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The Many Lives of *Degrado*: An Introduction

If we only pay attention to the rollout of contemporary spatial products as exemplars of urban neoliberalism, we might miss opportunities to see something else taking place, vulnerable and provisional though it may be (Simone 2016, 151).

Arising from a two-session panel organised at the 2023 Ethnography and Qualitative Research International Conference in Trento, Italy, this special issue is committed to the exploration of *degrado*, an Italian term that stands for urban decay, degradation, or blight, and that is usually opposed to *decoro* [decorum], an aesthetic-juridical dispositif that in the last two decades has migrated from the field of art and morality into that of urban security. While obviously not unique to the Italian context, it is here that both *degrado* and *decoro* have gained a peculiar stance in political discourse, popular culture and, most significantly, in the countless municipal regulations ‘against *degrado*’ and in defence of *decoro* – hence the decision to keep the two terms in the Italian form, when referring to the Italian context.

A number of critical works have recently addressed the politics of *decoro*, deconstructing its ideology, dissecting its policies, denouncing its political economy, and showing the pernicious discriminatory effects it has on urban life at large (Pitch, 2013; Pisanello, 2017; Dal Lago and Giordano, 2018; Ascari, 2019; Bukowski, 2019). While recognising their valuable contribution, this special issue aims to move beyond their approach in at least three ways. First, it focuses more specifically on *degrado* than on *decoro*. Second, it seeks to attend to *degrado* on its own terms, rather than as a negative counterpoint to *decoro*. Third, it complements the semiotic deconstruction and political economy critique of *degrado* with a deeper attention to its affective, excessive, and ‘vibrant’ materialities – that is, to the ethnographical exploration of its *many lives*. To be sure, this does not imply abandoning a critical approach to *degrado*, nor overlooking its complicity with the socio-economic inequalities and securitarian aesthetics of urban neoliberalism. Our main concern is to explore *degrado* without reducing it to a mere epiphenomenon of urban neoliberalism. That is, we intend to investigate whether ‘something else [is] taking place, vulnerable and provisional

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though it may be' (Simone 2016, 151), in the bodies, places and gestures that compose the contemporary urban ecologies of *degrado*.

The challenge has been brilliantly taken up by the five ethnographic contributions composing this issue. Prior to presenting them, this introduction seeks to unpack the notion of *degrado* at the conceptual and historical level. To do so, we begin by dealing more generally with decay and its relation with degradation, heritage and nostalgia on one hand; and with ,entropy, disorder and excess on the other. This deconstruction of the affective and material qualities of decay offers a way to read the emergence of *degrado urbano* as (one of the) historically-situated actualisations of *decay* in the urban context, in the shape of an aesthetic, moral and governmental category. Subsequently, we move to briefly account for the genealogy of the contemporary notion of urban decay by selectively choosing what we see as two key junctures: the 'urban crisis' that accompanied the nineteenth century surfacing of modern urbanisation; and the birth of quality-of-life policing in the late twentieth century through its most emblematic locus, the so-called broken windows theory. Finally, we move to the Italian context, by accounting for the political and juridical centrality recently assumed by the notions of *decoro* and *degrado*, and then reflecting on the challenges of exploring *degrado* ethnographically.

1. The ruins of decay

Degradation and decay refer to a process of decline, a *gradual* descent [from *de-*, indicating a downward movement and *grado*, staircase] or a fall [decay: from *cadere*, to fall]. According to the dictionary, decay indicates a "gradual decline in strength, soundness, or prosperity or in degree of excellence or perfection", or "the process or result of being destroyed by natural causes or by not being cared for (= of decaying)". In these two simple definitions, all the aesthetic and moral aspects of decay are set forth. First, a pre-existent condition of higher perfection, prestige, or vigour, with respect to which a given change is assessed as a loss of value, beauty, or status. Second, a more or less 'natural' *process* of deterioration dependent on ageing, weathering, ruination. Third, a relation between decay and a lack of care or neglect. Hence the moods that tend to accompany decay: a lingering nostalgia for what is no longer, an obstinate attempt to preserve form from the erosion of time, and a moral contempt against whoever is held responsible for degradation.

A precise structure of temporality frames our imagination about decay, namely, the time-image of a linear, unitary, and progressive history with respect to which decay appears as an uncomfortable *memento mori*, the uncanny reminder of the transiency of existence, the inevitability of disintegration, and the limits of progress. Walter Benjamin expressed this vividly in his allegorical interpretation of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, where progress is nothing but a decaying pile of debris the angel of history is unable to avert the gaze from (2005[1940]). Ruins, in fact, have been the epitome of decay since their 19th century 'appearance' as an aesthetic category in which an ideal(ised) past was nostalgically mourned and, at the same time, exorcised *qua* dissolution by means of the symbolic fetishisation of debris *as* ruins, that is, as a heritage that is to be conserved and celebrated (Huysen, 2006, Godrillo, 2014)). The ambivalent relation of Western modernity with ruins is telling of its ambivalent relation with decay, from the obsession of preservation that characterises the conservation paradigm in the field of heritage – i.e. the tendency to value the remains of the past only insofar as they can be physically preserved (Holtorf, 2015; Fairclough, 2009: 158) – to the contemporary tendency to perceive the present through the prism of loss and nostalgia (e.g. Fisher, 2016; Salmose, 2019; Tanner, 2021).

