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# The (mis)recognition of diversity in Italy between policy and practice: The case of Milan

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## Abstract

The article analyses the discourses, strategies and daily practices about diversity in Milan, Italy, framing them at different scales: (a) the national model of integration; (b) the city-level debate and policy framework about diversity; (c) the neighbourhood-level initiatives addressing (directly or indirectly) diversity; (d) representations and narratives about diversity among the residents of two neighbourhoods in the city. Drawing on qualitative research conducted between 2013 and 2015 with 33 interviews with key officials and policymakers and 52 interviews with inhabitants of two neighbourhoods in Milan, this work aims at disentangling how multi-scalar representations intertwine and intersect, to what extent the different scales influence each other and with what consequences on the multi-level governance of urban diversity. Considering both the bottom-up and the top-down perspectives, the results will highlight the detachment between people's narratives and representations and the local and national frameworks of discourses and policy practice, especially focusing on the reasons for and consequences of this detachment, and on the role that the meso level of local initiatives has in connecting the macro and the micro levels. The focus on the meso level allows one to underline the weaknesses and potentialities of the urban policy level in fostering the production of an institutional environment that is able to acknowledge and promote diversity.

## Keywords

Diversity, integration policy, Italy, multi-level governance, neighbourhood diversity

## Introduction

Diversification in today's cities has been the focus of recent scholarly interest (Meissner and Vertovec, 2015; Vertovec, 2007). The way in which diversity is

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represented and related to different models, conceptions and modes of integration (Anthias, 2013) is a more contentious topic, with important consequences on urban governance, the spatialization of identities and, consequently, people's daily life experiences. In this article, we argue that even if specific narratives about diversity inform and shape diversity-related policies at both national and local levels, as well as conform to people's attitudes and lifestyles (Meissner, 2016; Marconi and Ostanel, 2016), the way and the extent to which representations of diversity at different scales match and/or intertwine may vary significantly, providing place-specific constraints and opportunities. For instance, there may be significant variations in the ways approaches to diversity incorporation may be mainstreamed, the resources cities and neighbourhoods can rely on and their socio-spatial consequences.

This article, considering the perspectives of both policymakers and residents, analyses the discourses, strategies and daily practices of diversity in Milan, Italy. We will frame them at different scales. From the definition of the (weak) national model of integration (which will be briefly sketched in the next section), we will evaluate city-level debates and policy strategies about urban diversity incorporation adopted by policymakers in Milan, then we will focus on neighbourhood-level initiatives and the discourses informing them. Lastly, we will consider the micro level of the daily practices, narratives and lifestyles of the inhabitants of two neighbourhoods in the city. The aim of the analysis is to disentangle how different levels and the narratives informing policy practice may match and/or influence each other.

Relatedly, we will also focus on the consequences of power relations among different levels. How have official discourses, models and practice about diversity influenced conditions for living together in diversity at the micro level?

On the other hand: how have micro-level processes of diversification – residents' perceptions and representations of diversity – considered and recontextualized (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999) in the political and policy agenda?

Overall, we aim to answer the following research question: what constraints and opportunities for the local incorporation of diversity stem from the intertwining of different narratives and representations at different scales?

The relevant literature shows that the relationship between national models of integration and local diversity initiatives is not straightforward; therefore, scholars have focused on challenges in the multiscalarity of immigration and diversity governance (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017).

Cities have been developing their own "models" and local policies to deal with diversity in an increasingly "self-confident and self-reliant" way (Schiller, 2017: 269), but are informed by discourses, norms and policies at other levels. Nonetheless, numerous research studies (Arapoglou, 2012; Jackson, 2018; Raco, 2018) have shown a mismatch between the actual living experiences of diversity in cities and the official diversity discourses and policies implemented. Generally, micro-level adaptive strategies and positive experiences fostered by familiarity and proximity (Stolle et al., 2008) go hand in hand with conflicts and their resolution efforts (Marzorati and Semprebon, 2016). In contrast, diversity incorporation policies seem to be solely informed by concerns and anxiety about social cohesion and the accommodation of urban diversity (Amin, 2012; Kalandides and Vaiou, 2012; Vaiou and Stratigaki, 2008).

