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„My Home's a Prison": The Impact of the Covid-19 Lockdown on the Dwelling Experience in Northwest Italy

Abstract: Since early 2020, the anthropological community has investigated the cultural and social impact of the pandemic and the exceptional countermeasures of the Italian government. This paper contributes to the debate by exploring how the lockdown experience is linked to the sense of dwelling and the changed sense of place in one's residence and home. In particular, the processes of signification of urban and rural space and the relationship between these and the perception of one's home are explored.

Keywords: urbanism, dwelling, home, Lockdown, Covid-19

Introduction

Since early 2020, the anthropological community has investigated the cultural and social impact of the pandemic and the exceptional countermeasures put in place by governments worldwide. The special issues and forums published by international journals, such as *Anthropology News, Cultural Anthropology,* and *Social Anthropology,* testify to this widespread commitment. While the pandemic reshaped the everyday practices of individuals, communities, and countries so deeply as to mark the rise of a new epoch, the „Coronacene", as suggested by Higgins, Martin, and Vesperi (2020), this paper aims to explore the impact on urban dwelling considering the dramatic change of the everyday dynamics that the lockdown imposed. In so doing, this paper follows a body of research including the seminal work of Bauman (1998), Connerton (2009), Giddens (1990), Soja (2000) and others interrogating the limits and future of modern urbanization.

In the debate concerning the impact of Covid-19 in urban contexts, particular attention is given to the question of housing. Where poor housing conditions proved to have a correlation with higher Covid-19 incidence and mortality (Ahmad et al. 2020), as well as a deeper and more detrimental psy-

chological impact of the pandemic (Akbari et al. 2021), the very understanding of what is optimal housing changed. Early pieces of evidence emerged from the housing market where, as in the case of the USA, demand for less densely populated areas (Liu & Su 2021) as well as for larger accommodations rose (D'Lima et al. 2022). While consumption choices refer to deeper cultural processes (Miller 2012), this data suggests the emergence of a new understanding of the domestic space as well as a change of relationship concerning urban dwelling.

In this paper, I refer to the dwelling by following Ingold (2000) and considering dwelling as the specific mental and bodily practice of being and understanding a place through continuous interaction. In this regard, being in a place is not limited to its passive experience, but extends to a dynamic and constant relationship between man and environment capable of overcoming the subject – surrounding dichotomy (Lazzarino 2017). This perspective refers, therefore, to a dynamic construction of the sense of a place based on sensorial experience (Feld & Basso 1996) as well as the cultural categories that underpin human behavior. Specifically, here, the category called into question is that of domesticity.

What is encompassed within the domestic space is culturally based (Philips 2010) and is built on the distinction and interconnection between distinct semantic spheres, namely, the public and the private (Cieraad 1999). While in an agricultural society the domestic is meant as a self-reliant entity, and thus the fundamental unit of a community's economy (Gudeman 2005), in the case of cities, houses developed into residual spaces where to perform certain biological and sociocultural functions away from the public eye (Sæter 2011). Contemporary urbanism has, in fact, developed based on the principles of the interconnection of spaces, perpetual motion, and constant access to services and goods (Wiryomartono 2020), in so much to give birth to a city that never sleeps. The Covid-19 pandemic showed the limits of this arrangement.

This paper is an exploration of the cultural changes that have occurred in the perception of the domestic space, as well as the understanding of the urban space as a whole, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown policies. It does so based on the results of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Italy in 2020. The country was the first that introduced a national lockdown, the economic and social costs of which have been widely documented (Bonaccorsi et al. 2020). Scholars have pointed out this emergency public health measure changed consumption practices and social habits (e.g. Fontefrancesco 2021; Mondada et al. 2020; Oncini et al. 2020). The paper takes the analysis further suggesting the lockdown utterly transforms the ways in which the urban space is perceived by its dwellers, sparking new interest in the countryside.

Research and Context

This article is based on multi-sited ethnographic research (Falzon 2009) aimed at exploring the anthropological impact of the so-called „Phase 1" of the pandemic in Italy.