Critical works on ruins, in fact, are a good place to begin thinking about what a critical engagement with decay might entail. While this is a vast field of studies that we have no room to introduce here even briefly, a few examples may be of help for our discussion. First, we may think about Benjamin's (2002[1982], p. 3) use of the ruin as a strategic tool to understand the twisted relation between structures, ideology, temporality, and urban experience. In the *Passagen-Werk*, for instance, Benjamin explored the Parisian arcades as the ruins of the 'preimperial epoch of capitalism', the still standing, allegorical expression of the dreams of an epoch that no longer was². Second, we can mention Ann Stoler's (2008) suggestion to disentangle the ruin from its frozen staticity *qua* object in order to zoom out on the planetary process of ruination, in a sense mirroring the way critical geographers have advocated a shift from the places of urban decay and blight to the wider processes of institutional neglect and neoliberal destruction that are directly responsible for degradation in the first place. Third, it is worth mentioning Gaston Gordillo's Benjamin-inspired suggestion to substitute the 'ruin' with the 'rubble', that is, to disentangle decay from the narcotic effect of historicism and the spatial abstraction of the ruin-as-heritage, in order to think, look, and

bodily engage with the ruin *qua* rubble³. “A major source of [modern] discomfort” – Gordillo writes – “has long been the fact that “rubble” signals, for elite dispositions, the disintegration of recognizable forms” (2014, p. 9). His proposal, in fact, does not only consist in deconstructing the symbolic fetishisation of the ruin *qua* heritage, but also in ethnographically attending to the affective life of the ruin *qua* rubble.

If we are to push the argument further, we could say that this strategic move does not only resignify the ruin as rubble, but also turns the heritage imaginary itself into rubble. Critical deconstruction, after all, is always an activity of demolition, the undoing of a historical construction. Once an imaginary has been deconstructed, however, the debris does not disappear – instead, it becomes a field of exploration, and a promising one at that. Following this intuition, in our context one could look at *degrado* not only as the sign of a decay relative to a given system of values – that is, a symptom of a deterioration that is understood as such with respect to the aesthetic-moral set of principles expressed by *decoro* – but also as what threatens to decompose that very system of value. In other words, as a landscape in which *decoro* can be explored as *already* in ruins. We find an inspiring suggestion on this matter from Tim Edensor’s (2005, p. 846) observation that ruins represent “the value of inarticulacy, for disparate fragments, juxtapositions, traces, involuntary memories, uncanny impressions, and peculiar atmospheres cannot be woven into an eloquent narrative”. Ruins, rubble, or decay at large, then, are constitutively imbued with an excess of affective and sensorial temporalities that contradict the fixed and commodified narratives conveyed by the discourses of heritage or *decoro* alike⁴. The ‘disintegration of forms’ produced by decay and deconstruction generates an affective intensity that eludes the “cultural vocabularies” of “theories of signification that are wedded to structure” (Massumi, 1996, p. 221), and forces bodies into a more sensorial disposition that requires a double strategy: deconstructing the historical-ideological spell within which a given object is locked (Adorno, 1973); and attending to its affective excess via bodily encounter. The strategy we have proposed to develop here, accordingly, has been to rescue *degrado* from its negatively dialectical relation with *decoro*, that is, from its symbolic reduction to a sign of lack, to then explore the multiple forms and potentialities of *degrado* that have been in this way released. This is the challenge

³ For Benjamin, while the symbol that transcends, totalises and unifies, docilely fits dialectical thinking, the allegory offers an antidote against both the ‘narcotic’ of historicism as well as the totalising ambitions of dialectic: it allows to ‘remain[n] focused on the fragmentary’ (Buck-Morss, 1991, p. 160).

⁴ The correspondence between the two terms is certainly not casual, given that decorum has been a key term in heritage discourse, as demonstrated by the genealogy of the Italian term (see below).

the contributions to this Special Issue take up. From the sex workers in the imperial ruins of *Terme di Caracalla*, to the noisy, alcohol-fuelled nightlife of Cagliari and Turin, from Trap music's translocal appropriation of urban blight, to Milan's public transport atmospheres, the authors variously explore what remains of *degrado* – its ruins – once the concept and its relative imaginary have been deconstructed, by attending to its excessive affective powers, by listening to its many lives.

2. The excess of decay

To sum up the last section by defining the gist of our proposition in a sentence, what we are proposing is an affect-materialist upgrading of Benjamin's classic suggestion to explore the urban fabric and its built environment as not the mimetic reflection of historical/structural forces, but as their allegorical expression. In the case of decay, this means seeking to attend to the materiality of its unfolding and, in particular, to its excessive, affective force. This is, after all, what decay keeps signalling, and what makes modernity particularly uncomfortable with it: namely, that bodies keep leaking, overflowing and indeed disintegrating clear forms, and the moral set of values that are built upon them (e.g. Shildrick 1997; Nirta and Pavoni 2021). In other words, decay seems to be gesturing towards the entropic destiny of social orders. Let us pause for a moment to consider this notion.

Coined by Rudolf Clausius after the Greek word *entrophein* (transformation, change), the word entropy is normally assumed to indicate an increase of disorder – and therefore the decay of a pre-existent order. Yet, this interpretation depends on an implicit, far from self-evident presupposition that at some point in time things were more ordered. Once such a presupposition is removed, however, entropy becomes a measure of the inaccuracy of our blurred vision, that is, of our limited capacity to perceive the multifaceted complexity of the real (Rovelli, 2018[2017]). Put otherwise, as Caitlin DeSilvey (2017, p. 10) suggests, “entropy is more accurately defined as a measure of the multiplicity of potential arrangements of matter within a given system”. Likewise, decay is better understood as the process of decomposition and recomposition of different physical, chemical, biological, as well as social processes, each with their own actors and elements, as when the apparent ‘integrity’ of some (social, moral, semiotic, biological etc.) formation is disintegrated, setting its elements free to enter other relationships, and compose novel formations: “biological and ecological concepts of decay are full of activity, exchange, acquisition and redistribution. *Decay is as life-giving as it is life-taking*” (Cairns and Jacobs, 2014, p. 69).