This article aims to provide further evidence to this scholarly debate but with a focus on Milan, Italy, and additional attention on two interrelated, under-debated issues. The first is the role of individual agency and micro-level interactions, which create a living diversity practice and interact with institutional discourses; they are a structure-informing agency that can, at the same time, "bend" the institutional framing through participatory practices, activism and advocates of diversity and neighbourhood mobilizations. In this respect, we are interested in the practical consequences of migrants' agency as urban scale-makers, as theorized by Glick-Schiller and Çaglar (2009). We focus in particular on the experience of diversity used as a means to negotiate power relations and the practices of appropriation and belonging. The second is a related challenge of the increasing complexification of diversity in today's cities, which we describe in terms of hyper-diversity (Tasan-Kok

et al., 2014). This new trend may require novel ways of incorporating diversity in policymaking processes (Phillimore et al., 2017). In this respect, our Italian case study reflects a gap in the literature, particularly the need for evidence-based research by means of a critical analysis of discourses on diversity (Fairclough, 2003). It may provide empirical insight into how multi-scalar representations and discourses about diversity intersect. In particular, we will conduct interviews with policymakers, representatives of third-sector organizations[1] and residents of two diversified neighbourhoods in Milan to understand the differences and commonalities in the structuring of discourses on diversity at different levels, as well as the mutual influences and the effects on actual living conditions. This kind of analysis aims to connect the two levels of structure and agency by way of a recursive analytical movement that bounds the micro-analysis of the text to the macro-analysis of the context and passes through the meso-analysis of the discourse's organization. In this way, even though the article focuses on a specific Italian case, it can be of general interest to draw lessons about how representations and discourses can be recontextualized at different levels in order to challenge or reproduce existing power relations in today's hyper-diversified cities.

Our results show a gap between policy frames and neighbourhood life experiences. The characteristics, reasons and effects of this gap are discussed here, where a general misrecognition of diversity among government actors, the disconnection between them and the level of the lived experience, which makes it difficult to negotiate participation and voice in defining a sense of belonging, emerges.

## Framing diversity at the national level: Discourses, policy and the Italian model of integration

As numerous scholars have pointed out (Barberis et al., 2017; Calavita, 2005; Colombo, 2017), Italy's national political debates and agendas have usually framed discourses about diversity (and planned policies and allocated resources) in connection with immigration and with the construction of supposed "emergencies" (from Roma camps to refugees to

neighbourhood crime). Therefore, to describe the national frame of diversity in Italy, it is important to briefly introduce this issue. We will do so in the next sections by presenting data, an institutional framework and general discourses about migration, which will all be drawn from a literature review, analysis of policies documents and interviews with key actors.

### Diversity and migration in Italy

In 2017, Italy accommodated almost six million foreigners (Cesareo, 2018). Immigration to Italy is mostly categorized as labour migration, with features that would classify Italy's situation as a "Mediterranean" model (King, 2000). At the same time, Italy is an important Mediterranean entry door for refugees and asylum seekers. These two different flows overlay and blur in public and political debates, setting the tone of emergency and security-based responses.

The institutional counterpart of this Mediterranean model of migration is a late and undefined immigration policy and an even later and more blurred immigrant policy that is unplanned and has a poor legal framework (Peixoto et al., 2012). Public discourses towards immigration are characterized by divisive politicization, with strongly anti-immigrant tones that are usually associated with media hype on undocumented migration and/or crime. These discourses have the power to set a "control agenda" due to their influence on law enforcement and actual practices regarding diversity and immigration (Grillo and Pratt, 2002). Italy's immigration policy has wavered between security concerns, humanitarian claims (expressed by third-sector organizations, the Catholic Church and trade unions) and functionalist perspectives (carried on by social and political pro-business actors) (Zincone, 2011).

Although we cannot talk about a proper Italian model of integration, we can consider a "mode" that is consistent with Italy's political culture and welfare-state-making; is defined as indirect, implicit and subaltern (Caponio and Graziano, 2011); and is developed more by chance than by design, with an accumulation of local practices, inconsistent national measures, accelerations due to European Union (EU) influences and court judgements.
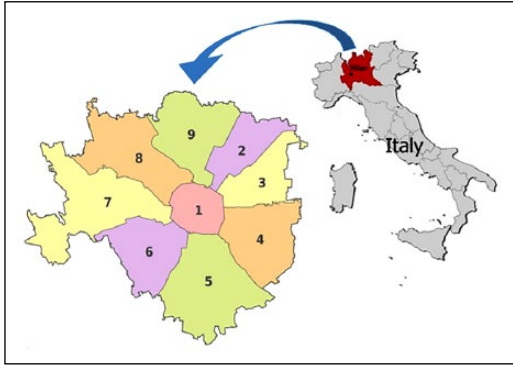
**Figure 1.** Italy and Milan divided into municipalities.

Such a weak national regulation means that the hot potato is often in the hands of local authorities (Campomori and Caponio, 2013). The local level is the arena where most of the participation and integration policies and practices take place, although with a poorly coordinated but effective multi-level governance.

Nevertheless, a somewhat consistent policy puzzle has been incrementally created. It manifests as a widespread refusal of traditional European models of integration, whether assimilationism or multiculturalism, in favour of an assumed intercultural middle (Barberis, 2018).

This model is said to imply both a weak assimilation (e.g. lacking policies to contrast inequality and support inclusion) and multicultural policy (lack of minority recognition policies) (see Bertolani and Perocco, 2013). In this respect, if Italy can no longer be considered a latecomer in migration policies, it is still a laggard in defining a clear diversity incorporation policy. The local level plays a relevant role in making up the actual national policy line. However, this comes more de facto than according to a precise strategy, as we will see in the next section.

