The paper explores forms and roles of ethnic economies in Italian cities following a perspective able to underline both the integration role that they can assume for immigrants and between immigrants and natives, as well as their possible contribution within policies aimed at promoting “competitive cities”.

From the national context point of view, Italy is still a country that looks at immigration as a “temporary emergency”. From 2008 very strong measures against immigrants have been introduced, contributing to simplify the public debate to security issues. Despite this general context the “integrative capacity” expressed by a number of cities has been underlined. This role of the cities has been possible also because national laws have only worked on immigration policies aimed at controlling the flows of people, completely devolving integration policies to the local level.

Moreover, an increasing body of literature has tried to create the preconditions for a different point of view, exploring ways of looking at the immigrant groups not only as a problem, but as a resource for the vitality of urban life and economy. In this perspective, entrepreneurs are seen as one of the less problematic side of immigration for their low level of welfare dependency. Furthermore, they have been able to express dynamic economies that are expanding despite the global crisis, their contribution to the Italian GDP having been estimated around 10%.

Based on a field research carried out in the last three years in a number of cities of North Italy that are promoting visitor economy or other policies aimed at stimulating their attractiveness, the paper explores if and how ethnic economies have been able to root at local level, which role they play in the neighbourhoods from the natives’, the immigrants’ and the new city-users’ point of view, if and how the political strategies aimed at creating competitive cities at national and international level have been able to deal or not with these intrinsically trans-national realities.

Keywords: regeneration policies, ethnic economies, North West Italy, economic competitiveness, social cohesion
Introduction

The paper explores forms and roles given by regeneration policies to ethnic economies in a number of Italian cities, following a perspective able to underline both the integration role that they can assume for immigrants and between immigrants and natives, as well as their possible contribution within policies aimed at promoting “competitive cities”.

The paper is based on a field research carried out in the last three years that has explored the regeneration strategies carried out in three multi-ethnic areas in Genoa, Brescia and Turin (North-West Italy). All these cities have been important industrial centres and, in recent years, the economic restructuring of the post-industrial ages has led their leaderships and policy makers to invest in visitor economy or in other initiatives aimed at stimulating their attractiveness for city users. The physical and socio-economic transformation of their sometimes anonymous, sometimes deprived, city centres has been part of these strategies. All the considered contexts – Genoa’s Old Town, the Carmine neighbourhood in Brescia, Porta Palazzo in Turin – are located in central and peri-central areas involved in the regeneration strategies, the real estate pressure becoming higher, rendering socio-economic and territorial inclusion/exclusion objectives of policies clearer.

Moreover, in the last years the immigrants’ presence in these areas and especially their visibility, has led stigmatization processes to arise: in a recent past these were no go areas for some and a no exit zones for others. Regeneration initiatives have changed this situation, sometimes dealing directly with the immigrant presence, sometimes even not mentioning it, sometimes trying to consider the local development and the social integration issues both from the immigrants’ and from the natives’ point of view. This last point is quite relevant as, until now, very common phenomena that could be found in other countries such as the ethnic enclaves, or the immigrants’ groups concentration or segregation in specific neighbourhoods, are unusual in Italy. Multi-ethnic settlements are “really” multi-ethnic as people from different countries live in the considered areas, including a prevailing presence of Italian citizens (Cozzarini, 2007). For this reason it could be interesting analyzing if and how regeneration policies have been able or not to consider ethnic shops and businesses, as well as their related activities as places of encounter, cross-cultural knowledge and exchange.

It’s important to underline that the Italian public debate is still dominated by the belief that immigrants shouldn’t come and stay in the country. Despite the phenomenon’s very fast increasing, immigration is still treated as a “temporary emergency”: the national laws’ traditional approach mainly aimed at controlling the flows of people, has been confirmed from 2008 when very strong measures against

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1 Far from any kind of “cultural reductionism”, and considering the high degree of arbitrariness within the process of categorization of ethnic groups’ businesses, the paper assume the “mixed embeddedness” perspective (Kloosterman & Rath, 2001), as well as embraces a simplification considering as “ethnic” any kind of immigrant’s owned business, independently from the its level of “integration” in the host society.

2 The case-studies have been realized directly through a field research, as well as through a review of the existing literature on the main development and planning strategies adopted by the different cities.