Once the perspective is expanded, then, decay appears as a continuous process of dissipation that is at the same time productive; a rhythm of decomposition and recomposition which is only narrowly constructed *qua* devaluation or involution. Everything does decay, since everything changes: released from the structure of linear temporality, decay becomes a measure of change. Yet, are we not, in this way, ending up equating decay with becoming, to the point of making the former a redundant term? Let us try a partial reply. First, decay is a value-laden, selective interpretation of becoming. Second, such an interpretation is to some extent unavoidable: in every culture the phenomenon of decay is framed, experienced, and expressed in one way or another at the intersection between aesthetics – i.e. what decay looks like – and morality – i.e. the system of values that decay seemingly shows as being eroded. To say that decay is never an innocent phenomenon does not mean that we can do without it altogether. Third, there seems to be a close relation between decay and excess, that is, between decay and the overflowing of form, the proliferation of multiplicities, the deforming vibration of matter. These three elements – the ontological becoming that subtends decay, its framing *as* decay, and the excess that seemingly characterises it – are what concur to compose any specific actualisation of decay – e.g. *degrado* – in a given historical constellation.

Again, we stress that a term like *degrado* must not be understood as a ‘cultural’ construction imposed onto an inert matter. Following the suggestion of Karen Barad, – whose approach Enrico Petrilli develops in his contribution to this issue – discourse, meaning, language, representations and evaluations emerge out of the world’s ongoing mattering, as the result of historical conditions, or apparatuses, which articulate the domains of what can be said, seen or thought. As Barad puts it (2007, p. 152): “the point is not merely that there are important material factors in addition to discursive ones; rather, the issue is the conjoined material-discursive nature of constraints, conditions, and practices”. Translated to our context, this means attending to decay *qua degrado* by looking simultaneously at the imaginary through which it is framed and the materiality through which it is expressed, that is, as a material-discursive assemblage composed by regulations, practices, objects, bodies, behaviours, expectations, affects, and spaces that have crystallised at a certain point in time in the configuration we know as *degrado*. Following this suggestion, and recognising the unstable, productive, and excessive lives of decay, allows us to make a further case for the necessity to

complement the critique of *degrado* with an ethnographic exploration of the ways in which it is actualised, embedded and embodied in the urban fabric.

3. Urban decay

The contemporary notion of urban blight is deeply entangled with the advent of urban modernity and its moral, aesthetic, and scientific expectations. Obviously, the nineteenth-century rise of the idea of progress was bound to provide the concept of decay – that is, the apparent negation or reversion of progress – with great importance. In a sense, in fact, insofar as showing the risks of a possible regression of the optimistic arrow of time, decay justifies the need to act – socially, politically, and technically – for suppressing those degrading tendencies, and the people, objects, spaces, and behaviour that supposedly foster them. This was particularly visible in the turbulent context of the ‘urban crisis’ brought about by the industrial revolution and the consequent mass of people that came to inhabit cities that were utterly unequipped to host them. Not uncoincidentally, it is by this time that novel forms of knowledge and disciplines about the organisation, management and control of (urban) space emerge, fed by novel scientific knowledge concerning the health, logistics, security, and liveability of cities. That generated a socio-technical imaginary *of* urbanisation – that is, an imaginary linked to the techno-political promise of modern urbanisation (cf. Pavoni and Tulumello, 2023; Jasanoff, 2015) – that began to shape urban politics according to an optimistic configuration of scientific progress, infrastructure, and space. At the same time, a new urban bourgeoisie was surfacing, with its set of moral values projected onto an aesthetic of propriety and decorum, first on the domestic interior and then onto the public space and behaviour at large (Sloterdijk, 2013[2005]; Brighenti and Pavoni, 2019). This mix of scientific optimism and moral-aesthetic expectations was bound to clash with the chaotic reality of the late nineteenth-century city, especially for what concerns “the anonymous crowd of the urban poor” which, writes Zygmunt Bauman, “appeared to the bourgeois, and to the agencies of the state to which he looked for protection, as an unruly, obstreperous, rowdy and rebellious mob, which was bound to remain a constant source of danger as long as its conduct was not forced into regular, predictable patterns” (1982, p. 47).

While for the likes of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels the condition of the working class was to be explained by dissecting at the pernicious effect of capitalist industrialisation and urbanisation, for others as diverse as Ildefons Cerdá, Baron Haussmann, Cesare Lombroso, or Gustave Le Bon, the swarming and dirty mass of the urban poor looked like an aberration,

the uncanny rem(a)inder of a primitive trait that needed to be corrected, civilised or *urbanised*. Especially the spaces where the poor lived appeared as the epitome of social degradation, like those *bas-fonds* that Dominique Kalifa (2013) exposes as emblematic of the imaginary of vice, violence and crime through which the urban poor were framed in the political discourse and popular culture alike. While different authors rightly emphasised the extent to which the urban poor appeared as a sort of return of the repressed colonial wilderness, and was framed accordingly (e.g. Ascari 2019), looking at the urban poor in terms of degradation had a further connotation. The otherness of these ‘urban savages’ appeared as the atavistic sign that the civilising progress was always at risk of reverting its direction, of decaying, that is. Here resided their uncanny quality (cf Vidler 1992). What made the urban poor, their spaces, practices and common life so out of place in the bourgeois vision of the modern city, in other words, was not so much their apparent ‘wilderness’, as much as their capacity to exceed that separation between the civilised and the wild on which the narrative of civilisation and urbanisation rested (see Febvre, 1930, Elias, 2000[1939]; Cavalletti, 2005), and that in the colony was more explicitly noticeable, as well as more violently kept in place.