## Diversity and migration in Milan: Research context and structure

Milan, which is in the north of Italy (see figure 1), currently counts more than 1.3 million inhabitants.[2] In the Italian context, its population is highly diversified in terms of origin; 19.2% of its residents are non-Italian citizens, and this share must be increased with a further 3.5% if we also consider both undocumented stayers and regular stayers not registered as residents (Menonna and Blangiardo, 2014). The 10 most common countries of origin (Philippines, Egypt, China, Peru, Sri Lanka, Romania, Ecuador, Bangladesh, Ukraine and Morocco) total 75% of all foreign residents in the municipality (Istat, 2017). One out of five is a minor, in more than 60% of cases born in Italy. Migration-related diversity is increasingly invisible in these data due to the growing naturalization rate. In the last two years alone, some 13,000 foreigners received Italian citizenship in Milan. However, migration is not the only source of diversity in Milan. With household compositions and socio-economic conditions changing quickly, the familist boundaries of the welfare state are challenged and the city becomes more unequal. Indeed, single-person households constitute more than 45% of the total population, while traditional nuclear households (i.e. married couple with at least one minor child) make up just 12% (Comune di Milano, 2018a). The crisis has strongly hit the unemployment rate, which has grown from 3.8% in 2007 to 8.4% in 2015 (in 2016 it decreased to 7.5%) (Comune di Milano, 2019). Meanwhile, Milan is the area in Italy with the highest average income due to a specific concentration of high-income groups compared to other Italian cities and due to its role in an advanced tertiary economy − 40% of wealth is owned by 10% of the population, making up one of the highest Gini indices among the largest Italian cities (D'Ovidio, 2009).

The research focuses on the northern area of Milan, which administratively coincides with *municipi* [municipalities] 2 and 9. This area houses more than 345,000 residents (Comune di Milano, 2018b) and is considered to be one of the most diversified areas in the city. Firstly, foreign residents account for 26.2% of the inhabitants, including some concentrated areas. For example, among the 37,000 inhabitants of the Via Padova neighbourhood (a focal area in our research), non-Italian citizens make up 34% and as much as 48.7% among those aged under 18 (Comune di Milano, 2018c). Via Padova is considered to be Milan's multi-ethnic neighbourhood par excellence (Verga, 2016). Even households, age and income groups are very mixed in this area. Generally, a young-to-adult immigrant population lives side by

side with older Italian adults; people aged 65+ constitute 21% of the population in the area, while minors represent some 15%. Also, 45.6% of households are single-person households in this area (Comune di Milano, 2018a).

The fieldwork was conducted between November 2013 and March 2015. Firstly, 33 key informants, which included policymakers, officials and representatives of grassroots associations operating in the case study area, were interviewed. The aim of those interviews was to define the context of local policies and discourses about diversity that inform the governance of diversity in Milan through the viewpoints of local government actors in the frame of the national arena and grassroots associations. Then, 52 inhabitants from the Via Padova area were interviewed with the aim to analyse how diversity is perceived. These interviewees were purposefully selected to correspond to the most diverse profiles of people, given by the intersection of different categories of diversity, such as migrant background, social class, age and gender.

By integrating the two parts of the fieldwork, it has been possible to examine the way in which representations of diversity at different scales relate to each other, the kind of institutional environment this relation creates and the socio-spatial implications that the latter has on the definition of narratives and representations of spatialization of diversity in specific neighbourhoods.

## Representations of diversity at the city and neighbourhood levels: Political discourse and socio-spatial implications of policy practice

### *Representation of diversity in political discourse at the city level*

The lack of a wide-scope, cross-sectoral, general and strategic discourse on diversity and its promotion in the Italian policy and public agenda is mirrored at the local level, where diversity as such is not thematized in relevant local policy documents nor in interviews with key informants. During our interviews, key officials and policymakers struggled to express an explicit, articulated and reflexive discourse on diversity. Most of them presented projects and specific cases rather than defining a broad set of priorities in diversity management.

Diversity was a heated issue in recent electoral campaigns and was given significant attention in the electoral programme of the coalition ruling the city between June 2011 and June 2016. The heated political and media debates during the campaign were often connected to urban policy or, more specifically, immigration (e.g. the management of high concentration areas), religion (e.g. the building and location of a mosque) and ethnic diversity (e.g. the Roma encampments).

No strategic document regarding diversity followed the elections, but in some fields, the change in policy orientation appears to be significant. This applies especially to the more contentious issues along the left–right cleavage, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and immigrant rights being good cases in point. In this respect, more politically committed interviewees underlined a radical shift in the approach to diversity:

> *In the new local government, diversity is not contrasted with normalcy. The multiplicity has a richness that plays a part in belonging to the urban community.* (Respondent A2_1)

The absence of a strategic document and guidelines on diversity issues partly explains the plurality of fragmented discourses concerning specific groups and categories (e.g. migrants and their offspring, Roma, the LGBT community, young people, women) that our interviewees reported.

