HOMInG Interview

with **Francesco Chiodelli**

(Università di Torino)

conducted by Enrico Fravega

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I have been working on issues of home and migration, and lastly I focused on migrant housing and homemaking practices in informal settlements. I've spent some time in Borgo Mezzanone and Gran Ghetto di Rignano, which are probably the most populated migrants' informal settlements in Italy, and in other minor centres in the province of Foggia carrying out my ethnographic work. I found your recent reflections very interesting. So, I had something to ask you about informal settlements. The book you co-authored with Sonia Paone in Agostino Petrillo stems from the assumption that slums are not a novel form of dwelling. Yet, the diffusion of informal settlements has now reached a different scale. And it's developing in a completely different context. Could you explain why this dwelling practice is so relevant in contemporary age?

Do you mean in the global North or in the global South?

I meant in the global North.

Let me clarify that the book you mentioned[1] is not about the so-called "global North"; it is on the "global South". Despite this, the phenomenon of slums is currently relevant in the global North as well. But before explaining why it is relevant, there is first point to clarify: what do we mean by *slum?* I think this is crucial. I never use the term "slum". The book you mentioned use the term "slum", but this was not my choice – and I'm not yet convinced that it is a good choice. As you might know the term slum is used by some international organizations, like UN Habitat. But for many scholars this term is problematic for different reasons. For instance, for the history of stigmatization associated to the notion of slums. But also for a matter of "substance": if by "slum" we mean an informal and precarious settlement identified according to the five well-known features

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[1] Paone S., Petrillo A., Chiodelli F. (2018). *Governare l'ingovernabile. Politiche degli slum nel XXI secolo.* ETS, Pisa.

pinpointed by UN-Habitat, the term "slum" does not represent in a comprehensive way the situation of precarious settlements of many countries, including Italy. So just to clarify, are you interested in "slums" or in informal settlements?

Normally I use the term "informal settlements", not "slums", for a lot of reasons. Some of them are about stigmatization, as you were saying. The term "slums" contains a sort of moral judgment on those who are inhabiting these places ...and with something connected to crime, and so on...

You know, the original definitions of slums identified places where alleged "vicious" population was living. So, I agree with you.

I normally use informal settlements in my work. By the way, these terms - slums and informal settlements - are in some way in connection, maybe in a dialectical connection, but somehow they get some reality that is exceeding their true meaning.

But why are they relevant today? Informal settlements are fundamental in order to understand the history of the last 70 years of urban development in Italy. As you might know, what we call in Italy *abusivismo* was originally very similar, at least "aesthetically" speaking, to what now migrant's slums are. This was the case of Rome in the 50s and the 60s. There are some estimations saying that a large part of the current urban fabric of Rome is informal in origin. A popular movie like *Accattone* by Pier Paolo Pasolini is emblematic of the conditions of these informal settlements in Rome – that we did not use to call "slums" even if, practically speaking, they were very similar to what today we call slums with reference to the global South. There are only two "urban things" in Italy that, today, we call slums: first, migrants' low-quality informal settlements; second, Roma camps. And this is a very clear indication of the political and ethical bias we have towards these settlements. By mobilizing the notion of slums we do not identify only a specific object, a specific type of settlement, but we identify simultaneously some groups which we do not consider entitled to citizenship rights. I mean, the crucial difference between Pasolini's *Accattone* and, say, Mustafa living in a migrant slum in Southern Italy is that they have different citizenship rights: Accattone was an Italian citizen (although a poor and marginalized person). Mustafa doesn't have any kind of citizenship right.

My point is that we must consider these kinds of low-quality settlement (that is, Roma camps and migrants' precarious settlements) as part of a larger phenomenon of informal inhabitation in Italy, which comprises also, for instance, the so-called abusivismo (that is, unauthorized housing construction) and informal occupation of public housing units. We need to have a broader understanding of informality. I think we should understand different kinds of precarious and illegal

settlements as variations of a broader phenomenon of informal inhabitation, to recognize that they are structural components of the Italian urban history.