A similitude may be of help to further qualify this aspect, which is crucial to understand the contemporary connotation of urban blight. In the eighteenth century the Scottish botanist and garden designer John Claudius Loudon invited readers to “compare plants with men, consider aboriginal species [i.e. wild plants] as mere savages, and botanical species [i.e. cultivars] as civilised beings” (Mabey, 2012, p. 9). The quote comes from Richard Mabey’s cultural history of weeds which, paraphrasing Mary Douglas, he defines as “a plant in the wrong place”, adding then that “the weeds occur when this tidy compartmentalisation [cultivated/wild] breaks down. The wild gate-crashes our civilised domains, the domesticated escapes and runs riot” (idem, pp. 5-21). Weeds, in other words, do not belong to a wilderness comfortably situated outside of the garden, nor does it dialectically oppose the space of gardening, it more precisely *wrongs* it, from within (cf. Pavoni 2018, pp. 253-269). Useless, parasitic, immoral, but also seemingly ugly, violent, toxic: like weeds, the urban poor seemingly embodied the decay of all the modern ideals of aesthetic, morality, and health. Their rhizomatic proliferation were constant reminders of the ineradicable excess that dislocates modern order (see e.g. Carter, 2002). It is no surprise that weeds, the quintessential expression on an ‘untended’ space, that is, the proof of the chaotic effect that neglect produces, figure prominently in the stigmatising narratives of urban blight: they express

almost emblematically the colonisation of order by a disorderly vegetation that often attracts and conceals as much ‘degraded’ people and practices (see Gandy, 2012, Parisi, 2019; Barchetta, 2021). Fast forward to 1982, and we find the very same imaginary in a vivid vignette of one of the most influential texts in shaping the normative, moral and aesthetic expectations of the contemporary city, Wilson and Kelling’s (1982, p. 31) ‘Broken Windows’:

We suggest that “untended” behavior also leads to the breakdown of community controls. A stable neighborhood of families who care for their homes, mind each other’s children, and confidently frown on unwanted intruders can change, in a few years or even a few months, to an inhospitable and frightening; jungle. A piece of property is abandoned, weeds grow up, a window is smashed ...

4. A thousand broken windows

Although urban decay, blight and degradation, paraphrasing Stephen Graham, “haunt the dreams of urban modernity and development” (2004, p. 170), in the post-industrial neoliberal city, where real estate speculation is usually dependent on the previous de-valorisation of ‘degraded’ areas, the superficial opposition between decay and development appears to conceal a deeper complicity. With a quip, one could say that in the same way as capitalism needs crisis, it also needs decay. In fact, urban decay cannot be fully understood without a political economy lens, with all its implications. In contemporary cities, the fate of a place, once it is translated in the language of economic values, is subjected to capital cycles of investment and disinvestment wherein ‘decay’ often figures as the product of what David Harvey (1975, p. 124) termed capitalism’s “perpetual perishing”⁵. The role of the state in these processes, of course, is far from being neutral. State-supported obsolescence, for instance, – a veritable institutionalised decay – takes an important role in the process of spatialised capital accumulation, sustained on the dialectics between degradation and regeneration of the built environment (see Weber, 2002).

During the 1970s and early 1980s, this process intersected the rise of a novel aesthetic sensibility in criminology. Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, or CPTED (Jeffery, 1971; Crowe and Fennelly, 2013), defensible spaces (Newman 1972), situational

⁵ Quoting Harvey (1975, p. 124), “capital builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time, only to have to destroy it, usually in the course of a crisis, at a subsequent point of time”.

crime prevention (Clarke 1983); broken windows (Wilson and Kelling 1982), are among the most influential approaches to social control that emerged at this juncture. Although each had a slightly different focus, they all shared a common attention to the environmental dimension (cf. Foucault 2010 [2004], p. 260; see Luke, 2016), and were characterized by a post-moral, pragmatic stance that appeared somewhat incompatible with the emphatic moralism of zero tolerance, the war on drugs, and other instances of ‘populist criminology’ that would surface from the 1980s onwards.

At heart, environmental crime prevention models shift their focus from the occurrence of crime to the forms and affordances provided by the ‘environmental’ situation that are assumed to increase the probability that crime will occur. Beneath this pragmatism, however, the moral bases of the modern bourgeois perception of urban space remain in place, albeit translated into a seemingly neutral notion: disorder. The centrality of order in political science (Hobbes), Enlightenment philosophy (Kant), and in classical sociological thought (Durkheim, Parsons) does not need to be highlighted here. What we could stress, however, is the extent to which order itself has offered a way for criminology to translate into the urban space – rather than abandon – the moral and normative bases and biases it had been accumulating for over a century. In this way, problematic questions concerning the discriminating effects of security policies in terms of race, gender, class and so on have been diluted into the seemingly uncontroversial aesthetic consensus concerning the common sense of order (Ascari, 2019, p. 23; Wall 2021). We can refer to such a common sense as the intangible infrastructure of shared norms and expectations that holds the social together (cf. Goffman, 1971). While it tends to disappear into the background, the sense of order is far from being innocent, rather it depends on historical, power-structured relations and expectations. It is on the very presupposition of its self-evidence, however, that Wilson and Kelling built the broken windows theory.

Their short text, which appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* in March 1982, has been criticised and deconstructed countless times. Yet, it is still worth delving in for a moment, given the relevance it played – and continues to play – in explicitly and implicitly feeding contemporary rhetorics and regulations concerning *degrado* and *decoro* in Italy (see Bukowski, 2019). ‘Broken windows’ shows a remarkable capacity to use efficacious, commonsensical vignettes in order to convey a seemingly self-evident equation: disorder breeds crime. It follows that the problem of social control is not crime itself but rather the

risk that the shared belief that things will go as they should – what Anthony Giddens would term, after R.D. Laing, ‘ontological security’ – will decay: “Vandalism can occur anywhere once communal barriers – the sense of mutual regard and the obligations of civility – are lowered by actions that seem to signal that ‘no one cares’.” (Wilson and Kelling, 1982, p. 31).