3 The paper embraces a conception of integration as a two-way process including both the immigrants and the host society. This conception helps to render problematic the most commonly held views of immigrants as all potentially excluded people, and of their culture as only linked to national, ethnic or religious origins (Gallissot et al., 2001). Culture is also a matter of gender, age, education, permanence within the host society, and socio-economic condition. I have argued in other works that recognizing these differences is a core point for regeneration policies that aim to deal with diversity without creating problems of social justice between immigrants and natives (Briata, 2009a).

4 Over the last ten years the number of legal immigrants has almost trebled. At the beginning of 2009, almost five million immigrants officially lived in Italy, composing 8,3% of the country’s total population. In 2008 they were half a million less (Fondazione ISMU, 2010).
immigrants have been introduced, contributing to simplify the public debate to security issues (Rivera, 2009), and following Italian citizens’ already “hostile” attitudes, not to say racist and xenophobic (Naletto, 2010).

On the other hand, an increasing body of literature has underlined the relevance of the immigrants’ presence in the country as they have been able to express dynamic economies that are expanding despite the global crisis, their contribution to the Italian GDP having been estimated around 10% (Fondazione Ethnoland, 2009).

As the entrepreneurs may be seen as one of the less problematic sides of immigration for their low level of welfare dependency, investing in this realities could be relevant both from the economic competitiveness and from the social cohesion point of view. In this direction, also regeneration policies may contribute to create the preconditions for “out of the mainstream” approaches, exploring ways of looking at the immigrants groups not only as a problem, but as a resource for the vitality of urban life and economy.

This approach is legitimized by the fact that, despite the quite aggressive public debate at a national level, literature on the “Italian way” of dealing with immigration has pointed out that a “local and adaptive” model of integration can be recognized (Caponio, 2006): as national laws have worked only on immigration policies, integration policies for immigrants have been completely devolved to the “local” level. It has been underlined that a “devolving approach” could be recognized, as the State devolves the integration policies to the Municipalities, and then, the Municipalities devolve a lot of tasks to the third sector and private associations (voluntary groups, cooperatives, trade unions and churches). As non-public bodies are diverse and differently rooted in each town, a wide range of approaches can be found: each city could have its particular “integration model”.

Based on this general framework, the paper aims at exploring if and how ethnic economies have been able to root at local level, which role they may play in the neighbourhoods from the natives’, the immigrants’ and the new city-users’ point of view, if and how the political strategies aimed at creating vibrant and competitive cities at national and international level have been able to deal or not with these intrinsically trans-national realities.

1. Commercial gentrification in Genoa’s old town

Strategically located on the sea, Genoa represents – as well as Milan and Turin – one of the vertices of what is commonly known as the “industrial triangle” of Italy. Traditionally a port and an industrial centre, after the 1970/80s crisis and the harbour reorganization, the city’s great effort to manage a transition towards a diversified economic reality based also on tourism, culture and leisure has been widely recognized (Gabrielli S., 2005). Nowadays the city counts 132.000 inhabitants.

With its surface of 113 hectares, Genoa’s old town is one of the largest historical centres in Europe. This part of the city has always been the gateway for the newcomers and, especially from the beginning of the 20th century, has been characterized by marginality, social exclusion, crime and illegal activities (Dal Lago, Quadrelli, 2003). Until the 1990s it was the “dark side” of the city: a “no go” area for the middle and upper classes that tended to settle in the hills zones outside the old town. The small alleys (carugi) that characterize this historical centre, the buildings’ state of decay and the decline of the public spaces, fostered the perception of a dangerous place. From the ’80s the arrival of immigrants from North Africa and South America contributed to enhance the negative perception of the old town. From 2000 the immigrants’ presence in the old town was estimated around 22,1%, even
if in some areas (rioni) such as the so called “ghetto” the percentage was up 40%, in other it was less than the average.

Close to the old town, Genoa’s waterfront has been for centuries occupied by the docks, and until the 1990s the city had “lost” its relationship with the sea. The docks were “a wall” between the city and the sea. Hemmed in between steep mountains and the sea, Genoa didn’t have so many territorial resources to develop its new economic strategy based also on tourism, culture and leisure. This strategy implied an investment on the regeneration of an highly stigmatized historical centre and on its reconnection with the sea (Bobbio, 2008).