In the same book you provide an in-depth review of housing policies through which political power in different ages has framed the raising of slums in many different parts of the world. Yet, at present, the issue of migrant informal settlements seems, at least in Italy, substantially ignored. In a way, the institutional attitude towards migrants' informal settlements evokes a spatial version of Herzfeld's idea of a politics of indifference. Or, alternatively, when something is done on this issue is always within an emergency framework: only minimal, basic, exceptional interventions. What is your opinion on this? Don't you think that public policies are often also implicit policies?

Thank you for this question. Just to clarify the genesis of my reflection on this issue, I've been working quite a lot on the global South; the chapter you mention[2] is part of these reflections on the global South. Then I started working on a housing informality in the global North. Usually these two streams of research don't overlap. So, my reflection on housing policies in the global South cannot be automatically extended to the global North, even if a few similarities can be identified. In this regard, you can browse a collective paper I have recently published, titled "The production of informal space".[3] In this paper you can find some reflections about policies on housing informality in Italy. From a certain viewpoint, policies for slums in the global South and policies for informal settlements in the global North are not *radically* different, but they apply to radically different phenomena, at least from the viewpoint of their magnitude. The magnitude of urbanization in the global South is so huge that also the most effective public authority would not be able to manage it. Said otherwise, there is a problem which is almost unmanageable. On the contrary, in Italy (but the same applies to the entire global North) the magnitude of informal settlements is completely different. We are speaking of a phenomenon which we could manage. Think of Roma people and migrants living in informal settlements in southern Italy: we are talking about a few people, if compared to the population living in the slum areas of any country of the global South. At the same time, we do not have any "knowledge deficit" like in the case of countries in the global South in the 50s. At that time, the problem of slums was new and unknown from many viewpoints. Nowadays in Italy we know how to deal with informal settlements. In other words, the problem of precarious settlements of migrants and Roma people is something we *can* manage and we *know* how to manage. Against this backdrop, in my opinion, it is quite evident that we are in front of the intentional neglect of these problems. A *politics of neglection* that must be understood within a twofold framework. Firstly, a politics of deliberate neglection which is beneficial for certain

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[2] Chiodelli F. (2018). Le politiche per la casa nella città informale: una rassegna critica. In: Paone S., Petrillo A., Chiodelli F. (Eds). Governare l'ingovernabile. Politiche degli slum nel XXI secolo. ETS Edizioni, Pisa
[3] Chiodelli, F., Coppola, A., Belotti, E., Berruti, G., Marinaro, I. C., Curci, F., & Zanfi, F. (2021). The production of informal space: A critical atlas of housing informalities in Italy between public institutions and political strategies. *Progress in Planning*, *149*, 100495.

political and bureaucratic actors. The long-lasting history of Roma camps in Rome, for example, shows very well this point. Even the recent judicial investigation "Mafia Capitale" show that this neglection is beneficial to local political and bureaucratic actors. Secondly, this neglection must be read within the framework of the long-lasting policy of tolerance towards another form of informality, namely "abusivismo". "Abusivismo" in Italy is the main form of housing informality from a quantitative viewpoint. Dozens of millions of housing units have been regularized in the last 30-40 years, since 1985. If you compare this long-lasting policy of tolerance and legalization of a specific kind of informality (that is, abusivismo) with the policy of enduring repression and neglection of another kind of informality (that is, Roma camps and migrant settlements), it becomes apparent that there is a political rationale behind this differential treatment of two "objects" which are equal (that is, illegal) from a judicial viewpoint. The main difference between these two objects relates to their main agents: Italians (usually middle-class people) in the case of "abusivismo"; poor non-Italian citizens in the case of Roma and migrants' precarious settlements.