This is what the visual decay embodied by a broken window expresses: the moral decay of a community that has stopped caring. Aesthetics and morality are deeply entangled in this phenomenological epidemiology that assumes given people, behaviours or objects as having the power to pollute the common atmosphere to the extent of making it unbreathable to anyone – that is, weakening the sense of order and therefore prompting the contagious proliferation of neglect, anxiety, and fear. The problem, therefore, is “not violent people, nor, necessarily, criminals” *per se*, Wilson and Kelling (1982, p. 30) clarify, “but disreputable or obstreperous or unpredictable people: panhandlers, drunks, addicts, rowdy teenagers, prostitutes, loiterers, the mentally disturbed”. These are actants that are able to remove that ever-fragile social patina of mutual assurance, to communicate a breakdown of mutual trust, to insinuate the “inescapable knowledge that the environment [...] is uncontrolled and uncontrollable” (ibid., p. 33)⁶. The bottom line is that people will care, as long as the environment, by aesthetically expressing order, decency, civility, and decorum, will communicate that other people are caring too. As explained elsewhere (Pavoni and Tulumello, 2023), the self-evident nuance of this framework, premised on the seemingly uncontroversial correspondence between disorder, danger, and crime, allows to overcome the above-mentioned, apparent contradiction between environmental crime prevention pragmatism and zero tolerance moralism. As Wilson and Kelling continue, the “wish to ‘decriminalize’ disreputable behavior that ‘harms no one’ – and thus remove the ultimate sanction the police can employ to maintain neighborhood order – is, we think, a mistake” (1982, 35). A single drunk, a vagrant, a piece of graffiti, may perhaps be innocent or innocuous, yet they are already a ripple in the social sea of order, one that, if left unattended, will sooner or later develop into a damaging wave. Just like weeds, disorder proliferates in an unkempt neighbourhood. To just focus on the apparent insignificance of a single episode is

⁶ Nathan Glazer’s quote refers to New York subway graffiti. Prior to the notorious mayorship of Rudolph Giuliani (1994-2001), New York public authorities had already waged a war against graffiti during the eras of John Lindsay (1971-1976) and Ed Koch (1978-1989), in which it was often framed not only as an expression but as the very cause of the decay that the city underwent during the 1970s and 1980 (Huertas, 2015).

short-sighted, since “it fails to take into account the connection between one broken window left untended and a thousand broken windows” (ibid., p. 35).

5. *Decoro urbano*

In the history of the gradual infatuation of Europe, and the rest of the world, with broken windows theory and quality-of-life policing more generally (Wacquant, 1999), the Italian case is particularly interesting, for the peculiar relevance played by the *degrado/decoro* couplet over notions of disorder, danger, anti-social behaviour, and the likes. Perhaps it is not surprising that a country so invested in the discourse of heritage has ended up translating a concept emerging from this very field onto that of urban security. In order to understand this passage, a few words on the latter notion are in order. In the Italian context, the notion of ‘urban security’ [*sicurezza urbana*] has been defined as “the public good that concerns the liveability and the decorum of cities”⁷. As this definition perfectly shows, urban security does not only point to the context of a given security policy (i.e. the city) but, more importantly, it signals a significant expansion into far wider and vaguer dimensions concerning the quality of life in general (cf. Battistelli, 2013). Urban security, in other words, expands the realm of security well beyond a direct concern with violence and crime, to address generic and discretionary notions such as liveability [*vivibilità*] – which has lately become a strategic notion in world city competition through urban liveability indexes – or *decoro* itself.⁸

Decorum, the Latin translation of the Greek τὸ πρέπον (*to prepon*), meaning propriety or appropriateness in the domain of rhetorics, refers to a condition of ‘orderliness’, being appropriate, suited or fitting (in Italian, *addirsi, confarsi*). Decorum, in other words, appears as an empty concept, simply signalling the correspondence of something – a word, a tone, a behaviour – to a given system of values: to be decorous means to con-form to a given order, whatever the order. Since its appearance in Cicero’s *De Oratore*, decorum overflowed the field of rhetoric to gradually refer to a “more abstract awareness of the arbitrary social codes that shape any particular arrangement of propriety” (Stoneman, 2011, 132): rules of conduct, that is, aimed to configure the relation between place and behaviour, signs and situation (Hariman, 1992).

⁷ [*si intende per sicurezza urbana il bene pubblico che afferisce alla vivibilità e al decoro delle città*] (Decree-Law 14/2017)

⁸ The following three paragraphs draw from Pavoni and Tulumello, 2023, ch. 7)

After having belonged for a long time to the fields of art and morality, in Italy *decoro* was legally codified in the 2004 Code of cultural heritage and landscape (*Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio*). While never clearly defined, *decoro* is here presented as a self-evident complement to the ‘appearance’, ‘fruition’ and ‘enjoyment’ of places of interests⁹. *Decoro*, more precisely, seems to refer to the need to protect something more than the tangible dimension of a good or a place, namely its atmosphere, a quality that is consistent with UNESCO’s notion of ‘intangible cultural heritage’, introduced one year before the Code¹⁰. This dimension also sanctions the apparent fragility of *decoro*: if vandalising a monument means physically defacing it, its *decoro* can be compromised also by a single indecorous behaviour, such as someone remaining shirt-less, or eating a packed lunch on the pedestal.

Decoro conserved this ambiguity as it migrated into the realm of urban security, that is, as it became *decoro urbano* [urban decorum]. First in the Decree of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of 5 August 2008, dedicated to ‘public safety and urban security’ [*incolumità pubblica e sicurezza urbana*], and then in the Decree-Law 14/2017, titled ‘urgent measures concerning security in the cities’, *decoro urbano* is presented as a condition of urban life that is supposed to be altered by various behaviours such as unauthorised retail, eating or drinking on public land, “street prostitution or aggressive panhandling”, but that is never clearly defined as such¹¹. *Decoro urbano* appears to address some sort of ‘spiritual dignity’ of the city, one that seems to rest on a shared sense of order, decency, and propriety (Videtta, 2019). This is even clearer in the 2017 Decree, where we find an explicit invitation to pursue policies of “urban, social and cultural regeneration”, something that could appear at odds with a document concerning security regulations.

