



# **Displacement and Discrimination: 'Evictability' of Refugees in Revanchist Rome**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, displacements in the form of fast evictions of 'refugees-squatters' in Rome are analysed as intersecting with increased racial discrimination and the marginalization of refugees in Italy. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic research before, during and after the involuntary removal of refugees from the occupied building of Via Curtatone in 2017, the paper suggests that fast evictions of 'refugees' and/or 'transit migrants' in Italy is employed as an anti-migrant device. For precarious migrants in Italy, the housing question is of uttermost importance as it is connected to their access to welfare services. Fast evictions disrupt migrants' ability to relocate and rearrange their lives in ways that such access could be sustained.



Thus, the evictability of migrants in Italy has become a political tool to suppress solidarity practices among and for unwanted populations.

## Keywords

Displacement; refugees; squatting; Rome

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## Introduction

In this paper I will explore direct displacement, fast eviction, and evacuation<sup>1</sup>, at the intersection with increased racial discrimination and the marginalization of refugees in Italy. After the onslaught of the global financial crisis, practices of direct displacement in the form of fast evictions and evacuations increased and became the most underexplored mechanism of the reproduction of social marginality (Desmond 2015). Evictions in Southern European cities are tied to the gentrification of the city centre, the sale of public housing stock, and to the effect of austerity on housing (Annunziata and Lees, 2016). Recent research in the field underlines the different lines of violence and dispossession involved in the process of eviction focusing on minority groups, migrants and vulnerable categories (Annunziata, 2018; Lancione, 2018; van Baar, 2017). Drawing on van Baar's notion of "evictability", namely the constant "possibility of being removed from a sheltering place" (2017, 214), I will argue that 'refugees' and/or 'transit migrants' currently living in Rome are constantly evictable and under threat of being displaced from place to place. The condition of evictability, for van Baar, produces and reinforces new intra-national and sub-national borders that marginalize and push aside minority groups (*ibidem*). Similarly, exploring the case of the evacuation of refugees from self-managed occupied buildings in the gentrified city centre of Rome, I will investigate how, in a country with a long-lasting tradition of housing squats and with relatively slow eviction processes, fast eviction and the evacuation of migrants has become a mechanism of displacement based on discrimination and a device that pushes migrants out of the city.

The involuntary removal of refugees from the occupied building - Via Curtatone in Rome - took place in August 2017 when the National electoral campaign was underway in Italy. The evacuation of the 'refugees-squatters' received wide national and international media exposure and paved the path to the populist party's anti-migrant rhetoric<sup>2</sup>. Based on interviews with evictees and activists and on secondary data, this paper explores the current regime of displacement at the

<sup>1</sup> I am using eviction and evacuation interchangeably, however, evacuation is the legal term used in cases of involuntary removal in situations where building occupation is without the consent of the owner. Different to tenant's eviction which is normalised by the Civil Code and the National 1998/Housing Law, evacuation is a violation governed by the Penal Code, Art.633 and it implies the use of police force.

<sup>2</sup> At the National election in May 2018 the North League and the 5Stars movement with 17% and 33% of the vote respectively signed an agreement and are currently governing.

intersection of, and tensions between, gentrification, the new housing questions – characterized by the growing housing demands of migrants, and discriminatory housing practices. Given the media exposure that the case already had, I will avoid using pictures, people’s personal stories, and personal names to preserve their explicit request of remaining anonymous.

### **Displacement in Rome: From Prevention to Differential Inclusion**

Gentrification in Rome was anchored in its historical precincts in the late 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s with severe episodes of eviction of elderly people and low-income residents living in (now financialized) council housing (Annunziata, 2018; Herzfeld, 2009). At the same time, severe housing unaffordability was/is impacting the working poor, elderly people, and migrants, the consequence being the movement of residents towards less expensive metropolitan regions. In this climate, the Roman Housing Movement (RHM) has played an important role in mitigating displacement. The RHM has a long tradition in the field of squatting and radical autonomy (Mudu, 2014; Mudu and Chattopadhyay, 2016) and it has been characterized by its long-lasting dialogue with local institutions and representatives. Between 2000 and 2014 the repertoire of actions and achievements of the RHM in the field of displacement prevention was intense; it encompassed anti-eviction picketing and *moratoria* for vulnerable groups, requests of public housing for squatters, regularization of squats via self-rehab cooperatives, the introduction of the status of ‘housing emergency’ by which evicted people can find solutions in temporary accommodation, just to name a few (Sethman, 2018). Providing alternatives for a wide range of groups the squats of RHM acted as social protection, and, given this role, they rarely got evicted without alternative offers of accommodation by the municipality or without huge resistance from the housing movements. Moreover, Italy is amongst those European countries where eviction processes last longer, up to five or six years from the first eviction note (*intimidazione di sfratto*) to the eviction order (*sfratto esecutivo*). The length of the process allows a margin for negotiation and for the identification of possible alternatives (gaining time, finding agreement with the owner, paying in instalments, re-housing in city-owned accommodation) which in itself represents an interesting terrain for displacement prevention (see Annunziata, 2017; 2018).

