect and conflict are the main terms used by the social actors both to describe the ongoing housing precarity of those who are at risk of losing their homes and to frame the current conditions of social housing. These represent crucial interpretive keys for developing a thick understanding of the housing crisis. We are therefore convinced that urban anthropology must unveil the processuality inherent in the construction of a specific form of knowledge while also taking into account the folk concepts that surround us when carrying out fieldwork research.

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