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## ARCHIVES

Special Report

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The Padua Wall: Immigration, Conflict, and Integration

Francesca Musiani

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The term "Padua Wall" first appeared in a local Venetian newspaper, at the end of year 2006, following the decision by the municipality of Padua (Italy) to fence in a particular area of the city, for reasons of law and order. The municipality soon found itself submerged in the phone calls and requests of reporters, nationwide and in Europe, to clarify the nature and purpose of this wall, as well as the steps that led to its creation.[1]

This should not come as a surprise. The last fifty years of our world's history have taught us to perceive walls as endowed with a highly symbolic value, one that transcends the practical purposes for which they are built. From the infamous Berlin Wall to the more recent walls in Baghdad, the border fence between the United States and Mexico and of course the Israeli/Palestinian wall, such barriers have come to symbolise fear, conflict, concealment, incapacity to engage in dialogue, need of protection.[2]

Our focus in this article will be the so-called “Padua Wall” – how, besides its local and practical relevance, it is a symbol and a meaningful case study of the dynamics that currently characterise immigration and integration patterns in Italy. These two issues, immigration and integration, probably constitute the most serious challenges brought by the beginning of the 21st century to Italy – a nation of emigrants for generations and generations, that has found itself, in the last thirty years but especially in the last decade, in the unprecedented position of becoming a host country for huge numbers of people.[3]

Public policy choices, resource allocation choices, the establishment of relationships between indigenous and immigrant populations, respect of their respective rights, the often unstable balance between conflict and integration, and perceptions of crime and criminals, all ultimately come down to a core question: what is the best way to deal with the Other?

#### A Case Study and a Symbol[4]

As it often happens, the label employed by media does not precisely reflect reality; the Padua “Wall” is in fact a sheet iron fence, raised on August 9th, 2006 by the municipality of Padua with the double purpose of facilitating frequent controls by the police in the Arcella neighbourhood, and separating the properties of the residents in the area from the infamous Via Anelli. This street hosts a complex of six buildings that were originally meant to become student residencies. However, most of the apartments ended up being occupied by prostitutes, and the consequent decrease in the value of the estates, coupled with the expansion of immigration in the city, led to them being rented primarily to immigrants, both regular and irregular, mostly of African origin. As this reality was developing, an increasing number of drug dealers and their clients – both groups included, but were not limited to, a number of residents – started using the open pass between Via Anelli and the adjacent streets to elude the police’s surveillance. This led to a systematic invasion of properties in the neighbourhood, whose residents ended up asking for the building of the since then-called “wall”. After a particularly harsh fight that took place in the summer of 2006, the municipality gave dispositions for the erection of the barrier, a “temporary measure” aimed at assuring security while the six buildings were progressively cleared out and closed, and the requalification of the urban area began.

The naked facts of this case, if taken alone, may sound as little more than the report of a local dispute. But to make it a case study of much wider dynamics are the reactions that surrounded the image of the wall and the development of a new discourse on immigration, conflict and integration – at the local, regional and national levels.

#### A Wall in Between

The word and concept of the “wall”, however inaccurate they may be, carry with them a burden of historical, social and cultural elements that go beyond the particular issue to tell something about the overall attitudes and sets of behaviour that a segment of society chooses when relating to another.

The fence in Padua; the walls between Shiite and Sunnite neighborhoods in Baghdad; the environmentally degrading, albeit often useless, border fence between the United States and Mexico – all become, at different levels, signals that “different identities might live beside each other in parallel communities with clear-cut borders towards each other; but they should not live together.”[5]

“They should not live together” – and here rise the new walls, often built by a States bearing the flags of freedom and democracy, an acknowledgment of their powerlessness in dealing with a

socio-political realm that has become too complicated for them.[6]

Ways to (dis)integrate?

This "local" wall, originally conceived as a temporary deterrent against drug dealing, ended up providing new meanings to social (dis)integration in Italy. As of today, the wall is still there - as is the drug dealing - and the Via Anelli controversy constitutes the foundation of the last ten years of security and control strategies, and of immigration policies management.

Via Anelli has been, since the beginning of the controversy, a shelter able to respond to the presence and the housing necessities of hundreds of migrants, integrated from the beginning in the economic networks of the territory – but it has also been a centre for the black market of drugs. Therefore Via Anelli is both a receptive shelter and a drug market: the first because of the lack of any alternative structures to this no man's land, and the second because of the lack of any alternative testing policies linked to drugs, that would not speak the language of mere prohibition.[7] For all these reasons, the ghetto surrounding Via Anelli represents a discordant voice, a possibility for all the Others to find their place in the city – an ongoing way of measuring Padua's level of emancipation.