Therefore, the local strategy does not emerge via a strategic plan but instead is progressively constructed via specific initiatives addressing diversity within a poorly explicit general frame. Such a weak strategy is also matched with limited prioritization and resources.

The lack of a general strategy does not hinder the rise of somewhat consistent and common narratives about diversity. In particular, policymakers often addressed diversity more as a problem than as a resource. Diversity was mainly seen as a negative issue "to ride over" (as a key official in the City Labour Department put it), although the nuances of

the discourse changed according to the type of diversity they referred to. There was an implicit tendency to consider immigration as a pivotal (or even unique), as well as the most problematic, aspect of urban diversity.

> *Diversity is a problem beyond certain thresholds. There's an effort to look at immigration as an opportunity, but it causes problems that cannot be kept hidden.* (Key official_1)

Therefore, most of the policy actions implemented by the local government move towards the containment of negative effects of living together in (ethnic and cultural) diversity.

## Representations of diversity in neighbourhood policies

Different nuances were apparent in the interviewees' perceptions of neighbourhood diversity in Milan. Diversity was considered a challenge with both risks and opportunities. Inequality associated with the concentration of disadvantaged groups in some districts, considered as potential ghettoes, was maintained to be the risky side of diversity. Opportunities are instead related to the acknowledgement of the role that minorities can play in fostering social cohesion and the local economy in mixed neighbourhoods. In this respect, (social) housing policies and urban regeneration are emblematic examples we will focus on here. Social housing initiatives are implemented by non-profit actors relying on private and public funding. They support the social mix of different urban populations and the promotion of encounters and interactions through community development activities. While their aim is to foster cohesion in multicultural buildings and neighbourhoods (Marzorati and Semprebon, 2015), the risk that they could favour inequality rather than spatial justice has been highlighted (Bricocoli and Cucca, 2016).

Nonetheless, housing policy has a more diversity-aware vision than other policy areas in Milan. The main focus in this policy area is to avoid the concentration of disadvantaged groups in "ghettoes". Diversity was not primarily seen as an asset in social housing or neighbourhood renewal initiatives. Rather,

it was seen as an element to be controlled and normalized. In this sense, the attention paid to diversity is "reactive" and policies target its potentially negative effects. Positive aspects of diversity simply refer to specific groups that the city should attract. A quote from a key official in the municipal housing office is a good example in this respect.

> *In the management of public housing, the focus is on diversity as a problem: paying attention to ghettoization risks, answering the demand of different targets. When we think about the public building stock at large and the maximization of its value, we think about another kind of diversity: creative, cultural, social (even antagonist) groups, and the non-profit sector.* (Key official_1)

Relatedly, many interviewees maintained that neighbourhood diversity – when matched with the ethnicization of public space – produces actual social problems and becomes a veritable issue. In this respect, our key informants predominantly and implicitly supported an integrationist approach in which diversity is accepted but not encouraged. Pluralism should be tempered by attention to social cohesion, and social cohesion usually and implicitly refers to the worries of the natives and to the need to blend minorities' specificities by mixing with the majority (although not to the point of supporting assimilation, which is consistent with the intercultural mid-way mentioned above). In our interviewees' opinions, ethnicization is strongly associated with ghettoization, which is intended as a socially and spatially separated diversity, while *mixité* and the promotion of dialogue are supported. Social cohesion, likewise diversity, is not (yet) a key policy concept in Milan[3] as it is in other European cities (Raco et al., 2017). Rather, it has been evoked to negatively recontextualize the experience of diversity through narratives referring to the disadvantage that the concentration of migrants may represent: the idea of the ghetto, the ethnicization of public space and so on.

Although Milan has a low territorial segregation of poverty and minorities (Lichter et al., 2016), some micro-concentrations, such as Roma encampments and individual blocks where migrants or poor people concentrate, were a major

policy concern for our interviewees. Also, security issues and the blame on immigrants for self-segregation emerged as associated discourses. These can be applied to cases such as the one of Sarpi-Canonica, a historical middle-class neighbourhood defined as the Milanese Chinatown, even if it does not have the characteristics of Chinatowns in other world cities. Its resident population is in fact mostly Italian, while the Chinese presence is mainly visible in the neighbourhood's commercial activities (Hatziprokopiou and Montagna, 2012). However, a few years ago, the conflicts between Chinese retailers and Italian residents made the Chinese presence much more visible in the public discourse. This hostility climaxed in 2007 with the outbreak of an urban revolt. In this neighbourhood, some interviewees considered the "bi-national" representation of a middle-class neighbourhood to be even more risky than the multi-ethnic encounters in a poorer area, such as the above-mentioned Via Padova. In this respect, the interviewed policymakers seemed to associate their "fear of the ghetto" with the visibility of diversity rather than inequality. In discussing Milan's "Chinatown", which is not a poor, dilapidated neighbourhood, some of them maintained:

> *A tribal drift is always dangerous […] Urban spaces must be social spaces.* (Policymaker_1)

> *The problem with Via Sarpi is that it is not diversified enough. […] We may see two options: one is the ethnicization, creating a Chinatown. But this option was not appreciated by the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, neither Italian nor Chinese. […] The other one is about diversification, working on the Italian and Chinese commercial offer. […] It's a chance to create a plural and interesting – but not poor – area, which is quite rare in Milan.* (Key official_2)

Interestingly enough, as Koopmans et al. (2005) have already noted is common throughout Europe, claims from minority members tend to align with dominant institutional frames. Minority key informants showed that the integrationist discourse is quite pervading, even though it may involve the implicit subordination of minorities.

> *Emphasizing the ethnic features of a neighbourhood is risky. Our bet for the future is to avoid spaces that belong to individual communities but rather mobile and intertwined communities.* (Policymaker_1)

> *The Italian solution is not the multiculturalism in the Anglo-Saxon way. That would allow a Chinatown. The Italian intercultural way does not love ghettoization; it's more about interaction in diversity than about a multi that doesn't crossbreed.* (Key official_2)

So, even for actors praising the recognition of minorities, the visibility of diversity should be subordinated to social cohesion. An "accommodation" can take place if diversity is limited or if there is evidence of social mixing. Therefore, most of our interviewees maintained that problems in diversity incorporation in Italy are not due to a lack of recognition of diversity but rather to a lack of attention to social cohesion. This idea sounds consistent with the Italian integrationist/intercultural model discussed above.

Interviewees' representations of Via Padova introduced another dimension to the "ghetto" discourse in Milan. That is, even when the focus on this much poorer and diversified neighbourhood came from progressive stances, the integrationist discourse against ghettoization was framed in a culturalist argument and did not consider structural inequalities.

The discourse on the risk of ghettoization in Via Padova refers to the accumulation of disadvantages, the lack of cohesion, urban insecurity and limited public action to support diversity. In Via Padova…

> *…besides few positive cases […] people tolerate each other with suspicion in an atmosphere of social dangerousness [while in Via Sarpi] Hanging around is pleasant. It's a valuable area, becoming more valuable […]. The Chinese living there seem attached to the context; money and investments play a role.* (Third-sector organization representative_1)

On the one hand, the encounter of diversity is considered easier in wealthy areas, but, on the other hand, the visibility of a specific cultural diversity is seen to jeopardize social cohesion, perhaps even more than ethnicized inequality.

## Neighbourhood diversity and grassroots associations

Third-sector organizations play a key role in Milan, and in the governance of diversity, too. In migration issues, they are a relevant interface between institutions and the daily experiences of people (Ambrosini, 2013). In fact, not only do they directly interact with people in the neighbourhood, but they also respond to an institutional logic, being somehow tied to the (limited) public funding at a different governance level within a logic of "passive subsidiarity" (Kazepov, 2010). Analysing their role through the scrutiny of their localized initiatives and practices in our case area is therefore illuminating for grasping the nuances of the discourse and processes of the (mis)recognition of diversity in Milan.

Interviews with third-sector organization representatives focused on the representations of diversity that inform their initiatives in our case study area. For the sake of simplicity and space, we refer here to two examples: the City of Sun – Friends of the Trotter Park (henceforth CSFTP)[4] and the social-mix housing project viaPadova36.[5]

Interviewed third-sector actors in these projects explicitly addressed the issue of social cohesion. Their grounding idea was that social contact in diverse contexts is a basic condition for achieving cohesion. To reach this goal, action must be taken.

Despite paying attention to immigration-related diversity, these initiatives try to involve as many diverse groups and categories as possible to make them encounter and interact with each other. Most of the implemented initiatives are based on the networks of small- and medium-sized collaborating organizations, with limited support from the public sector. This is one of the weaknesses of these kinds of interventions. Lacking solid public support, their outcome is fragmented and discontinuous, with a prevalent micro-perspective. At the same time, this micro-level activism can be considered a strength because it allows people's needs to be met more effectively thanks to the proximity between initiative leaders and target residents. Spaces of encounter are seen as one of the main ways in which social mix and social contact are achieved. These are physical places in which people from different backgrounds and groups can congregate, interact and eventually engage in meaningful relations.