However, something has changed under the new climate of austerity and with the rise of populist parties in recent years - fast eviction and evacuations, especially of migrants and refugees living in shelters and squats, has increased and become an anti-migrant device or practice.

Several factors have to be acknowledged regarding housing and migrants in Italy. The housing needs of refugees and (transit) migrants put pressure on an already very severe housing crisis characterized by the chronic shortage of public housing (less than 4% of the total stock), a prohibitive rental market and precarious job market. Moreover, the capacity of the refugee reception systems in Italy only covers 30% of the demand (SPRAR, 2017) and less than 12% of the total arrivals have been

relocated in other European Countries so far. The reception system, moreover, demands that the refugees receiving protection become independent, fit into the Italian housing and labour system, and, last but not least, feel socially and culturally included (*ibidem*). However, a promising refugee inclusion policy hits its limits when it meets a very weak economy (in which migrants occupy the informal, low skill sector) and a prohibitive rental housing market. Consequently, migrants, whether asylum seekers or not, face limited housing alternatives and search for a “do it yourself” solution. The situation is worse in large cities, like Rome, where migrants are living in precarious conditions, in encampments managed by migrants in collaboration with activists and non-profit associations, in temporary accommodation managed by the catholic third sector, and last but not least, in housing squats. Self-organized housing squats have thus become a structural part of the housing system and a solution for a multitude of people otherwise excluded from the housing market; so not surprisingly, in the last decades, migrants have become an important component of housing squats (Grazioli, 2017; Vereni, 2015).

However, the capacity of the RHM to provide social protection for migrants in housing squats has reduced in the years since the crisis began. Under the climate of austerity, the city re-established its power over a multitude of practices of solidarity and mutualism, social centres and squats, reducing housing informality to an issue of legality and public order, especially when it overlapped with migration issues. As a way to re-take urban assets, such as private squatted buildings, the City of Rome, the Prefect in concert with the Minister of Internal affairs, targeted and listed the buildings that have to be evacuated as a matter of security.

### **The Evacuation of Via Curtatone in Rome**

On the 21st August 2017, 600 refugees from the Horn of Africa were evicted by the City from a building located in via Curtatone, in the city centre, that they had squatted for housing purposes since 2013. The squat took place during the Tzunami tour<sup>3</sup> with the support of the housing movements which deliberately targeted vacant “buildings subject to (sometimes suspicious of) speculative financial operations” (Sethman, 2018, 467). The building was composed of office spaces and was auctioned by an investment fund in 1990. After several uses, in recent years the owner of the building, currently an investment fund, planned its conversion into a luxury hotel and proceeded with an intimidation of eviction in 2015. The proposed building use fitted perfectly with the predatory fifth wave of gentrification (Aalbers, 2019) in Rome where almost the entire housing stock of the historical city is being converted into tourist accommodation or gentrified by a growing financialized real estate market.

Among the many squats in Rome (about 80), via Curtatone had some peculiarities: it was central, located near to the main railway station; it was a migrant-

<sup>3</sup> In 2013 the Roman Housing Movement squatted 12 buildings in a day as an act of protest against skyrocketing rent prices and the absence of housing policies. The event was called Tzunami Tour.

only squat, with more than 400 (variable of 200 with relatives or dwellers in transition) refugees and holders of international protection mainly from Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia, Italian post-colonial countries. Many of them had already spent several months (6 to 9 months) in the system - refugee's reception - for the obtainment of international protection. The squat was self-managed by an assembly of households and with more or less stable relations with housing movements. Moreover, it was characterized by a smattering of invisible/informal practices incredibly important for the everyday survival of the dwellers (such as family re-joining, hospitality of migrants in transit, etc). Those living in the squat built a strong network of mutual help and via word of mouth helped each other find intermittent jobs, legal aid, and some financial help. The squat worked well for both temporary staying and more permanent shelter. In the interviews, the complexity of their conditions emerged: in some cases, they described themselves as "*being in transit*", "*looking for temporary housing with the objective of re-joining with families in other European cities sooner or later*"; in the majority of the cases they described themselves as "*settled but wishing to move into a proper house*" (Anonymous Interviews, April 2017). Their transitional condition or the decision to settle directly depended on the opportunities they found (and/or were still searching for) in the receiving country; however, in some cases their humanitarian protection was too short for a life project and rendered them 'illegal' very easily.

Housing plays a particularly relevant role in their case. It is much more than a fundamental material need. For migrants, a permanent housing residency (*residenza*) is key for their access to welfare services (such as healthcare, childcare, financial aid and migrant papers, such as *carta di soggiorno* - necessary to travel). The centrality of the squat also played a crucial role for the residents' right to inhabit the city; to live in proximity to the main railway station and administrative headquarters enriched the refugee's geography of opportunities. And in general, regarding the gentrification of the historical precinct, the squat enriched the social diversity of the area and (theoretically speaking) the opportunities of coexistence of different social groups in the city.