The inhabitants of the street have been fighting, as individuals and through local organisations,[8] in order to free themselves from the ghetto: the regular immigrants in the name of democracy, the irregulars in the name of the simple acknowledgement of their presence, as a first step towards the recognition of their legal and human rights, citizenship in the first place.[9]

Before the wall, politicians had been silently witnessing the situation– a conscious choice, one could argue; however, this was no longer possible as the spiral of the escalating conflict[10] began to involving the entire city, and solutions began to be demanded. Some sort of action was required, and the delay with which it was finally taken made an integrative approach – one in which political structures could really transcend ethnic divisions and promote the obliteration of the divide[11] – almost impossible. At least in a temporary way, the only alternative seemed to be the separation of the conflicting groups, and the building of policies upon this separation.[12]

Armouring and clearing out the ghetto became both possible and necessary. But deliberately or not, the process of transforming the ghetto quickly became a matter of police and video surveillance, a permanent state emergency level, in which a fragile and temporary peace could be established by force.[13] The Via Anelli issue, therefore, ended up being described in terms of securitisation – not merely a matter of public concern, but a matter of emergency, requiring extreme measures as the only possible way to cope with the exigencies of the situation.[14]

What does the securitisation of Via Anelli mean? The answer is multi-layered. In the first place, it seems to deprive the battles that have surrounded it from their original goals of freedom, democracy, and the promotion of human rights –and replaced them with the narrower goal of clearing out of the ghetto primarily a matter of seclusion and confinement.[15]

Secondly, some of its elements (the wall, the check points, the blitz, and the roundups) all privilege a kind of problem-solving that emphasizes control over the lives of the people involved. The spokesman for the community, wanted by the municipality of Padua, has in fact no right to vote in the Committee that decides on the Via Anelli situation, and is competent only for immigration-related issues – it is the opinion of many, for legitimate reasons, that this does not constitute a proper counterbalance to the level of seclusion imposed by the new arrangements of security policies.[16]

Ironically, it seems as though the "Wall" policies have led to a diffusion of the ghetto into the town,

reproducing on the entire urban area the policies of seclusion that characterised it, and have become the way of coping with immigration in the city.

## Lessons Learned

The process of emancipation of Via Anelli is currently on the move. But the building of the fence, the “wall”, and the ways this has been read by the local community and the nation as a whole make it very likely, at the moment, for this process to be progressively and completely deprived of its original meanings (providing a way out of the ghetto, integrating marginalised communities into a more dignified environment, assuring residents a more secure area) and fade into a scenario where the Other is the enemy, the different has to be kept away; a reality in which drug dealers and immigrants are gathered inside the same fence, and as a consequence, become perceived as one and the same entity; an area in which clearing out procedures and urban regeneration can only be carried out through the “hard” way, in the form of repeated police actions.

In July 2007, the last regular residents, having lived for years in the dramatic conditions of the most (in)famous street of Padua, were finally moved out of the area. A decade of very questionable policies on immigration and security reaches a (temporary?) epilogue, and it is time for an assessment of lessons learned and open issues.

The clearing out of Via Anelli, initially the product of innovative challenges and of the authority’s reluctant response to these challenges becoming unsustainable, has in fact delivered to Padua – and to the nation – one of the hardest pages of their history in terms of immigration-related conflicts. The operation was necessary and desirable, but the discourse in which it has been framed has compromised its possibly positive aspects.

The issue of security, the emergency related to crime, the zero tolerance policies, and mostly the Wall-related events, have swept the debate surrounding the issue. The city realm seems now to be soaked in an “alert” mood, in the pervasiveness of fear – so much that, seemingly, it has lost track of the main issues at stake. Let us summarise them briefly.

The moving out of the regular residents has been coupled with the forced removal of hundreds of irregular immigrants, as well as those holding the permit of stay but paying usurious rents at the black market; for all of them, the problem of housing, and to a larger extent, that of integration, have never been more open.