Another issue I would like to discuss is about informality. When we speak about informal settlements, we imagine a total lack of connection with infrastructures such as electric powers, sewage system, garbage collection and so on. Still, the sites I've seen and visited in Provincia di Foggia frequently are the output of a more complex pattern of interaction between formal and informal aspects. I mean: the Borgo Mezzanone informal settlement, raising on what previously was a landing strip, has grown just aside of an official reception centre; then its inhabitants have squatted some structures that were abandoned from the same reception centre and, finally the whole informal settlement is drawing electric power from the reception centre. Likewise, Gran Ghetto di Rignano now is composed by a formal part and an informal part because the formal part has been built after a great fire destroying the whole settlement, few years ago. So, institutions placed there a great number of containerized dwelling units with chemical bathrooms, electric power, and so on. Immediately after that, the informal settlements have been rebuilt all around through a quantity of shacks, and shanties, and so on. In short, the conventional idea of informal settlements is misleading. Judging from my research experience, an informal settlement is rather a complex mix of formal and informal dimensions permeating one another. What do you think about this?

I completely agree. Actually, my research is exactly about the entanglement of public and private, of formal and informal processes in the production of informal space. This point is crucial, not only to understand the factual reality of these informal settlements, but also to think of policies. If you understand informality as something completely outside the law and public institutions, you can imagine certain kinds of policies. On the contrary, if you understand informal settlements as the by-product of both formal and informal practices, of grey public action, this more complex and sophisticated picture may help you also from the viewpoint of policies. This is also one of the reasons why I always struggled to find the appropriate term to denote what I work about. I mean, you referred to "informal". Informal is the most spread term, which is not bad – even if, etymologically speaking, it is inaccurate. It means without form. But many informal settlements have very precise structure, they have a form, they are not chaotic as the word "informal" suggests. So, sometimes I opt for the term "illegal". But "illegal" is a problematic as well, because it means

"out of the law". This terminological question is very marginal. But terminological problems are a sort of mirror of the conceptual problem we have. The political and public sphere tend to view informal settlements simply as something out of the law, which is not the case. Think once again to "abusivismo": "abusivismo" cannot be understood outside the framework of amnesty laws and institutional tolerance. "Abusivismo" is not external to public laws and practices. The same applies to the occupation of public housing units in Italy. Working on it together with a colleague, we discovered that, in many cases, the occupation of public housing is, once again, the by-product of a very specific overlap of legal norms and illegal practices.[4] It's an intricate assemblage of legal and illegal aspects. We still have to do a lot of work to disentangle all these different layers of illegality.

In my experience, migrants' informal settlements are spreading all across Europe in many different forms. This trend affects many urban spaces; think, for instance, of large migrants' squats in Rome, Athens (respectively Salaam Palace in Rome and City Plaza in Athens) or, until some years ago, the Ex-MOI in Turin. Yet, it also affects rural spaces, and not only in Italy; take the case of labor exploitation in South Spain, where Lepe recalls what happens in the province of Foggia (Italy). Furthermore, informal settlements affect places along the borders and at the fringes of Europe, either along external borders (for instance Gourougou, close to Melilla) or along internal European borders (such as Ventimiglia or Calais, at least until Brexit). What do you think about this?

I'm not an expert, so I cannot comment, on this. I think you know much more than me on this issue. However, I've been working quite recently on another form of migrant housing informality, which is a sort of lateral aspect of your point. You have been mentioning the most visible forms of migrants' informality – and this is why they are conceived as a "relevant problem" by the public and political opinion. There is a process of visibilisation of these migrants' informal settlements for different political purposes. Even researchers and activists focus a lot on these settlements. However, there are other aspects of migrants' informal inhabitation that are less in the spotlight of public and academic attention: subletting or living in crowded housing units at high cost or using the black market for renting a dwelling space, for instance. These aspects of migrant dwelling are less visible, less under the gaze of researchers, policymakers, and politicians. I don't have data, but I think they are much more relevant than informal settlements from a quantitative viewpoint. There are many invisible informal dwelling practices which still must be investigated.