The evacuation lasted several days. The limited amount of time between the eviction order and the consequent 'displacement' of the refugees reduced the time available for the exploration of alternatives either with the owner of the building or with the City Council. During these days, the newly elected City Government offered very limited support in the negotiation with the owner, as well as for the evictees. The City's social services proposed temporary accommodation to the most vulnerable categories (women with children, elderly people, the disabled), some of them owned by the owner of the building in another province. Most refugees considered the offer inadequate for their needs and refused to be re-housed there. The accommodation alternatives were too far away from the city centre, and thus from connections and opportunities; female-only, without any inclusion of male relatives with the consequence of breaking up family ties; too limited in time, only for three months, without considering what a "temporary solution" means in each

specific case (a pregnant woman, a person with health issues may have different perceptions of time).

The dwellers of via Curtatone who refused to be re-housed and all those who were left without alternatives temporarily occupied the public square in front of the building, piazza Indipendenza, in an attempt to stay put and resist. They were removed by police force and water cannons a few days later and the entire square militarized. Evictees reported that the local government had left them without alternatives apart from the option of being displaced outside of the city, disregarding their needs (work place; work hours; commuting needs) and the needs of their children (school, etc).

After the evacuation, it is almost impossible to say where the inhabitants of via Curtatone have gone. Some of the refugees migrated to Germany where relatives live; others rented collectively a flat in the city to remain close to their workplace. Their community broke up and all their efforts to build the 'minimum conditions' either to stay or to continue their journey vanished: "*it is like we have to start from the beginning. Who knows? Everything is gone, nothing has remained*" (Anonymous Interview after eviction, 17 January 2018). An unknown number of those who refused to be re-housed moved to other squats or in encampments at the margin of the city. They intentionally looked for marginal, isolated places: "*here we are invisible and nobody cares about us*" (Anonymous Interview after eviction, 30 of January 2018). The issue of strategically mobilizing invisibility became a crucial element for their survival in the city (for survivability in the case of displacement see Lees, Annunziata, Rivas-Alonso, 2018). In addition, further evacuation occurred in 2018 in other migrants' shelters where the evictees potentially re-located.

### **Conclusion: On the Evictability of Refugees**

This case epitomises a dramatic change in a city with a long tradition of housing squats; a change that implies a process of contraction of the space of negotiation and dialogue between the Roman Housing Movement and local institutions, with the consequent reduction of social protections. A change legitimized by a normalized regime of (moral) austerity (on regimes of austerity see Hayes, 2017), which in Rome is based on a process of expulsion of undesired populations and on the eradication of practices of solidarity. Moreover, the evictability of refugees is legitimized by the rise of anti-migrant rhetoric and discrimination along racial lines. Indeed, the ethnic profile of the evictees allows consideration of 'evictability' as a mechanism of displacement based on discrimination. This case, in fact, is only one of several episodes of forced evictions of migrants (and in particular of non-white people and minority groups) from squats/informal shelters/encampments that took place in Rome in 2018 under a severe regime of expulsion of migrant and minority groups.

Eviction has become the perfect mechanism for the City Council to reaffirm control over occupied buildings and at the same time to solve, by evaporating it, the refugees' need of housing. The refugees' evictability has become a strategy of

dispersion: refugees and migrants have been first displaced from the neighbourhood where they settled for years, later on displaced from encampments and shelters in abandoned buildings in more peripheral areas in the city. The result is a cyclical process of evacuations and forced evictions that reduces, at minimum, the possibility to settle and to ask for housing rights; the consequence being their displacement out of the city where it is even harder to mediate the situation. As van Baar frames it, “eviction and the fear to be evicted have become peculiar incentives to increase, rather than decrease, forced mobility and differential inclusion” (2017, 223).

Seeing the eviction of via Curtatone in relation to gentrification and related housing shortages allows us to stress the Local Government’s structural incapacity (lack of will) in negotiating with financial institutions to provide housing for durable tenancy to refugees and migrants (either in search of stability or in transit). The lack of housing has resulted in a divisive force that pits Italians against potential ‘invaders’, fighting for basic material rights, in a growing climate of racism, intolerance and repression. Divisive slogans, such as ‘prima gli Italiani’ (Italians first), for instance, in the allocation of public housing, in the fulfilment of citizen desires and job opportunities, have been normalized and legitimized by public discourses alongside evacuation orders. The current anti-migrant rhetoric thus provides justification for the unjustifiable: forced eviction of people to whom the Italian State have (already) granted the status of international protection, with a consequent duty of guaranteeing ‘full’ citizenship rights. The evictability of refugees and transit migrants then not only represents a revanchist attitude by the financial elite over the city’s de-commodified (read squatted) spatial resources, it testifies to displacement based on discrimination.

There is no place for refugees in the gentrified landscape of the city centre of Rome, apart from running the informal economy upon which the tourist sector is based. Whether refugees and migrants will stay or leave will depend both on our capacity to prevent displacement and to delineate strategies that reconfirm legitimation to self-managed housing as a possible housing alternative.

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