The early 1990s saw the large-scale deployment of resources to activate processes of urban regeneration for the old town and the waterfront, redefining their image and identity, promoting the visitor economy, and improving the urban facilities and spaces for leisure. Three main families of integrated actions and policies made the regeneration process of such a huge area possible and sustainable: a series of “great events” that played a core role mobilizing large-scale resources; some architectural and urban design interventions that contributed to attract new city users in the historical centre, changing the perception of a “dangerous place”; last but not least, an integrated system of regeneration and renewal initiatives carried out through European, national, regional and local funding programs.

From the great events’ point of view, a core date to understand the city’s new development strategy is 1992 when Genoa (Columbus birthing place) hosted the Colombiadi – an international exposition celebrating the 500th anniversary of the discovery of the Americas. The exhibition played an important role especially for the old harbour renewal. In 2001, the G8 summit conference allowed a number of interventions for the old town renewal, including large-scale actions of “urban maintenance” involving streets, historical buildings’ façades and public spaces. Finally, in 2004 Genoa was awarded European Capital of Culture: this event implied actions of urban maintenance and redevelopment of public spaces and façades of the historical buildings, strengthening of the museums functions, environmental redevelopment projects for the central area and the waterfront, organization of cultural events, promotion of the city’s image but, most important, played a core role to make the new touristic vocation of Genoa well known at an international level, and to foster a new identity and a sense of pride for the city in its own inhabitants.

Confirming and strengthening the new touristic vocation of the city, in 2006 the Strade Nuove (new streets) – that lay in a pivotal position between the middle ages streets of the old town to the south and the modern traffic system to the north – and the related system of Palazzi dei Rolli (private residences belonging to the city’s aristocratic families that in 1536 started to host the distinguished guests of the Republic of Genoa) were included in the Unesco World Heritage List.

Before 1992 (during the 1980s) a number of architectural and urban design interventions played a core role in the old town recovery process: the restoring of the city’s main square, Piazza de Ferrari; the transformation of Palazzo Ducale into a cultural and exposition centre; the re-opening of the Carlo Felice theatre (the local opera house). These places are not in the historical centre, but may represent a sort of “clasp” between the old and the new town. Moreover, in the same years the Faculty of Architecture was moved from an upper class neighbourhood on the hills to the historical centre. The new faculty building was realized on a former monastery bombed site. This was a quite relevant choice both from the symbolic and from the substantial point of view: on one hand, the moving of such a relevant urban function in a former stigmatized site represented the new will of the city’s leaderships to invest on a long-time forgotten place; on the other hand, the university presence stimulated first generation of gentrifiers – students, artists, creative class – to move in the old town (Gastaldi, 2009).
Finally, a number of integrated plans and projects funded at European, National, Regional and local level, were developed in the different areas of the historical center, including public and private actions for housing renewal, as well as the public space’s and built environment’s rehabilitation and improvement.

As described by Bruno Gabrielli, an academic who was Alderman for the Urban Quality during the recovery strategy implementation, these policies aimed also at raising the real estate values (Gabrielli B. et al, 2006). A policy aimed at raising the real estate values leads to gentrification processes. As also the most “socially oriented” programs (for example the so-called Neighbourhood Contracts) have not provided strong initiatives to cope with these phenomena, the old town social mix is preserved only thanks to a spontaneous market process as wealthy people don’t buy dwellings located in the first floors of the old buildings because the lighting is not good (ibid).

It has been widely acknowledged that the Genoa’s recovery strategy was successful: the city has been reconnected with the sea and the historical center, mainly in the part that lay east of Via San Lorenzo, thanks also to the Faculty of Architecture’s and other urban functions’ presence, has become a place to visit and stay for city users and tourists. In this way, the urban space is less dominated by the immigrants’ and social excluded people’s presence; visitors and city users feel “safe”. In the last years the results of this process may be seen also thanks to the arrival of second generation of gentrifiers, that includes also people from the upper classes previously living in other areas (Gastaldi, 2009).

Some major problems remains in the Maddalena area that results only partially gentrified, and in the Ghetto and Prè areas, still characterized by deprivation, social exclusion and high presence of immigrants.

From the local development point of view, two main programs contributed to the commercial gentrification of the old town:

- the European Initiative Urban II that implied actions of renewal, economic and social revitalization in the old town, the historical docks buildings’ restoration and promotion for tourism and cultural purposes, as well as the public space’s and built environment’s improvement;
- the Integrated street centers (Centri integrati di via) – where European Objective 2 Funds aimed at strengthening the commercial environment have been used.