> *Besides integration, I would consider social cohesion as a goal of this association – the school, the association, other institutions – here, there's a world, like a fish tank; that is, a microcosm where different species and plants live together, and that has a reason in its diversity since diversities together made up its beauty.* (Member of association_1)

> *[ViaPadova36 social housing is] a place for the promotion of social, commercial and cultural activities, a place where diversity becomes an asset to facilitate social cohesion in the building, in the area and overall in the city.* (Third-sector organization representative_4)

These elements may be of some relevance in understanding third-sector actors' discourses on diversity. The idea of fostering social cohesion through encounter is common in European urban diversity policies stemming from both (neo)assimilationist and multicultural stances (Raco, 2014). In our case, this issue was framed in an integrationist stance in which the concept of diversity is ambiguously seen both as resource and problem by our interviewees. Representations from interviewed third-sector organization actors sometimes imply that diversity should be kept under control, and mix and social contact are a way to achieve this goal. The appreciation of diversity depends on the possibility to control it (Tissot, 2014).

> *We are the social managers of this social housing project [...] We have selected the inhabitants, and now we are managing the project both in terms of maintenance of the buildings and in terms of orientation in the participation process in relation to the construction and conservation of the community.* (Third-sector organization representative_1)

> *Social fragmentation in Milan can be recomposed in dignity by the means of assisted paths. Because if you know diversity, if you know the foreigner and you acknowledge him in what he does, in what he thinks, and in what he says, then he is no longer a foreigner for you. He is not diverse anymore. He is an ordinary person with whom you share something.* (Third-sector organization representative_3)

The perception that targeting specific minorities is ghettoizing and creates segregation emerges here in a complementary way with the institutional discourse described above. Promoting mix and social contact seems in some cases to be connected to a fear of negative media and political discourses: hysteria around diversity-related initiatives can in fact foster the spread of nativist and anti-diversity stances disseminated by vocal political actors. Thus, involving native residents as policy targets is a way to minimize the risk of anti-diversity stances.

> [Talking about the reaction of the association of CSFTP against the political process of stigmatization of the street] *Via Padova is a place of transit, passage, diversity and richness. The actions that we did were political actions concerned with sociability and social cohesion. Avoiding, unless it was strictly necessary, specific interventions on difference.* (Third-sector organization representative_5)

However, many involved actors recognized the hyper-diversification of the population, which makes classifying groups and categories difficult. This fact challenges the integrationist idea of a core we-group that needs to be selectively protected. Indeed, several associations in their initiatives treat diversity as a source of social disadvantage but, in the frame of an awareness of hyper-diversity, with growing attention on the possible advantages that come from social variation, diversity-related complexity and new social profiles.

> *The association is bonded to diversity because it must cope with it… It is an unavoidable aspect of this association […] The fact that we are in a neighbourhood with plenty of immigration and social diversity… obviously we hit against this, you cannot avoid this.* (Member of association_2)

> *The important thing, from an intercultural point of view, was to create contexts, situations in which people of Trotter Park who are "multi" themselves, "multi" from many points of view, could converge, gather and find a feeling of exchange, relation, community.* (Third-sector organization representative_5)

In some cases, diversity is considered positive, acceptable and enriching when it is not overly related to inequality. Minorities, especially the stigmatized ones, by themselves are rarely appreciated. The appreciation comes when those identified as "diverse" are seen in the "normality" of certain positions, such as being a parent who is active in the local community and educational environment, a good tenant or a high-end transnational professional. Thus, the two discourses on inequality and recognition stay largely separated.

## Narratives and representations of diversity: Residents' perspectives

In this section, we focus on residents' perspectives[6] about diversity and its incorporation at the local level. After outlining how diversity is represented and what kind of narratives it fosters among interviewees, we will describe their perceptions about the diversity governance in their neighbourhood. Do they feel the policymaking process considers their perspective and influences their daily lives in a positive way? Then, in the concluding section, we will summarize the opportunities and constraints that this specific intertwining of narratives and discourses produces on the structuring of power relations among different scales and on the negotiation of the meaning of appropriation and sense of belonging in Milan.

### Narratives and representations of diversity and spatialized identities

Generally, our interviewees shared positive representations of diversity, which were fostered and characterized by a favourable perception of their neighbours – attitudes that are instrumental in maintaining peaceful and "civilized" relations (Anderson, 2012). Diversity was perceived as a complex and articulated concept that is strongly linked to cultural and geographical origins of people but is not limited to this. Relevant differences in perceptions are mostly related to generational gaps; older adults and younger people have very different attitudes about diversity. Younger interviewees (including new generations from an immigrant background) perceived diversity mostly as a positive and crucial element of their neighbourhood but were aware at the same time of its complexity, potential and liabilities. They felt

they could get the most from the diversity in their neighbourhoods thanks to their intercultural capabilities. They assumed that growing up in a diversified context enables them to understand the positive and negative dimensions of diversity and to develop specific social skills that are marketable in today's world.