The drug dealing and related crimes, fence or no fence, are still there – and the “Wall”, despite the conclusion of its official and temporary purpose (the evacuation of the residents) is still there as well, and has become a worrying symbol of what a scholar calls the “good fences make good neighbours” approach.[17]

In very recent times, other crime-related emergencies in other neighbourhoods have come to the attention of politicians, police forces, media and citizens. This suggests that the price the city is paying for the clearing out of Via Anelli is fairly high, as the figures related to crime rates in Padova for the last fifteen months suggest.[18] Besides what the data says, an increasing confusion about crime vs. immigration, drug dealing vs. liberalisation, integration vs. seclusion has spread through the city, reflecting the doubts and fears of a whole region and nation.

Narrowing down the discussion to the sole aspect of security seems to have overwhelmed all possibilities of addressing the core challenges related to the situation of immigrants in Italy. Building fences, either mental or physical, around the diversity that Others represent is not the way. What is needed is a vision of immigration in which not only the reality of conflict, but also the hope

and necessity of integration, are acknowledged and addressed. “Tearing down the wall” can be a first step, at least symbolic, in this direction.

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[1] See Sandri A. (2006) La resa di Padova, un muro per ghettizzare gli spacciatori, La Stampa, <http://www.lastampa.it/redazione/cmsSezioni/cronache/200608articoli/8873girata.asp>; Ravelli F. (2006) Il Muro dei clandestini. Padova si divide in due, La Repubblica, <http://www.repubblica.it/2006/08/sezioni/cronaca/padova-via-anelli/padova-via-anelli/padova-via-anelli.html>; BBC News (2006) Padua Builds Wall In Drugs Battle, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4782925.stm>

[2] Piccirilli M. (2007) Il secolo dei nuovi muri, <http://www.meltingpot.org/articolo10420.html>

[3] Government of Italy, Ministry for Social Solidarity (2006) L’immigrazione in Italia, numero per numero, <http://www.solidarietasociale.gov.it/NR/rdonlyres/AD0EA401-AC33-4B01-BAD6-1565F6753374/0/19Tuttiinumeripp149153.pdf>

[4] The background information for the case is derived from [www.larepubblica.it](http://www.larepubblica.it), [www.meltingpot.org](http://www.meltingpot.org), [www.corriere.it](http://www.corriere.it), [www.antiproibizionisti.it](http://www.antiproibizionisti.it).

[5] Holm U. (2002) The Implication of the Concept of the French State-Nation and 'Patrie' for French Discourses on (Algerian) Immigration. Copenhagen Peace Research Institute Working Paper, p. 9.

[6] Hellman S. (1998) Review, The Crisis of the Italian State: From the Origins of the Cold War to the Fall of Berlusconi by Patrick McCarthy. The Journal of Politics, Vol. 60, No. 4. pp. 1247-1249.

[7] Sacchetto D. (2006) Un’area di manovalanza stigmatizzata, in Vianello F. (a cura di), Ai margini della città. Forme del controllo e risorse sociali nel nuovo ghetto, Roma: Carocci. pp. 118-141.

[8] Associazione Razzismo Stop ([http://www.centrodirittiumani.unipd.it/a\\_database/scheda\\_ong.asp?associazione=241&menu=database](http://www.centrodirittiumani.unipd.it/a_database/scheda_ong.asp?associazione=241&menu=database)), and Comitato per il Superamento del Ghetto (<http://www.padovanet.it/nonprofit/ricerca.php?id=1091>)

[9] The Rights of Immigrants: The European Convention on Human Rights, <http://www.yourrights.org.uk/your-rights/chapters/rights-of-immigrants/the-european-convention-on-human-rights/the-european-convention-on-human-rights.shtml>

[10] Pruitt D. and Kim S.H. (2004) Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate and Settlement. Boston: McGraw-Hill. Chapter 5, p. 96.

[11] Fallentin Caspersen N. (2002) Good fences make good neighbours? A comparison of consociational and integrative conflict regulation strategies in Post-Dayton Bosnia. Copenhagen Peace Research Institute Working Paper. p.2

[12] Fallentin Caspersen N. (2002), cit., p.2

[13] Isakovic Z. (2002) Democracy, Human Rights and Ethnic Conflicts in the Process of

Globalisation. Copenhagen Peace Research Institute Working Paper, No. 3.

[14] Holm U. (2002) cit., p. 22.

[15] Sacchetto D. (2006), cit., p.132.

[16] Ravelli F. (2006), cit.

[17] Fallentin Caspersen N. (2002), cit.

[18] <http://www.poliziadistato.it/pds/online/datistatistici.htm>

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