Policies implied not only direct funding for existing economies to be improved and for new ones to be created, as well as for the public space and services improvement, but also actions aimed at establishing an information centre for the entrepreneurs, and contributions to build up associations to the joint management of already existing services for the enterprises. These last action were inspired also by a national law launched in 1997 that promoted the creation of the so-called “natural shopping malls” in the historical centres. Even if it’s not possible to say that immigrants were formally excluded by these actions, the newcomers foreseeable difficulty to relate with the bids’ rules and with the local authorities made their participation hard (de Benedittis, 2005). This means that the new activities that opened in the most gentrified areas of the old town are mainly related to the new users’ population: bar, restaurants and services related to the tourists’, the students’ and the creative class’ presence. These activities were opened in the most gentrified areas, leaving space for the old ones in the still problematic parts of the historical centre. Genoa old town is thus now characterized by the presence of different socio-economic realities that express still unsolved tensions between contrasting social needs and development strategies. This means that until now the city, despite a quite successful urban renewal program, seem not having been able to invest on the immigrant’s entrepreneurship’s presence despite an inclusive public discourse constructed at local level. Genoa has been presented by local
authorities as a multicultural city emphasizing its role as a port as well as a gateway for immigrants. A number of cultural policies have been promoted in this direction, and characterised also the proposal that led the city to be European Capital of Culture in 2004. Without denying the cultural value of these actions in a country as Italy, this out of the mainstream public debate should be reflected also in more “substantial” forms of intervention that from the regeneration policies point of view have been until now quite weak.

2. The spontaneous commercial mix of the Carmine neighbourhood in Brescia

Located within the Lombardy Region, Brescia is the fourth economic centre of Italy and counts 191,000 inhabitants. Despite a still quite strong industrial tradition based mainly on metallurgical industries, in recent years the city has seen a significant process of development of the tertiary and finance sectors. Moreover, an effort to promote visitor economy as well as to enforce its university could be recognized (Granata et al., 2010). The Carmine neighbourhood is located in the historic heart of Brescia, and has always been a working class area, as well a hosting place for the newcomers coming from the mountain valleys close to the town in the 19th century, from the south of Italy in the 1950/70s, and from North Africa, South East Asia and East Europe starting from the 1990s. Social exclusion phenomena, deviance and prostitution have led Carmine to be considered one of the most problematic areas of Brescia (Grandi, 2008).

The arrival of the most recent immigrant groups occurred at a critical point in the history of the area: local population reducing and ageing, residential dereliction, public spaces declining, closure of shops and businesses, presence of illegal activities. This situation favoured the immigrants’ settlement in this part of the city from the 1990s when abandoned buildings were used as living and working places. The migrant population grew from 8% (over a population of 4412 inhabitants) in 1992 to 40% (over a population of 4650 inhabitants) in 2008. Between 2002 and 2006 the enterprises run by immigrants groups increased from 20 to 110.

These dynamics generated an informal real estate market with high rental prices despite the houses’ state of decay, cases of severe overcrowding, and economic or other types of exploitation between Italians and foreigners but also between co-nationals. These new urban trends, even though characterized by informality/illegality, contributed to slowing down the process of decline in the area, allowing new uses for the urban space and new forms of social relations. Despite this, foreign migrants have always been seen mainly as the problem of the neighbourhood.

The national political debate as well as the local press facilitated the emergence of hidden tensions and unspoken conflicts. Also for this reason, from 2001 the Municipality promoted a Piano di recupero (Urban Rehabilitation Plan) for the Carmine neighbourhood that has already brought about radical transformation of the economy, public and living spaces of the area.

It’s important to underline that, covering around ¼ of the overall surface of Brescia’s historical centre, the Carmine neighbourhood is a core territorial resource for any kind of development strategy based on visitor and city users’ economies.

The major problem for the neighbourhood’s recovery project was to deal with the fact that the majority of the buildings in the area were privately owned. For this reason, it was established that the physical renewal of the residential buildings would be compulsory: the plan implied a series of agreements between the Municipality and the private owners, provided incentives for housing renewal, and established severe measures such as expropriation if the buildings were not restored.
This process was supported also through a number of actions carried out directly by the Municipality aimed at changing the perception of the area and at rendering it more attractive. These actions included the public space’s improvement as well as the introduction or relocation of a number of institutions and general services of the city into the neighbourhood: some departments of the university, a library, a nursery school, a police station and student housing.