> *If you've grown up in this neighbourhood [...] you know them [migrants]. [...] While television speaks against Egyptian migrants and says that they rape women and things like that... [...] you know that they aren't as the media say. I mean, it's really easier not to fall in with generalizations.* (Resident_27)

> *First of all, I have the opportunity to meet diversity every day, and I realized that, as for people who don't live here, this thing is not that expected. As for me, it is just something normal, and I think that this is also a pull factor for people from other countries to come and work here. Most people here are open-minded, and they aren't prejudiced.* (Resident_25)

Among the older adults, diversity was prevalently perceived as a fact, something that must be coped with in the best way possible to maintain a liveable environment. This group generally perceived neighbours in just a formally polite way. They professed tolerance and good predisposition towards otherness but rarely engaged with neighbours and diversity in the neighbourhood. Their relationships with neighbours remained at the level of courtesy and with the aim to maintain a liveable environment.

> *Yes, I know them [my neighbours]. I say "Hello!" every day to the Chinese pizza man!* (Resident_32)

This situation changes when long-term residents from an immigrant background are considered. Among them, diversity was seen as a positive aspect and as a strength of the neighbourhood. They mentioned diversity as an essential element of neighbourhood identity and as the bonding element between this and their own identities. In their eyes, it can establish affiliation, a sense of community and place-based identity. For this reason, their own personal identities remain strongly linked to their neighbourhood.

> *When I was young, I moved to other neighbourhoods for one or two years, but I always came back... And when I bought my own house, I said: "Here! This is the area where I like to live, where I feel safe".* (Resident_03)

This sense of community was one of the two prevailing narratives connected to diversity among respondents. Diversity was perceived as an element that can foster solidarity and a sense of belonging if treated and faced in a certain way. When people interact with others and are enabled to see their similarities beyond simply diversity, this can challenge their perceptions of stereotypes, setting the stage for participatory and community practices. However, this occurs at the micro level, where third-sector organizations implement activities aimed to boost this process, and it is connected with specific spaces in the neighbourhood, what Elijah Anderson calls *the cosmopolitan canopy* (2012) to refer to specific places within the city where racial conflicts and tensions seem to be suspended.

> *I define the park as a little welcoming community, where I feel comfortable. I love staying here.* (Resident_03)

> *This is the place where I belong... I feel this neighbourhood as my neighbourhood; I feel it close to me. [...] There is a diversity where I, with the colour of my skin, can be disguised.* (Resident_23)

The second narrative concerns diversity as an element of "Europeanness" and the modernity of the neighbourhood, which inhabitants proudly perceived as one of the most internationally connected, open and dynamic in the city or even the country. In this sense, respondents saw both positive and negative aspects of living with diversity as something necessary for a European identity, which is, at least among youngsters, perceived as more cogent and concrete than the national one (even if this is not the case when compared to neighbourhood-based identity, which is much stronger).

> *I see it [the neighbourhood] as... the zone that mostly classifies Milan as a European City. If one goes to Berlin or Paris, let alone U.S. cities... all these cities have zones that are considered more dangerous than others,*

*but… at the end of the day, these cities are the most well-advanced cities… So, this [the dangerousness] is a necessary disadvantage that we must face to become equal to other European cities.* (Resident_21)

The generally positive picture that emerges from the quotations above does not translate into residents' positive perceptions about the governance of diversity at the local level. In fact, interviewees had little, if any, awareness of policy actions implemented by the local government and were difficult to reach by local initiatives implemented by third-sector organizations.

*Well, yes I heard about some initiatives that the association of the park has implemented here to give value to diversity… but I didn't participate.* (Resident_30)

Generally, they felt marginalization and a strong detachment from the local government, which is seen as insensitive to their actual needs and rights.

*I'm completely disappointed!* [towards the local government] *You can write down "COMPLETELY DISAPPOINTED"!* (Resident_ 16)

*Here, the local government should do something… But as I said, the peripheries here…* [are neglected by the administration]. (Resident_15)

## Conclusions: Dissonant narratives and misrecognition of diversity in Milan

The last step of our analysis aims to highlight the way in which the different scales of analysis mentioned above interlink and the consequences that the structuring of a multi-scalar discourse on diversity has on the structuring of power relations and on the negotiation of diversity-related meanings and actions. As we have seen, narratives and representations of diversity at the micro and macro levels diverge in a significant way.

On the one hand, different groups of residents shared a positive perception of diversity, a complex and articulated cognizance in which they were aware of the risks and potentialities of living together in diversity. In particular, young people schooled in multicultural contexts developed intercultural competences, positive attitudes towards diversity and globalized horizons of meanings, which rooted their own identities and intimacy. This suggests that proximity and familiarity with diversity are optimal conditions for the emergence of positive framings of diversity and for promising developments regarding the construction of new (multicultural) identities and belongings. At the same time, the awareness of the risky and challenging factors of their environment affirmed a lucid understanding of the complexity of hyper-diversity, which cannot be constrained into a strictly categorical approach, as the political discourse does.