Phase 1 began on March 11th following weeks of growing political and public concern over the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Italy. The first cases of infection were recorded on January 30th in Rome. However, the first actual outbreak was identified on February 20th in Codogno, Northern Italy, with 16 cases recorded. A few hours later, the first Covid-19-related death was diagnosed. Within a few days, the epidemic reached the regional level, involving the Lombardy and Veneto region. On February 25th the national government adopted the first set of measures of mobility limitations, ranging from the suspension of all direct flights to and from China to the establishment of quarantine areas (the so-called „Red Zones"). Despite these measures, the contagion curve continued to rise, and the epidemic spread to a large area in the north of the country. On March 7th, the government announced the extension of „Red Zone" mobility restrictions to 14 provinces in Piedmont, Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, and Veneto, starting from March 9th. Over the following forty-eight hours, thousands of people left the concerned provinces, which resulted in the spreading of the infection at the national level. Consequently, on March 11th these exceptional measures were extended to the entire national territory. Thus began the so-called „Phase 1", which lasted until May 4th. During this period, Italy entered lockdown. Most economic activities (with few exceptions such as the sale of food and newspapers) were suspended. Public offices, schools, restaurants, bars, theaters, and cinemas were closed, as well as most factories and companies in the tertiary sector (except for companies in strategic sectors, such as health, food, and agriculture, albeit with strict rules of physical distancing and sanitation). Limitations of individual mobility (except for emergencies, commuting, and purchasing food and medicines) were in place. In some regions, these measures could be further tightened. For example, the maximum distance to be traveled outside one's home might be reduced, and practices otherwise permitted by the central government, such as some sports activities, might be forbidden.

The research focused on the Italian Northwest and, specifically, on Milan and its local work system which encompasses a large part of western Lombardy and the eastern part of Piedmont (Cacioli 2020). This area is one of the most heavily urbanized in the country (Turri 2004) and was deeply affected by the first epidemic wave (Alicandro et al. 2020). In this area, moreover, I focused most of my ethnographic research exploring issues concerning local development in rural and urban contexts (e.g. Fontefrancesco 2013; Fontefrancesco 2020).

The research was conducted in two phases. First, between March and April 2020, during Phase 1, in-depth interviews were conducted on the telephone or via digital communication platforms. Second, between May and September 2020, face-to-face interviews were added to the initial methodology. Data included the first interview during Phase 1, then a second interview in the following months. Interviews were conducted according to the life history methodology (Atkinson 2002), focusing on the experience and perception of the lockdown.

Research participants were selected according to the relevance of their experience for understanding the impact of the lockdown and its representation. The snowball sampling method (Goodman 1961) was used to ensure homogeneity in terms of education and socioeconomic status. It was decided not to focus on a section of the population defined as „at-risk" from a social and economic point of view (De Lauso & De Capite 2020, 10–14). Fragile social strata are the ones mostly affected by the lockdown, having endured rising poverty and limitations (Patel et al. 2020). However, they are also the ones that endured urban marginalization and alienation before the pandemic (Paragano 2019). In this respect, the research aimed at investigating the change of perception in a sector that is traditionally equipped with sufficient social, economic, and cultural capital not to have experienced particular forms of urban alienation (Parker 1978) before the pandemic. Thus, I focused on the urban middle-class embodied by professionals working in white-collar jobs in non-exec positions in Milan.

Overall, interviews were conducted involving informants between 30 and 50 years old. All research participants were informed before the interview about the purpose of the research, the methods, and the processes of data analysis. Names and places have been anonymized and the analysis and presentation of data followed the ethical guidelines of the American Anthropological Association *Principles of Professional Responsibility*.

Age	Male	Female	With Children	Family net annual income less than 30.000 euros	Family net annual income between 30.000 and 50.000 euros
31–40 y.	22	18	9	8	12
41–50 y.	21	19	13	3	17

Table 1. Main socioeconomic characteristics of the sample

Among them, this article focuses particularly on the life stories and narratives of two research participants, each representing a "*human-individual actor whose intrinsic nature may be described separately from a description of the details of his or her current cultural milieu, social standing, structural empla-*

cement, or symbolic categorization." (Rapport 2012, 86). Following a comparative case approach (Eisenhardt 1989), the two experiences are here presented in parallel in order to describe different processes of signification of the pandemic depending on their dwelling strategies.

Parallel Stories

Giorgio and Mario have been working together in the same office for over ten years. They are both in their forties, one from the Piedmont region, and the other from Southern Italy. They arrived in Milan in the late 1990s to study at the university. Later they were hired, at different times, by a company in the Milanese province. They found themselves working in the same office and developed a daily routine made up of commuting and office life. Both live about an hour's drive from the company. Giorgio lives in Borgonuovo, a small village in the valleys on the Piedmontese side of the Ligurian Apennines where he grew up. Mario lives in Milan, where he bought a house a few years ago with his wife. For Giorgio and Mario, the Covid-19 emergency marked a period of over two months in which ordinary life was interrupted, forcing them to leave their office and continue their work at home, which restricted their horizon to the domestic space and its immediate surroundings. For them, the lockdown was a period of renegotiation of domestic space, searching for a new balance between work and private life. Despite such a structural similarity, the limitation of their mobility took a deeply different meaning, rooted in the specificity of the lived context and their dynamics of dwelling. That emerges from the interviews conducted in September after Giorgio and Mario had resumed working in the office and sporadically from home:

> „The lockdown for me has been first and foremost the fear of the early days..." explains Giorgio. But then he wanted to go back to living in Borgo Nuovo. „I believe I had not been shopping at Maria's [the only food shop left in the community] for twenty years at that time. And since then, for two months, I have been seeing her every day for small purchases. Once a week, I went to Alexandria to do the big shopping. The house is large, and, for the first time, I really used the room that I had originally arranged as an office. For years colleagues asked me why I kept on living lost in the Apennines. But recently, nobody asks me that question anymore... Except for the first few days, the police checks decreased, they became very few even for a village where only a few hundred people live and only had a few cases of contagion. Normally, on the streets of Borgonuovo, you do not see a soul. It is easier to meet a roe deer or a wild boar than a human... We were locked at home, but we never really felt in danger. I had to change my internet contract; that, yes. In the initial days it was a big problem, with my job, but then... Except for the fear of the initial moments, and the pain of losing friends, the lockdown for me has been just this: a homecoming.

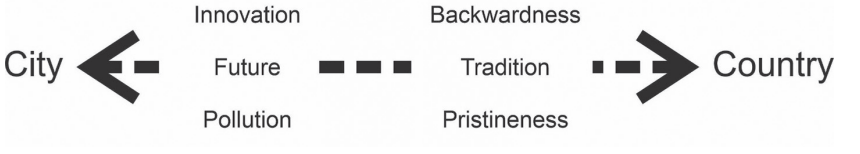
„Don't mention the lockdown... and don't tell me how beautiful life in the city is," says Mario. „I understand those who jumped on a train in March and went back home. It has been two months of hell in the city; two months in prison, or worse! The problem was not the apartment per se, which is large; neither do I have a problem with my wife. It was just that, for two months, I could only see the world through the window. A sad and grey wall. Going out was not possible; we could only go out if we had to. Then the queues... and the fear that someone might cough on us. Then... the people clapping in the evening... that made the whole thing all the more absurd. And the fear of being in the elevator, because you could not know if someone in the building was infected. Apparently, someone did die of Covid. No cinema, no shops, no friends. At home, just the two of us. We baked... bread, pizza, cookies, pasta... I called my relatives in the south and asked for recipes. One evening, we ordered paper lanterns and Chinese chopsticks and we had a themed night, with food delivered by the Japanese restaurant on the corner. Let's just not talk about the lockdown in the city! At the end of April, when everything was about to finish, [my wife] and I took the car at night and drove to the countryside to see the sunrise. We cried like babies. Looking back, it scares me. For me, that's what the lockdown is; a sense of imprisonment, fear of dying in a four-room cell on the fourth floor..."

A Changing Sense of Place

Giorgio and Mario told similar stories to the extent that they placed dwelling at the center of their narrative, and lockdown not only expresses the delocalization of one's daily life, but also a profound change associated with the sense of place, and the way people meet, perceive, invest with meanings, and naturalize different sensory worlds. Thus, the impact of the pandemic is so profoundly linked with the characteristics of the place where they spent the period of isolation that its experience is situated (Lauer & Aswani 2009) and undivorceable from the very environment where it is lived.

Thus, the environment is the first protagonist of the signification of the pandemic and it is conceptualized through two antithetical contexts: the one of the city, and the one of the country. According to Williams (1973), these categories are loaded with shifting cultural meanings. Specifically, after the industrial revolution, their polarized definition identified the city as a vibrant but contaminated place, and the country as a place anchored in the past but still pure (Fig. 1).

Fig 1. Polarized perception of the city and the country.



The interviews reflected this understanding, and in particular, the impact of the lockdown in shaking an otherwise consolidated perception that portrays two spatial faces of contemporary Italy (see table 1).

	% National population	% Number of municipalities	% National area
Urban Italy	31% (18.7 M inhabitants)	1% (106 municipalities with more than 60,000 inhabitants)	7% 21,000 Km^2
Rural Italy	21% (12.7 M inhabitants)	70% (5,498 municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants)	60% 181,000 Km^2