At the opposite end lies *degrado*, indirectly defined as a general ‘situation’ generated by the ‘degradation [*scadimento*] of urban quality’ due to neglect or ‘carelessness’ [*incuria*] towards – or the occupation of – public buildings. The term has a relatively recent history in Italy, and

⁹ Legislative Decree 42/2004. The law refers to “the appearance, decorum and public fruition [*l’aspetto, il decoro o la pubblica fruizione*]” (art. 49.1) and “the decorum and enjoyment [*il decoro e il godimento*]” (art. 96.1) of a given good.

¹⁰ See the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

¹¹ The 2008 decree refers to ‘those situations that constitute a hindrance to traffic circulation [*pubblica viabilità*] or alter *decoro urbano*, and in particular those [situations concerning] unauthorised retail or occupation of public land’, as well as ‘those behaviours, like street prostitution or aggressive panhandling, that can offend public decency, even for the modalities in which they are manifested, or rather seriously disturb the free use of public spaces’ (art. 2).

it is only since the 1980s that it has begun to be used consistently in public discourse, for instance as a ‘morally loaded label’ to describe the atmosphere of political corruption that followed the Tangentopoli scandal of 1992-1993, or as a racializing category in relation to the visible presence of migrant communities (Dines, 2012; see also Mudu, 2002, Saitta, 2022). In his 1996 book *La Repubblica della Città*, Antonio Bassolino, then mayor of Naples, used the term “to evoke a negative past or the abject elements that obstruct the rehabilitation of Neapolitan identity” (Dines 2012, p. 190), a telling example of what would become a common way of referring to *degrado* as either an obstacle to progress or a sign of its interruption. In the 2017 Decree, *degrado* is only vaguely referred to as a self-explanatory adjective connoting given ‘areas’, ‘sites’, ‘phenomena’, or to refer to “situations of severe neglect and *degrado*”. It is not clear what *degrado* stands for, except that it is implicitly indicated to be the opposite of *decoro*, in both a physical and social sense: if *decoro urbano* refers, as Videtta suggests, to the ‘spiritual dignity’ that the atmosphere of a place exudes, then *degrado* is the sign that such a dignity has somehow been contaminated¹².

Following Furio Jesi’s notion of ‘ideas without words’, Wolf Bukowski (2019, pp. 107-116) argues that *decoro* and *degrado*, just like other concepts such as the Nation or Civilisation, are empty notions that are presented as self-evident beyond any explanation, and which for this reason appear to be particularly fitting for the dominant ideology. More specifically, he continues, the *degrado/decoro* dichotomy is unexplained insofar as it implicitly rests on an unexplainable opposition between the beautiful and the ugly. We agree with the first part of his reasoning: by abstractly referring to a condition of ‘being appropriate to’, *decoro* has a stabilising function vis-à-vis any given social system: to be decorous means to conform. For this very reason, contrary to Videtta who argues that were the ‘problems’ of *decoro* to be resolved (e.g. lack of a clear definition and means for its implementation) it would have the potential to become a “transversal value in urban liveability politics, and a functional tool to the objectives of inclusion and therefore social equality” (2019, p. 64; our translation), we instead believe that *decoro urbano* is a fundamentally conservative legal dispositif that is destined to systematically suppress difference, variation, and deviation from the urban. As such, *decoro* cannot be put to any ‘good use’.

¹² For a curious take on the ‘spirituality of urban decay’ through the case of looking at Detroit urban ruins with a humanist gaze, see Joongsub (2016).

Where we disagree with Bukowski, on the other hand, is on his denial of the possibility to delineate a productive difference between *decoro* and *degrado*. Not only do we believe that this is feasible, but it is also crucial to emphasise both the political value of *degrado* and its use as a category for ethnographic research. *Decoro* is a pristine, immaculate, and immaterial concept that depicts a purely abstract and static state of affairs, one that tautologically coincides with the system of values with respect to which a certain behaviour, person or place is defined as *decorous*, that is, ‘suited to’. *Degradado*, instead, is a material and dynamic process of dissipation, erosion, wearing out, a decomposition that, nevertheless, always generates a recomposition. While the endpoint of *decoro* is a frozen, humanist, and uninhabitable image of conformity, *degrado* is a potentially endless process of deterioration and proliferation that can be – and indeed is – inhabited in many ways, as shown by the weeds, ruins, organic matter, promiscuous practices and human and nonhuman bodies that compose its precarious ecologies.

Degradado, in other words, has as *many lives* as the multiplicity of its actualisations, unfolding beneath and beyond its rigid framing as the mere opposite of *decoro*. Paraphrasing Tolstoy: all decorous places are alike, but each place of *degrado* is degraded in its own way. As the contributions to this issue show, even though *degrado* is evidently dependent on a hegemonic, power-structured discourse where morality, aesthetics and political economy overlap, at the same time its processual, generative and excessive quality potentially lend it to strategies of repurposing and reappropriation for those bodies that are able to handle, manipulate, experiment with, endure, and inhabit its atmosphere.

6. A thousand lives of degrado

The posture of whoever observes *degrado* is already affected by precise narratives, aesthetics and power asymmetries. The journalist writing an article about the city’s insecurity, the member of the city’s anti-*degrado* committee seeking to document the dirtiness, incivility and noise of nightlife, the cop displacing a homeless person from a touristified city centre, the urbanite who walks past a pile of rubbish bags shaking their head: these are all subjects who perceive themselves as *external vis-à-vis degrado*, i.e. not responsible for it, and who will continue to always find it exactly in those places where they know they will find it. The imaginary that has emerged in the last decades, fed by an often-violent political discourse,

sensationalist media coverage, and inflammatory social media pages¹³, and abundant municipal regulations, have generated a simplified aesthetic and moral lens that deeply affects urban experience – a state of affairs that the pandemic has significantly intensified, adding a further, health-related moralisation to the stigmatisation of deviant behaviour (Bukowski, 2020). The pervasiveness of this imaginary is evident in the way it has seemingly permeated every context: a quick search would suffice to reveal a constellation of anti-*degrado* pages and committees spanning from major cities to small provincial towns.