The social consequences of this project on immigrants’, old and poor people’s life was not considered directly by the Rehabilitation Plan, their problems being totally devolved to the social services that followed “emergency based” forms of intervention. People who could not afford the raise in rent prices (including regular immigrants) were helped to move to more peripheral areas of the city, especially in the Council housing neighbourhood of San Polo (Grandi, 2008).

As in Genoa, an univocal evaluation of this process isn’t simple as, even if the recovery strategy stimulated a gentrification process forcing immigrants and weaker groups to leave, there is no doubt that the situation of overcrowding and unsanitary condition of the dwellings had to be faced. At the same time, the strategy implied a form of social control also over the private owners as the cycle of the mostly illegal informal market characterized by high rental prices for the poor housing was broken. Despite this, there is no doubt that, if the owners managed to rent or sell the dwellings to wealthier people after the renewal process, the gains for the weaker groups were not so granted for everyone as gentrification processes forced a lot of people to leave.

If the housing renewal strategy had a role in the immigrants’ moving to other places in the city, a different process was related to the commercial activities. In this case the main actions aimed at creating a “diversified local economy” and contributions were given to open new activities or improve the existing ones. As in Genoa, even if it’s not possible to say that immigrants were formally excluded by these actions, the newcomers foreseeable difficulty to relate with the bids’ rules and with the local authorities made their participation hard (Grandi, 2008). Moreover, a quite aggressive public debate against the call centre’s presence began to strike root at local level. The call centres are particularly problematic places from the natives’ point of view, first of all for their role of meeting points for immigrants, as well as because they are mainly considered as very “poor” services that contribute more than others forms of entrepreneurship to the local economic environment degrading image. For these reasons, strict sanitary rules aimed at discouraging the call centres’ presence were adopted by the Municipality starting from 2004. Afterwards the same rules were extend to all the Lombardy Region Municipalities through a Regional law adopted in 2006.

Nevertheless, despite the quite aggressive debate created at local level, and the partial commercial gentrification of the area, the Carmine neighbourhood still hosts a number of services for migrants such as ethnic groceries, shops and a number of call centres that have been able to cope with the new strict rules. For this reason the area still represents a meeting point for the migrants, especially during the week-ends. At the same time, some of the immigrants’ activities – for example, low-cost “exotic” meals vendors – have demonstrated a “compatibility” with the city users now attracted in the neighbourhood such as university students and tourists, contributing to new image of this place as the vibrant Latin Quarter of Brescia. This means that, from the users’ point of view, the place is still perceived as “ethnically and socially mixed” even if policies have not invested at all in this mix maintenance. There is no doubt that the presence of new users attracted by the university and other relevant functions has contributed to change the perception of the Carmine neighbourhood as a no-go area, even if immigrants are still a visible presence and spend a lot of time in this place. At the current state of the regeneration process it’s difficult to evaluate if this mixed reality will persist in the future or if the gentrification process as well as the immigrants’ expulsion will affect commercial and public spaces as well in the future.
3. Immigration and local development in the Porta Palazzo area in Turin

With its 900,000 inhabitants Turin is Italy’s fourth largest city and represents one of the vertices of the industrial triangle of the country, an area that, since the Second World War has been one of the main destinations of immigrants from the less developed areas of the south of the Italy.

The economic base of Turin has always been dominated by the FIAT car manufacturing industry whose relevance has been underlined by a wide range of studies that have defined the city as a “one-company town” (Bagnasco, 1986). From the mid-1970s all the main European and Italian cities had to face de-industrialisation and urban decline, losing population and employment. Turin was affected by the crisis and by its social consequences severely, mainly due to the presence of a single industrial sector, and to the dominance of one single firm within it (ibid).

The 1980s have been for Turin a starting point for a slow and incremental process aimed at overturning its traditional image, improving a quite anonymous city centre, promoting the local cultural tradition, and investing in visitor economy (Dente et al, 2005).

From the town planning and urban policies’ point of view, three main tools have been set up during this recovery process: a new Urban Masterplan adopted in 1995 to replace the existing one dated from 1959; two strategic plans, providing from 1998 the main guidelines for the economic development strategies (Winkler, 2008); and from 1997, the Progetto Speciale Periferie (Special Project for “Peripheral” Areas) that tried to connect and integrate a number of regeneration initiatives at neighbourhood level carried out by the Municipality using European, National, Regional and local funds.