Table 1. Urban/rural *Italy compared. ISTAT Data 2019.*

Italy in the new millennium is predominantly urban (according to the 2010 general census, 68% of the population lives in urbanized contexts). This situation results from the unstoppable process of depopulation of the countryside which began in the second half of the nineteenth century (Bravo 2013), as well as the employment crisis and aging of the national agricultural sector (Cagliero & Novelli 2012). Confronted with the progressive marginalization of rural areas, the national public debate touched on the question of how to trigger the development of rural areas, far from major transportation routes and with limited infrastructure resources (Barberis 2009; Borghi 2017; D'Alessandro 2020; De Rossi 2018). Despite several interventions, marginalization does not stop: limited possibilities for development exist in individual communities within ecotourism and gastronomic tourism (D'Alessandro et al. 2020; Kaneff & Endres 2021). In contrast, the urban space is the main engine of economic, social, and cultural development of the country, with its richness of contacts, relationships, and opportunities. This point was also made explicit by my informants. A woman in her mid-30s: *"I left my village, about three hours' drive away from Milan, and reached the city. I did it because I was sure that at home there was no future for me, while Milan offered something unique in terms of future perspective and better quality of life. This has been true for almost a decade. Then, the pandemic broke out and demonstrated how I was wrong."*

Among my informants living in the city the positive attitude towards the urban environment, however, seems to be challenged by the lockdown scenario, in which many forms of sociality were suddenly removed by the pandemic (Mondada et al. 2020). In fact, the research suggests the lockdown period has been more negative for those who live in urban and metropolitan contexts. Unlike those living in rural areas, in small villages, or on isolated farms, these remarked

how the lockdown severely impacted their life and that it was difficult adjusting to the new situation. For them, the city turned into a hostile environment.

As it emerges from the experience of Giorgio and Mario, a crucial element in the process of hostilization of the urban surroundings is their density "*because of the concentration of (different) social groups, activities, understandings, wills, desires, instances, interests, and values*" (Tulumello 2016, 125), but also because of the high population concentration and proximity to strangers (Auge 1992). Similarly to what was portrayed by Will (2020) concerning the public debate in the UK, my informants linked the spreading of the disease with the occasional encounter with other, unfamiliar people.

„*We are surrounded by people who we don't know and we don't know what they bring with them [in terms of Covid-19 infection]*" remarked one of the informants. In this respect proximity had a problematic and dangerous connotation, making the city an uncanny landscape (Navaro-Yashin 2012), and a hostile and alienating place in which to be.

Conversely, in the rural context, where ordinariness was marked by the absence of opportunities and loneliness (Teti 2011), this very rarefaction was perceived as reassuring. *"Before the Covid pandemic, I would consider very negatively the fact that you cannot find anybody around the village during a weekday... During the lockdown... well... it was a gift from heaven. This meant that I and my family could have a walk safely every day even in the worst days of March,"* summarized one of the informants, living in a settlement in the Lombard Prealps. In this respect, the quotidian marginalization of the rural settlement made it a safe place (Porcelloni & Mazzanti 2020), guaranteed by its isolation and „rarefaction"; a setting that allows people to loosen both measures of individual limitation and the perception of individual danger.

While the surroundings played a central role in shaping the dwelling experience during the lockdown, as the stories of Giorgio and Mario suggest, another crucial aspect is the very articulation of the domestic space in terms both of space available for each individual and the activities that can be contained within the boundaries of the home (Motta 2020).

Urban dwelling in a metropolis is often associated with comparatively small accommodations, marked by solutions such as small studios or shared apartments. In an ordinary situation, this restrictedness is balanced by the possibilities offered by the city itself, in terms of goods and services that allow outsourcing outside the domestic space of vernacular activities such as eating, washing clothes, or storing goods. The liveability of the house is, therefore, a dynamic combination of inside and outside. This intrinsic dependence became critical when the access to extra-domestic reality was limited and the supply of goods and services offered by the city was restricted by the legislation. *"I'm single and was used to washing my clothes in the automatic laundry down the road. I rent*

my home and there is no actual space for drying the clothes. During the lockdown, I never ever went to the laundry and washed the few things I needed in my tub. Well after two months I was desperately missing a washing machine", recounted a 32-year-old bank clerk.

In order to explain the vivid discomfort and fear that was experienced when facing the limits of urban lodging, my informant often referred to the episode that occurred on the night between March 7th and 8th. The national media describe the event as „the race to the trains", although the first and far more substantive departure from Milan was registered on February 23rd (D'Alessandro 2020). Months later, the internet is still inundated with images of the train stations packed with passengers. On the eve of the first restrictions to individual mobility, thousands of mostly young people rushed to catch a train or drive to their city of origin. They were students and workers from other regions, mostly from the South. Live images were broadcast on national TV and social media, which triggered indignant reactions from the public, including the ever-present, never dormant, regional stereotypes (Pardalis 2009). As my informants indicated, this hasty exodus was motivated by the fear of contagion, but also by the perception of one's home as liveable. That is the case for university students and young workers who were interviewed during the research. The primary motive for their escape from Milan was the fear of quarantine in the city, which meant, more often than not, a space as limited as a room in a shared flat.