How can we penetrate through these reductive narratives without succumbing to the temptation of explaining *degrado* away via reference to ideological and socioeconomic structures alone? How do we attend to the lives that grow beneath the narratives of *degrado* without romanticising them – an equally problematic reductionism? An ethnography of *degrado* could be a way – the only way, perhaps – to explore *degrado* not only by deconstructing its ideology, but also attending to its materiality via a critically reflexive embodied approach that is also attentive to the visceral reactions *degrado* may trigger, regardless of our ‘critical awareness’ as regards the toxic narrations that frame it¹⁴. To be sure, the exploration of ‘deviant neighbourhoods,’ marginalized and criminalized communities, slums and ghettos has long been a part of the sociological tradition, as evidenced by the early research conducted by the Chicago School of Sociology. Works such as *The Hobo* (Anderson, 1923), *Taxi-Dance Hall* (Cressey, 1932), and *The Gang* (Thrasher, 1927) serve as powerful examples of ethnographies delving into the ‘many lives of *degrado*’ *ante litteram*. Unlike the static and stigmatising portrayals made from the ‘outside’, these studies accurately captured the internal vitality that characterizes these contexts. As chaotic and disorganized as these social worlds may initially appear, each reveals the embodiment of dynamic social processes where many urban worlds meet, and develop their own “universe of discourses” (Park, 1952, p. 201) comprised of unwritten codes, types of slang, local stratification systems, customs, senses of place and distinct moral milieux. The whole ethnographic oeuvre of the Chicago School sought to celebrate the inner meaning of social life, communicating the joy and “zest for life” of those communities (Jackson, 1984, p. 174). While it is important to avoid letting this fascination degenerate into a romanticisation that

¹³ For example, Facebook pages and groups, blogs and websites like ‘Roma fa schifo’, ‘Abusivismo e degrado a Firenze’, ‘Venezia non è Disneyland’, etc.

would be myopically ‘culturalist’ at best¹⁵, it is important not to let the critical gaze suppress a sensibility to this life-giving potential.

What is at stake in an exploration of the many lives of *degrado* is the affective intensity produced by the power of actually existing *degrado* to overflow social norms as well as the stigmatising frames in which it is routinely entrapped. This, in turn, invests the ethnographer with an affective, sensorial and material excess that is neither necessarily positive nor negative, but is powerful nonetheless, and demands attention. A dynamic engagement with *degrado* can prompt the ethnographer to a corporeal encounter with the ecology of human and nonhuman bodies that compose it, synchronised in precarious rhythms of belonging, solidarity, conflict, violence, while traversed by affects such as fear, shame, defiance, resentment, anxiety, as they go about their daily practices of (re)producing, patrolling, enduring or contesting *degrado*. Such an engagement is instrumental to attend to the non-obvious ways in which the narratives and atmospheres of *degrado* frictionally precipitate in the field (cf. Rahola, 2014), and are actually experienced, felt, and lived in and through the strategies, negotiations, appropriations, knowledge, resistance, relations and conflicts that emerge within its thick atmospheres.

Let us qualify this point further. If *decoro* has to do with a *correspondence* between a body, a gesture, a space and a moral-aesthetic category, *degrado* has to do with the undoing of this very category, insofar as it embodies an inherently *queering* potential (cf. Gandy, 2012; Belingardi, Castelli and Olcuire, 2019; Tulumello and Bertoni, 2019). In other words, *degrado* and decay more generally both involve a process of dissipation that is always already a metamorphic proliferation: a becoming-other, becoming-filth, becoming-animal, becoming-savage, becoming-weeds. It has a differential value, therefore, that must be explored in its own right – that is, in its intrinsic potential to become – rather than only with reference to a *decoro* it supposedly deviates from. Brian Massumi (2018, p. 4) recently insisted on the necessity to “revalue value, *beyond normativity* and standard judgment”, by calibrating the longstanding anthropological and political economic investigations on the subject towards an inherently qualitative understanding of value in its inextricable relation with life: “a qualitative life value is something that is *lived for its own sake*; something that is *a value in and for itself, in the unexchangeable “currency” of experience*’, it has to do with

¹⁵ For a critique of the Chicago School in this sense, see Harvey (1973) and Castells (1977)

the singular, evental and differential qualitative-life-in-the-making. It is the quality of living as it unfolds” (p. 25; see also Stiegler, 2013). This suggestion is particularly promising in our context, since the notion of quality of life, as mentioned, has been central in framing the concept of urban security out of which the *degrado/decoro* dichotomy has emerged. It makes perfect sense that if we are to detonate such a binary structure it is the very concept of quality of life that needs to be rethought. What, then, would it mean to revalue *degrado* in this sense?

Avoiding any trivial and pernicious romanticisation, to revalue *degrado*, for both methodological and political purposes, means to disentangle it from its opposition to *decoro*, and therefore from its systematic (de)valuation with respect to that standard. Once this is done, *degrado* is restored to its queering potential as a proliferating becoming that does not only challenge a given set of (decorous) values, but rather questions the very mechanism that anchors evaluation to a given standard. Similar to Brighenti’s discussion of graffiti (2016, pp. 159-160), *degrado* can be said to unleash a “disjunctive synthesis”, in the sense that it is neither fully assimilated by, nor excluded from, processes of urban valorisation, but is rather affected by “impossible (i.e. mutually exclusive) yet simultaneous processes [...] towards expulsion, capture and re-inscription”. Economic and cultural reductionism aside, *degrado*, in its multiple manifestations – in its *many lives* – is far from merely coinciding with loss, and may instead end up being culturally, semiotically, materially, and even economically productive, thereby lending itself to strategies of resignification, re-appropriation and re-configuration. The value of *degrado* would in this sense rest on the brimming potential of its more-than-human ecologies, as a qualitative-life-in-the-making that cannot be *judged* a priori but can only be attended to, ethnographically so.

