Nuances, boundaries and subjects of the fear in the city.

Women's experiences in Milan

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Introduction

Fear is a word used to describe a present feeling, a past experience or a foreseen emotion; a condition that is pervasive but unforeseeable (Galimberti, 2006). Often considered one of the core features of contemporary societies (e.g. Beck, 2009; Tuan, 2013), fear can be a valuable tool to thoroughly investigate social phenomena, as it is one of the most primitive and uncontrollable emotions of human beings (Mongardini, 2004), which can take on different forms and dynamics. Although emotions have not been taken into account by sociological thinking for many years, around 40 years ago "such a central dynamic in human behavior, interaction, and social organization" became "central to sociology's mission" (Turner, 2009, p. 340). Emotions are, in fact, constitutive of our individual and collective experience (Turnaturi, 1995), and can be considered as social constructs that emerge or become meaningful in relation to a specific context and that cannot be isolated from the social structures within which they arise (Cerulo, 2018). Thus, they can have a crucial role in the analysis and interpretation of social practices.

If we look at some of our cities, the ways in which private and urban spaces are designs are dramatically affected by emotions and, especially, by fear. This can be noticed in how western democracies have become obsessed with security in the last few decades, but also individual and collective behaviours seem to follow this path likewise. Although social class and ethnicity are still fundamental "ecological" categories (Park, 1936) in this process, fear is a fundamental element deeply intertwined with these categories, hence, it ought to be taken into account at the theoretical and empirical level.

Following this background, at the Department of Communication, Arts and Media "Giampaolo Fabris" of IULM University (Milan, Italy), we conducted a study aimed at better understanding how fear shapes the lived experiences and perceptions of women living in Milan (see Di Fraia, 2019). More specifically, the study focused on how different cognitive and emotional representations of the city enact and constrain the places and the ways in which women experience their daily life around the urban environment. The outcome is an emotionography of the city, that sought to better understand which depiction of the city emerge from a female perspective.

Fear as a tool to understand the city

As every metropolis, Milan is an ensemble of places and bodies that flows within them. Drawing on qualitative interviews and focus groups, this study aimed to relate lived experiences and emotions with physical places, as well as with media images and stories, in order to investigate how the city

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is experienced by women[1]. The result is an *emotionography* of the city, which revealed that fear is a useful tool to better understand urban spaces and to elaborate meaningful interpretations of the ways in which individuals organise their social and personal experiences in urban environments.

Emotional states

Fear is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of ongoing feelings and emotions and as a term it can refers to different emotional states: from worry to phobia, from soft anxiety to panic, and so forth. Indeed, fear emerged from our interviews as a feeling with some nuances and related to different realms of life.

One of the prevalent concepts that women link to fear is *insecurity*. Human beings can feel unsecure even when there are no tangible threats: "fear is the name we give to our uncertainty" (Bauman, 2006, p. 1), which is a constant feature of everyday life in Western societies.

Fear is often expressed also as a *feeling of threat related to something or someone*. A common narrative that emerge, for example, is the fear of walking alone down the street during the night, with no one else around, which is associated with the potential peril of meeting ill-intentioned individuals in the darkness: "darkness is not the cause of danger, but it is the natural habitat of uncertainty - and so of fear" (Bauman, 2006; p. 1). When this emotion gets more intense, participants talk about being scared and feeling the need to instinctively run away, especially when there is someone else that is distantly perceived as a peril.

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Then, another common dimension of fear is uneasiness, such as when a woman passes around a group of men that harass her with remarkable verbal and nonverbal behaviour (catcalling). In general, it emerged that the strength of fear is linked to the fear of strength, as though fear became more powerful when a form of strength is perceived (a man, a group of men, a "herd" of males, etc.), that may potentially violate the vulnerability of a female body.

Boundaries and comfort zones

If fear can surface through different emotional states, it has a crucial role in drawing physical and symbolic boundaries within the city. The municipalities of Milan have different social and urban fabrics, which are divided and reunited by different confines. Specifically, there are two main emotional boundaries that emerge from this study: first, the differences between central upper-class neighbourhoods and suburbs; second, the distinction between day and night. Together with this, there are some inhibited places that recurringly emerge in the narratives regarding Milan. Indeed, women avoid specific places or zones on purpose, in order not to meet someone that is deemed potentially dangerous. This trend is exacerbated especially during the night and it implies the stigmatization of certain neighbourhoods, which are perceived as excessively empty (and therefore with no one that can help) or characterised by the presence of potentially ill-intentioned individuals.