In *The Planet of Slums* Mike Davis, in order to draw a sort of worldwide history of slums makes explicit reference to colonialism and the rules whereby colonialist European powers and particularly the British excluded the black population from urban centres in the colonies. In essence, they pushed the poor and the black away from the cities; at the margins or beyond. Don't you think what's happening now is something similar although, of course, on a wider scale?

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[4] See: Esposito E., Chiodelli F. (2020) Juggling the formal and the informal: The regulatory environment of the illegal access to public housing in Naples. *Geoforum*, 113: 50-59

I'm a bit sceptical about these global, comprehensive pictures, because contextual differences count a lot. Mike Davies is a wonderful scholar. But I think, that, sometimes, he runs the risk of indirectly promoting oversimplistic generalizations. I appreciate very much his research, but his theory of convergence of different countries towards one single trajectory does not fit with the specificity of many places. This is the case of Italy. I mean, on paper Italy is part of the global North, but it is easy to recognize that it is not the same global North of UK or France. I think that we need careful contextual pictures in order to understand contemporary urbanism. We need analyses such as those proposed by Sonia Arbaci in her recent book[5]. Of course, there is a global tendency to the marginalization of migrants, often with a colonial flavor, but I'm not sure that this process takes the same shape in Italy and, say, in the United states where Mike Davies is based.

Informal settlements seem to be basically defined by a condition of lack. We've seen before: lack of access to drinkable water, lack of sanitation, lack of connection with the sewage system, lack living space, lack of housing standards and so on. Yet, in the case of migrants, informal settlements there is also a condition of lack of citizenship of its inhabitants. How do you think this lack of citizenship affects public policy towards these settlements?

To answer this question, we have to answer a number of other questions, such as: What is the basic difference in public approach between "abusivismo" in the 50s in Italy and the slums today? And why the developing trajectories of these two "urban objects" are so different? That is, why "abusivismo" in *borgate* in Rome was incorporated into the ordinary city while precarious migrants' settlements or Roma camps are still outside? The answer to these questions must be also sought in the different citizenship status of its inhabitants. "Borgatari" were Italians, and, despite being marginalized, they were recognized as part of the local community. Currently, migrants are not Italian citizens and, therefore they are not as politically represented as "borgatari" were. The Italian Communist Party in Rome was their voice, it was the link between *borgatari* and local institutions. Nowadays the situation of migrants is completely different. They lack any political representation at the national level. There are some parties which are somehow sensitive toward the needs of migrants, but no party *fights resolutely* for them, for their rights. There is a problem of political representation for these subaltern subjects; they have a voice, their public representatives are emerging in the public arena, but they are still too weak to obtain crucial reforms. This weakness, obviously, is also related to the fact that they don't have the right to vote in Italy. In a nutshell, migrants' lack of citizenship implies lack of political representation, the lack of influence on the political arena. Moreover, their generalized condition of precarity hampers their chance of political mobilization. Then, we must admit that Italy is a country which is not open to diversity as

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[5] Arbaci, S. (2019). *Paradoxes of segregation: Housing systems, welfare regimes and ethnic residential change in Southern European cities.* John Wiley & Sons.

other European countries are, for several cultural, political and historical reasons. There is a lack of acceptance that migration is a structural and permanent component of our society.

I totally agree. In the interesting paper you co-authored with Senyo Dotsey[6], you write: "'Precarity serves an essential purpose in a disjointed political economy of neoliberal globalization within which the excluded are unsafe and vulnerable — but not superfluous". I think this is a crucial issue because, as you point out, precarity is not regarding only the labour market, but also housing conditions and access to housing. This shows that paradigms of incorporation, of assimilation and also of pluralism are more and more inadequate to explain what is happening in the country. Rather, it seems that the idea of a differential inclusion, or that of the "color line" crossing our society fits much better to the contemporary condition.