Turin has been one of the first cities in Italy able to develop strong relationships with the European Union, acceding to an international network of realities that had to face similar problems, exchanging know-how and experiences. These relationships brought also a wide range of resources for urban renewal and regeneration, as well as for socio-economic development (Dente et al, 2005). Moreover, as the city successfully took part in the 1999 bid to host the 2006 Winter Olympic Games, this exceptional mega-event contributed highly to reinforce the city’s re-positioning strategy at national and international level, and to boost the its tourism capacity and reputation (Guala, 2007).

Despite the crisis, Turin is still one of the most important cities in Italy, and lies at the centre of one of its most prosperous and industrialized regions. For these reasons, from the mid-1980s it started to attract thousands of immigrants from non-European less developed countries. As with other immigration countries, the newcomers tend to settle mainly in poor and deprived neighbourhoods where the cost of living is not too high. In the Italian biggest towns these characteristics could be mainly found in the outskirts, where the post-war working class public housing estates lie, but in Turin some popular peri-central areas – in particular the Porta Palazzo and San Salvario areas – were able to attract the immigrants as well.

The main square of Porta Palazzo hosts everyday one of the largest open air markets in Europe. The market has always been a good place to find a (legal and not legal) job for the newcomers. For this reason Porta Palazzo has always been a traditional “port of entry” in the city for all immigrants – both the ones coming from the south of Italy from the 1950s, and the ones coming from the non-European countries in more recent years.

An appropriate English translation of the Italian term “periferie” is difficult to find. One term could be “outskirts”, but this definition omits the inclusion of the “inner cities” areas economically, physically and socially marginalized, that were part of the Turin special project as well. For a theoretical analysis of this term, and of its use in the Italian contest see: Governa & Saccomani (2004).
The increasing number of immigrants in Porta Palazzo led in 1995 to a hard movement of protest by the Italian citizens. The protests’ roots could be found not only in “white” racism, or in the scarce level of integration between Italian and foreign people, but also in the low level of social integration of the Italian citizens living in the area. The “crisis” made clear that the policies’ answer shouldn’t have been based on any kind of affirmative action, as problems of social justice could easily raise (Allasino et al., 2000).

A number of initiatives for the area were carried out in a fragmentary way until 1996 when, thanks to the second European Union bid to finance Urban Pilot Projects, the Municipality had the opportunity to set up a more coherent strategy for the whole place. The project was significantly named “The Gate”. Living not Leaving” clearly stating its main “integration” objectives.

In the Porta Palazzo area live around 10,000 inhabitants (The Gate, 2002). When the project started almost 6% of the population in the area was composed of immigrant groups. The percentage increased to 19% when the initiatives started to work, and has reached 23% at the present time, the Italian population still representing the majority. For this reason, the project main theme was “inclusion” (living not leaving), considering this issue both from the immigrants’ and from the natives’ point of view. This means that all the community involvement strategies have been addressed to the overall local population, considering shared problems and not shared ethnicities as a base for action.

The Gate has tried to set up a general framework able to integrate its activities with more traditional planning initiatives. The project implementation started in 1998 and ended in 2002. The prevailing actions focussed on the social and economic integration of both market vendors and residents. In particular, the project included 19 actions related to five main areas of intervention:

- Business incubator (economic development and work opportunities);
- Safety net (social initiatives);
- Liveability (addressing the urban degradation, improving the housing stock and the built environment);
- Sustainability (environmental protection, especially related with the market activities which produce 15 tons of waste everyday);
- Link-ability (related to mobility and transport issues, as well as aimed at establishing relationships between people in the neighbourhood, and at “building bridges” between the area and the rest of the town).

Despite the end of the European funding, the committee has continued its activities in the area, thanks to a wide range of partners’ support such as the Municipality, a number of bank foundations, voluntary and third sector initiatives. The project has been updated with an innovative series of initiatives and, thanks to its twelve years activity, The Gate office, settled in a building facing the market square, has become a point of reference for the communities living in the area, and a place for local people, workers and entrepreneurs to meet, identify their main shared problems, and looking for collective solutions.