These boundaries tend to divide Milan in accessible and avoidable zones, based on class, gender,

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1 The participants of the study were aged 18-65, thereby covering three age subgroups (18-25, 25-45; 45-60). From November 2018 until January 2019, 9 focus group and 45 interviews were carried out with women from each of the nine municipalities of Milan. To draw an emotionography of the city, at the beginning of the interviews/focus groups, we showed participants a map of the city and we asked them to describe different neighbourhoods from an emotional perspective. Then, we expanded on these feelings with participants and relate their emotions with personal experiences and perceptions.

ethnicity, thereby creating both manifest and invisible limits and boundaries (Mattiucci, 2019). Thus, while the city appears as an infinite and limitless space (Bonomi and Abruzzese, 2001), that never stop growing, by incorporating and devouring all the places around it, within the urban environment physical and symbolic boundaries are continuously re-marked (Lazzarini, 2013). This is a typical feature of contemporary metropolises: the ceaseless flows of goods, capital and people reinforce and relocate boundaries, rather than reducing them. Whether we use the metaphor of the "dual" city (Mollenkopf and Castells, 1991; Borja and Castells, 2013) or of the "fragmented" city (e.g. Cesafsky, 2017), the division between high-income neighbourhoods and areas inhabited by low-qualified and underpaid workers is getting increasingly evident. In this scenario. fear plays a crucial role in how citizens perceive, behave and move within the city boundaries (Amendola, 2013).

This scenario highlights how common spaces can be often perceived as problematic and hostile. In the background there are images of big apartment buildings, boulevards with smoke, post-industrial areas, and then certain stigmatized public transport lines and a city that in many zones seem to become desert after the sunset. Here it is possible to find those "others" - immigrants, homeless people, drug addicts and so forth - on which is put the burden of insecurity. Wacquant (1999) refers to this process as the "criminalization of misery". This idea appears reinforced by media narratives and political discourses (Sbraccia, 2007; Borlini and Memo, 2008; Di Fraia, Risi and Pronzato, 2019), which strengthen the stigmatization of marginalized subjects, framed as potential criminals.

Furthermore, it should be noted that certain areas are easily described as accessible and avoidable even when someone has never been there. Accounts of experiences by friends and acquaintances, but also a myriad of cliches and commonplaces, are the basis through which the stereotypization of certain neighbourhoods is perpetrated, through a sort of mixophobic perspective. Here the Other is often viewed, even without previous encounters, as a potential danger, especially when ethnic and class differences appear evident. The contact with them is systematically avoided and, therefore, also the areas of the city in which is possible to find them. These narratives substantiate the risk to chroni-cize a distinction between "us and them", which reinforce a city based on exclusion and discrimination rather than inclusivity.

Within this scenario, individuals tend to remain in places in which there are people considered similar, while other areas are systematically avoided: citizens develop their own comfort zones, a sort of "city within the city", which is mainly composed by known itineraries and habits, i.e. the spaces seman-tized by everyday life, leisure and working activities.

These strategies may be framed as a typical trend of the late modernity: the continuous use of subjec-tive solutions to systemic, collective and institutional contradictions (Adam, Beck and van Loon, 2000; Beck, 2009). People feel lost and disoriented in an emotional world out of control, that lack coherence and certainty, hence, they attempt to develop reassuring practices that can seemingly protect them. This may also be linked to a perceived lack of efficacy of some institutional actors that ought to guarantee the safety of citizens, such as the police, which are often perceived as lacking or sometimes even improper and unfair in their interventions. Some of our informants claimed that their interventions rarely meet citizens' needs, while there are also accounts of episodes in which improper or violent actions by the police increased fear rather than diminish it.

The presence of the army in streets and squares does not reassure citizens, but it seems instead to highlight how weak the state is now. Indeed, when the state or institutions need to flex its muscles, citizens may interpret that as a sign of unpreparedness against risks and perils. Within this scenario, the state appears not able to protect citizens (let alone the most vulnerable, like women) while it display its (lost) strength by showing a form of force that is traditionally the most brutal and extreme, as the army was originally use to eliminate enemies.

The fear of the power of the state - that in the enlightenment project was considered a cure against individual fears, as well as a symbol that could reinforce social solidarity - today seems to turn into the power of fear. Power is shown by weak states, while people have to cope with fear and systematic incertitude (which, as explained above, can even be framed as the same thing).

A fearful, fragmented city

Our reflection aimed to investigate some of the core dynamics that underlie how women experience urban environments and the role of fear in their perceptions and behaviours. From our empirical research emerged an *emotionography* of a fragmented city, made up of inhibited places (especially by the choice of the women themselves), complex relationships with the *Other*, and crowded areas that are deserted in the night. In this scenario, fear plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and decision-making processes regarding which places are more advisable to frequent and what is possible to do (or not) in certain parts of the city, as well as how and when. Furthermore, problems of coexistence with situations of social unease (such as drug addiction, homelessness, etc.) continuously emerge in filigree.

Although the results draw upon a qualitative sample from Milan, the lived experiences that were analysed are probably not dissimilar from the ones that could have been gathered in other cities or even countries. A feeling of insecurity and uneasiness shapes how women perceive and experience the city. They feel their bodies threatened, their images chased, their freedom undermined. The response to these emotional states is often individualistic and consists mainly in the elaboration of comfort zones and in the avoidance of certain places, that are deemed dangerous and implicitly stigmatized. Indeed, certain locations are avoided as they are considered unsafe, often due to a tangible presence of males with distinctive characteristics - such as a different social class or ethnic group - and to the lack of reference places in which is possible to recognize people that comply with one's everyday life.

All in all, fear has a striking impact on social practices and on how urban environments are experienced and explored. The risk entailed in a systematic avoidance of specific places is the chronicization of discrimination and stigmatization logics, within a city texture that tend to exclude minorities, to hide social issues and that appears difficult to freely live by women.

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