7. The contributions

The first contribution, by Enrico Petrilli, is an experiment that goes exactly in the direction delineated by the last section. Looking at the geographies of nightlife in Turin, and mobilising Karen Barad’s onto-epistemological methodology, Petrilli ‘returns’ to the fieldnotes from two periods of fieldwork with the aim of diffracting the *decoro/degrado* binarism that, in this case, is replayed through the opposition between *movida* – a Spanish term that originates from the post-Franco atmosphere of political libertarianism and artistic counter-culture, and that in Italy has gradually been appropriated to refer to a particularly

intense and vibrant nightlife – and *malamovida*, a denigratory term that refers to a degraded *movida* and that is also often – and tellingly – substituted by the expression «wild *movida*» [*movida selvaggia*]. Through his ethnographic and auto-ethnographic incursions into Turin's nightlife, Petrilli is able to show the potential of Barad's 'diffracting method' in releasing the materiality of *degrado*, which allow for the emergence of the intense assemblage of noise, abandoned bottles, plastic cups, improvised rapping, occasional fights, binge drinking, bottle flipping, and excited bodies that compose *degrado* as not only the mere, devalued symbol of something else (e.g. lack of values, morality, control, civility, or decency) but as the excessive outcome of space-time-mattering processes that are generated by the relational processes that are intrinsic to nocturnal urban experience.

In the next essay Fabio Bertoni takes us to the provincial context of Cagliari, the regional capital of Sardinia, where we remain focused on *movida/malamovida* binary, and particularly on the way it is experienced by local youth in their late teens. On the one hand, Bertoni's contribution performs a detailed discourse analysis of the numerous, often byzantine municipal ordinances seeking to govern nightlife. On the other, it ethnographically explores local youth, particularly highlighting their complicated relation with the local institutions, media discourse, and the increasingly commodified spaces of nightlife. Bertoni shows how the narratives of *decoro* and *degrado* have also infiltrated the representations, discourses and affects through which young people experience and make sense of the urban. While they are often singled out as agents or signs of *degrado*, in fact, these same people reproduce the latter's representations internally, by singling out and stigmatising instances of *malamovida* among their own peers and the spaces they frequent. As a result, nightlife emerges as a heterogeneous and contradictory field in which *degrado* is endured, reproduced, contested, or repurposed in ways that are not obvious or predictable and that require an ethnographic sensibility to be addressed.

In the following contribution Filippo Borreani and Nicolò Molinari take us to the Trap music scene of Barriera di Milano, a multi-ethnic, socio-economically 'problematic' and highly stigmatised neighbourhood of Turin. Analysing the songs and videos of young trappers and related social media pages, as well as conducting observation in some of their meeting places, Borreani and Molinari show how these subjects tend to appropriate, re-signify and indeed weaponise the denigratory language of *degrado* usually associated with their neighbourhood. By reclaiming *degrado* as a sign of toughness, coolness and street wisdom, local trappers

counteract the territorial stigma attached to their community. While revealing trappers' agency and creativity vis-à-vis the territorial stigma affecting them, the authors show the contradictions this operation entails: social denunciation and proud affirmation of a periphery that at the same time is violent and 'magic', desperately poor and socially and artistically formative – unresolvedly *hala mala*, a Tunisian Arabic term used to indicate both a sweet-and-savoury food and a good-and-bad place or situation. Ultimately, through a sort of trans-local feeling of belonging fostered via digital media, the 'trap imaginary' expressed by their songs extends well beyond the boundaries of northern Turin, connecting Barriera di Milano with a constellation of 'tough' peripheries worldwide to which they proudly feel a sense of belonging.

Next, we move to near-by Milan, and specifically to its public transportation network. It is here that Federico la Bruna and Cecilia Brazioli set out to investigate the atmosphere of *degrado* that emerges from media discourse, personal experiences and the syncopated rhythm of city life, often in contradiction with the imaginary of a smart, green and efficient city that Milan's branding strategy has aggressively crafted over the last decade. On the buses, trams and metro trains comprising Milan's network, *degrado* emerges as a coming together of bodies, spaces, narratives and affects shaped by the frictional encounter between the expectations of comfort and the stress of the contemporary metropolis, syncopated by the rhythmical variations of urban life, and filtered through media- and politics-inflated stigmas. Combining newspaper analysis, interviews and auto-ethnographic reflection, the authors demonstrate how the experience of *degrado* on public transport is shaped by the atmospheres and rhythms accrued through various relational, affective, aesthetic, semiotic and temporal dimensions, that are in turn structured by often hidden power dynamics.

Finally, we end in Rome, where Serena Olcuire explores the fragmented spaces of street sex work, a practice that ambivalently oscillates between invisibility and hypervisibility. Olcuire examines how such activities transgress the moral and normative geography of public space and at the same time generate alternative forms of life that are only reductively captured by oppositional dichotomies. In choosing the spectacular site of the Terme di Caracalla and the stigmatised "favela" of Quarticciolo as her research setting, Olcuire unravels the power dynamics that shape the configuration of space, sex and gender that animate these places, the conflicts and negotiations between residents and sex workers, as well as everything that is

filtered through the *decoro/degrado* dichotomy. Untended vegetation, imperial ruins, non-normative bodies, shady businesses, occupied buildings: these apparently uninhabitable spaces of *degrado* in fact turn out to be generative of relational ecologies of possibility, which play a strategic role for the marginal subjectivities that actually inhabit them, exactly because they possess the very characteristics that would stigmatise them as degraded in the first place. The under-determined places, in other words, harbour the potential to generate “unintentional public spaces” whose *indecorous* quality cannot simply be read as the negative opposite of decorum. On the contrary, Olcuire shows that «inhabiting *degrado*» becomes both a necessity and a strategy through which sex workers reclaim their own right to the city.

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