The Council’s High Official in the International Relationships and European Policies Unit, Ilda Curti, played a core role in this process: she was director of The Gate’s committee from 1998 to 2006; after the 2006 elections she become the Alderman for Urban Regeneration and Immigrants’ Integration.

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6 “The gate” is an English translation for the Italian word “porta” which is commonly used to indicate any kind of door, but that also refers, as in the Porta Palazzo area, to the ancient gates of the historical town walls.
7 Twelve years after, this initiative is still the only experience of an urban policy expressly focused on the immigrants’ integration issues in Italy.
8 People now living in Porta Palazzo come mainly from North Africa, East Europe, South America and China.
Department. This department didn’t exist before in the Municipality, and its institution reflects a quite innovative approach in Italy, as the immigrants’ integration issues are usually devolved to the Social Services Department. Moreover, in the same years the majority of the Italian cities set up a “Safety issues” department to deal with immigration, confirming a negative way of seeing this phenomenon (Tondelli, 2009). For this reasons, it’s possible to argue that the Council’s innovative approach in dealing with immigration and integration issues through regeneration initiatives, as well as The Gate experience that established a sort of “urban laboratory”, could be both seen as part of a mutual learning process that has led to a change in the public institutions’ culture and organization. This policy is reflected also in the choice to deal with the immigrants’ presence not as a temporary emergency, but as a structural phenomena: in particular, the ethnic economies’ presence in the Porta Palazzo area played a core role in The Gate’s local development strategy. A number of initiatives were carried out involving the immigrant’s activities. In particular, several actions were launched to improve the market venues, guarantee the respect of sanitary rules and assure food quality, reduce the underground and illegal aspects of the work in the market. These actions implied strong relationships between The Gate offices and the immigrant entrepreneurs, as the market labour-intensive activities have resulted in a progressive retirement from this kind of job from the Italian population. Courses on the Italian laws especially targeted on the immigrants entrepreneurs’ needs were activated as well. The market provide a core service for the overall population in Turin, and this means that these entrepreneurs don’t have to face the problems of closure in the niche markets that usually results as a constraint of the ethnic economies in a long-term perspective. For this reasons, The Gate worked mainly in a direction able to make possible a condition of reliance between immigrant entrepreneurs and the mainstream population’s potentially clients, as well as in building up strong relationships between ethnic-owned businesses and the public administration. In some cases these entrepreneurs have asked The Gate to be helped in building up associations to promote their activities, but these initiatives have often failed due to the high level of conflict inside the associations themselves. Moreover, the marked square has been used, especially on Sundays when the open air market is closed, as a place of encounter, cross-cultural knowledge and exchange, thanks to a wide range of initiatives (foreign languages courses for Italian people versus Italian courses for foreigners; football matches; food festivals; twinning with other Mediterranean cities). All these activities are based on a wide conception of “multiculturalism”, involving and stimulating ethnic economies as well. The program’s main innovation in the Italian context is related to the choice to use an urban regeneration integrated approach to deal with integration issues, as well as to deal with immigration from a more general perspective based on inclusion, considering the neighbourhood’s liveability and its economic development (Briata, 2009b).

Porta Palazzo has always been a very central area: the market square is just a few minutes of walk from the Town Hall. The recovery strategy that has allowed Turin to go “beyond the one company town” has rendered this place even more “central” than 15 years ago. The Gate has always been included in the Progetto Speciale Periferie, and it’s important to underline that only a very strong strategic approach for the whole town at the “peripheral” areas – considering the specificity of their territories and of their socio-economic environments – seems to be the best chance for realities such as Porta Palazzo not only to survive, but also to “have a meaning and a place” in the city’s more general contest.

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9 It’s interesting to underline that similar problems affected the initiatives of the Integrated Street Centres in Genoa, involving mainly the Italian entrepreneurs: conflict seem to be part of these policies, not being limited to the experiences carried out in the immigrants’ economic environments.
Conclusions

Despite the quite aggressive debate on immigration at national level, it has been underlined that immigrant entrepreneurs represent the less problematic side of this phenomena also in Italy for their low-level of welfare dependency, as well as for their willing to accept highly labour-intensive activities that tend to be abandoned by the host community members. From the urban studies point of view, literature has underlined the relevance of this presence in declining neighbourhoods such as the Carmine, whose decadence would have been more evident without the immigrants’ presence. Last but not least, from the economic point of view, despite the global crisis that has affected Italy as well, ethnic businesses’ contribution to the national GDP has been estimated around 10%.