„I think about the students and junior workers, and I feel very bad for them," commented one of the informants in her early 40es. „But also for us, parents with kids, it was difficult. We had to negotiate spaces, internet connection, and silence. It was hard." While on an international level the lockdown coincided with the rise of domestic violence (Bradbury-Jones & Isham 2020), the regime of forced cohabitation, especially in small houses, was described as an additional factor that further exacerbated the sense of precariousness felt by my informants in front of the pandemic, creating further tension, a sense of impotence and claustrophobia. These feelings were not recorded among informants with larger houses and especially among those living in rural areas, where both the houses are more spacious and the external pressure related to the risk of infection, as we have seen, was reduced.

Analyzing the Berber houses of Kabyle, Bourdieu emphasized how domestic and public spaces were distinct and opposing spheres of life, functionally and culturally self-sufficient (Bourdieu 1977). In contrast, the research highlights the domestic space in a present urban context developing as an ancillary space to the public one. The rescission of this bond has highlighted the limitation of this arrangement and its fragility. These were expressed in the plurality of ordinary affects (Stewart 2007) described in the interviews: forces that accentuated the sense of uneasiness linked with the fear of the disease. This led the inform-

ants to engage in reflection on the actual liveability of their homes, and also on the very meaning of urban dwelling. None of them believed after the pandemic the city would be the same. *"My house is my prison," explained a marketing expert in her forties. „I loved the city and have always believed our lives depended on its vibrant rhythms. Life was outside our homes. Why have a home, so? I personally paid the price of the fragility of this way of dwelling and with me most of the people of Milan and of all the big cities around Europe. Now, we have to find a new way forward."*

Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns that marked the past years represented a milestone for contemporary urban dwellings. The case study of the first Italian national lockdown as it was lived by middle-class workers active in Milan shows the actual limits of a way of living based on interconnection, motion, and extensive use of the public space developed at the expense of the domestic space. Specifically, two spatial dimensions deeply affected the experience of the informants: the level of obligatory interconnection with the outside, which is the level of unavoidable exposure to encounters with unknown people every day, and the availability of sufficient domestic space to contain within the domestic walls all the working and leisure activities of an individual and a family. While the rural areas appeared to provide more resilient lodging against the detrimental sociopsychological effects of the lockdown, the urban accommodations appeared insufficient in face of the crisis. Enduring this constricted experience, the informants started questioning the very meaning of contemporary urban dwellings, opening up the discussion about the future of present cities.

In exploring these ethnographic data, this research offers its contribution to understanding the main cultural features associated with contemporary dwelling strategies and their development. Moreover, in an international context marked by the UN SDGs among which the development of sustainable cities and communities is identified among the priorities, this contribution opens the question of how to build new and more resilient spaces of domesticity, finding a more functional equilibrium between what constitutes the public and the private space. In this respect, a key direction for reflection seems to point toward the dynamic management of the density of interconnections. In an attempt to find a more sustainable path to follow, the research highlights the potentialities that the rural areas and settlements seem to offer, suggesting looking outside the city to find at least some of the responses needed to answer the emergent questions that mark the future of contemporary urbanization.

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„Moj dom je zatvor": Uticaj zaključavanja zbog kovida-19 na doživljaj stanovanja u severozapadnoj Italiji

Od prvih meseci 2020. godine antropolozi proučavaju kulturni i socijalni uticaj pandemije i vanrednih protivmera koje je uvela italijanska vlada. Ovaj rad predstavlja prilog ovoj raspravi time što proučava način na koji je iskustvo zaključavanja zbog kovida povezano s doživljajem stanovanja i izmenjenim

osećajem mesta u svom domu, a posebna pažnja posvećena je procesima signifikacije urbanog i ruralnog prostora i odnosa između njih i percepcije svog doma.

Ključne reči: urbanizam, prebivalište, dom, zaključavanje, kovid-19

Mon chez-moi est une prison": L'impact du confinement Covid-19 sur le sentiment d'habiter en Italie du nord-ouest

Depuis le début de 2020, la communauté anthropologique étudie l'impact culturel et social de la pandémie et des contre-mesures exceptionnelles instaurées par le gouvernement italien. Cet article contribue au débat en explorant la manière dont l'expérience du confinement est liée au sentiment d'habiter un lieu et la perception changée de son chez-soi. Une attention particulière est consacrée aux processus de signification de l'espace urbain et rural et aux rapports entre ces espaces et la perception de son chez-soi.

Mots clés: urbanisme, domicile, chez-soi, confinement, Covid-19

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