Indeed, at the macro level, political debates and agendas often frame diversity in connection with immigration and with the construction of "emergencies" (which manifests now, more than ever, as the hegemonization of Italy's political discourse by the anti-immigrant stances of the ruling far-right party, the Lega), maintaining immigration is a problem to solve and keep under control. Diversity is represented almost exclusively as a disadvantage that needs to be addressed through policies for equity and redistribution. This narrative can be associated with the above-mentioned intercultural/integrationist national "mode" of integration, which understands diversity as an acceptable element, although only up to a certain threshold.

This discourse about diversity at the macro level seems to simultaneously be a means to negatively recontextualize the experience of diversity made at the neighbourhood level. This experience, although generally positive, does not have the strength to negotiate a diverse understanding of diversity and belonging at the level of policies.

The detachment between these two levels is a proxy of problems in national and local institutional practices in influencing individual agency and, vice versa, the inability of the micro level to raise and voice their claims to the government actors, both at the city and national levels. The reasons for this difficult relationship can be found in some complementary processes.

On one hand, the macro level seems largely unaware of the complexity that an increasingly intersectional and multi-layered diversity implies

(a well-known issue also in other contexts; see Ram et al., 2013). Matched with the lack of an explicit model of integration, this frame establishes a peculiar integrationist/intercultural approach with stigmatizing effects on the most vulnerable categories of diversity, especially when they are visible and coupled with inequality. Rather than refusing diversity as such, this approach seems to be more concerned with the *visibility* and the concentration of certain kinds of diversity (see the concerns about ghettoization discussed above), while diversity is accepted when in a (subordinate?) relationship with the majority.

On the other hand, discourses and practices shared at the micro level are not able to scale up or influence political discourses and policy agendas, probably due to their fragmentation. This is likely a side effect of the hyper-diversification of needs, which makes it difficult to gather claims and share experiences and is mirrored also at the meso level of neighbourhood initiatives that are more open to grassroots mobilization. This level fails to serve as an interface between the micro and the macro levels because of its own weakness in a policy frame to poorly endow and target a diversity policy.

Indeed, initiatives implemented by third-sector organizations are often on a small scale. Even when these initiatives manage to foster the development of positive narratives and representations among residents (as well as a sense of belonging, see the case of the Trotter Park Association), they may also have unexpected consequences. Firstly, due to their very small scale, they fail to reach a larger and more inclusive audience and, consequently, face the risk of going unnoticed by many inhabitants. Secondly, the fragmentation of the different measures, also related to the lack of resources and of public support, turns these initiatives into "mouth pieces" that are unable to advocate enough at larger scales.

In conclusion, we maintain that the disconnection among different scales leads to the implementation of policy actions that misrecognize diversity in its complexity. We come to this conclusion in our case study because of the specific constraints coming from the dominant narratives and representations about diversity at the macro level by structuring a model of integration that cannot fully grasp the increasing complexity of diversity. While struggling to contain the negative aspects of diversity and neutralize its visibility, government actors seem to miss important aspects that some third-sector actors, in contrast, are starting to consider. The latter implements initiatives to boost and strengthen the sense of community, although with a small-scale focus. Rather than developing localism and populist drifts, however, this sense of belonging mixed with a place-based identity grounded on diversity fosters residents' narratives of openness and root pluralist-community identities.

This process is liable to stumble and fall because it involves just part of the population, and its weaknesses are crystal clear when it comes to vulnerable groups. In summary, people are less equipped to face and cope with a multicultural environment. Nonetheless, national and local governments seem to be missing a crucial opportunity to positively influence the path towards a more inclusive and open society.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## Notes

1. By "third-sector organization" we refer to a large and heterogeneous set of organizations, drawn from Salamon and Sokolowski's (2016) definition, which includes non-profit institutions; cooperatives; social enterprises; and volunteers and community-based and civil society organizations.
2. Source: demo.istat.it; 1 January 2018. The province of Milan, as a proxy of its metropolitan area, counts 3.2 million inhabitants.
3. However, it is becoming ever more common in the policy discourse. Project "MIX" was launched in 2016 to "promote social cohesion" in the city through the funding of social projects activated by third-sector organizations in each neighbourhood.
4. CSFTP is a volunteering association founded by parents and teachers of the school City of Sun, which is located within Trotter Park in Via Padova. The

association implements activities targeted towards children and adults living in the neighbourhood. For details on other analysed initiatives, see Barberis et al. (2017).

5. ViaPadova36 is a social-mix housing project that provides affordable housing to families of Italian and immigrant origins, university students, older adults, vulnerable individuals and families. It aims to experiment a communal form of living in a building located in Via Padova, with the goal to foster social cohesion in the building block and in the neighbourhood (see Marzorati and Semprebon, 2015).

6. Our interviewees were selected among the inhabitants of a focal neighbourhood in our research, Via Padova, which, as stated above, is particularly interesting due to its diverse compositions.

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