I totally agree with you. In Italy, the point is not only that we are still not as ready as other continental European countries to cope with cultural and ethnic pluralism. The problem is that we don't have any explicit institutional approach to ethnic diversity. I mean, we go on with emergency measures; we aren't even able to have a decent law on rights of people who have kids who are born here (at it is exemplified by the recent political debate on *ius soli* and *ius culturae*). We can criticize the French approach to migration, but at least France has an explicit approach; we can criticize the German approach, but they have an approach. What kind of national approach do we have? A messy mix of emergency measures, neglection and fragmented policies at the municipal level.

Following your words, squatting or other uncommon dwelling practices (such as dwelling in the workplace, experiencing some time as homeless, etc.) for migrants have historically been temporary resources to cope with the lack of access to formal housing market. However, in the last decades –due also to the 2008 financial crisis – these dwelling practices have become more and more common for long-time migrants as well. This seems to be another aspect of a widespread crisis of reception, the so-called *crisi dell'accoglienza.* Something that shows its effects not only for newcomers but also for long-settled migrants in Italy.

Once again, I agree. I cannot say if the situation is getting better or worse, because we don't have precise data. However, my perception is that the situation worsened. Before the 2008 financial crisis the situation of migrants in Italy was getting a bit better: there was a process of stabilization of several migrants, which implied also the improvement of their housing conditions, as testified by the increase in the percentage of homeownership among migrants. I'm afraid that the situation worsened not only due to the financial crisis, but, more recently, due to the pandemic crisis. If you think to all the measures promoted by the Italian government to assist the population during the last two years, you see that there are no measures devoted to irregular workers or for people renting on the black market. We are becoming the country of "bonuses" (compensative allowances to face some economic or social disadvantage): we are receiving a non-refundable grant from the national government for almost everything. But obviously, to access this kind of emergency economic

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[6] Dotsey, S., & Chiodelli, F. (2021). Housing precarity: A fourfold epistemological lancet for dissecting the housing conditions of migrants. *City*, *25*(5-6), 720-739.

support you need to be a regular resident or worker. This means that a large part of migrants in Italy did not receive any support from the government to cope with the problems related to the pandemic crisis, for instance in terms of housing precarity and unemployment.

I have just a few more questions. Talking about home – not about housing, but homemaking practices – my ethnographic fieldwork shows that the idea of home is much more related to social aspects, for instance to the presence of national religious ethnic communities, the freedom to gather and spend time as they like to celebrate holidays, have their own food in their own ways and so on. Along these lines, dwelling in informal settlements can be considered in a twofold perspective; on one hand as an accident showing a dramatic condition of social exclusion; on the other, it seems to reverse a stigma by giving birth to a sort of "makeshift citizenship": a temporary condition of inclusion in an upside down world where white people are the exception.

I'm not an expert of micro-scale aspects of dwelling, but what you stress is crucial to understand the reality of several informal settlements. We tend to see them as places characterized only by social exclusion, poverty or violence. This is *often* the case. But not *always* the case. From this viewpoint, we can learn something by looking at research on informal settlements in the global South, where a certain apocalyptic narrative about slums has long been questioned. Many informal settlements in cities of the global South are conceived as ordinary portions of the urban fabric, where paths to inclusion, to improving one's living conditions can be developed. This could apply also to some informal settlements in Italy. Approaching Italian informal settlements through the lens of hope is a good way to turn upside down the ordinary apocalyptic view of these places.

Maybe we agree on the fact that home is a concept that is not merely standing on a micro dimension. Rather, it is a contentious research object depending on a wide range of structural factors, as well as from a multiplicity of aspects and points of view of social actors, which make each site different from the other.

I agree completely.

And home-making practices in migrants' informal settlements can be considered an example of agency that reveals the political dimension of the affective and emotional spheres. I mean, home is something that is normally viewed for its emotional aspects, whereas the possibility to make home in certain precarious conditions is deeply political.

Once again, I share this interpretation. I cannot comment on it, because I do not do research on these issues. But, once again, my superficial perception and also my readings confirm what you found by your fieldwork.