Despite all these positive aspects, especially when the immigrants’ activities are located in urban areas, their presence is often associated with a negative perception of their settlements, rendering these places no-go areas from the outside. The main reason for this is due to the visibility of ethnic economies, that contribute more than other factors to the image of some places as “otherness”. This perception is enhanced by the “integrative role” of these activities from the newcomers’ point of views, as they provide “culturally specified” goods to serve their needs, but also because they usually become points of reference and meeting for job-searching, information exchange, cooperation and collective self-help. These are all important factors for the immigrants communities, whose members usually have to face problems of discrimination and disadvantage, not to say socio-economic exclusion. On the other hand, visibility, as well as the “intensive” use of public spaces that characterize the immigrants’ meeting points, may be the main reason of conflict with the host community members, creating problems of coexistence.

Urban regeneration activities activated in the examined context seem to deal with this problems mainly “breaking up” the immigrant’s established territorialities (Yiftachel, 1990), introducing new urban functions such as universities, libraries, restaurants and coffee shops to attract students, young people, businessmen, new city users in general. In this way the space is less dominated by the immigrants groups’ presence, and appear safer for people coming from outside. These strategies imply also commercial gentrification that may affect the ethnic economies’ survival in some places. Despite this, in some areas as the Carmine neighbourhood in Brescia, ethnic economies resist, widening their clients to the new city users. It’s relevant to say that process of disneyfication of ethnic economies usually associated to commercial gentrification in other countries (Eade, 1997; Briata, 2007) have not been promoted until now in Italy, despite a use of a disneyfied image of some aspects of the traditional Italian regional culture.

As the Turin’s case may show, social cohesion in Italy with reference to the relationships between immigrants and natives is at the current time both a matter of “substantial” actions, as well as a matter of giving a contribution to the construction of an “out of the mainstream” public debate. Regeneration policies may contribute in both the directions.

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10 In Italy, literature has underline the relevance of ethnic economies also in the countryside, especially in the North Regions where “local” entrepreneurs help immigrants in starting up activities abandoned from Italian people that are useful for their firms (Fondazione Ethnoland, 2009).

11 Paradoxically, the immigrants presence in the housing stock, often associated with phenomena of overcrowding and unsanitary conditions of living, could be less problematic in Italian people’s perception of places due to their less visibility.

12 For example, in Genoa’s historical centre economic contribution were given to entrepreneurs that opened high price restaurants were is possible to “rediscover” the traditional “poor” local cuisine.
Furthermore, regeneration policies may work on the immigrants’ economies markets widening. In fact, these intrinsically trans-national businesses\textsuperscript{13} are usually locally rooted and supported by ethnic clients, but they may have a low level of trading with the mainstream population. If for start-up businesses these conditions could be an opportunity for the immigrant entrepreneurs, the niche markets constraints and their long term negative consequences for trade have been documented by a wide range of studies at international level (e.g., Rindoks et al., 2006). For these reasons, a contribution that urban regeneration initiatives may give to these economies’ development is linked to the promotions of actions able to expand their markets to the mainstream population.

Both the coexistence between immigrants and natives and the niche market constraints issues may be faced by regeneration initiatives in different ways, that all imply reciprocal form of knowledge between immigrants and natives. On the contrary, going back to the case-studies analysed in this paper, is possible to say that ethnic economies are rarely explicitly valorised. At least two of the examined cases (Genoa and Brescia) deal with situations in which “forgotten” central and peri-central places become more “central” given their strategic role in the city repositioning in the post-fordist economy. The Carmine neighbourhood represents a key territorial resource for the new development strategy of the city focussed on visitor economy: a part of the city that cannot be left to disadvantaged people and social excluded – first of all immigrants – even if it has been a gateway for centuries. The same could be said for Genoa’s old town that is a key territorial resource for the post-industrial city.

Both the cities pursued Municipality-led gentrification strategies to change the perceptions of these places from outside, and to bring new inhabitants and users in these areas. These strategies implied also commercial gentrification initiatives. In the regeneration policies framework, both the cities provided funds and actions aimed at promoting new forms of entrepreneurship in the target areas. Even if it’s not possible to say that immigrants were formally excluded by these actions, the newcomers’ difficulty to participate has been underlined. Only an explicit investment on these existing realities would have allowed the immigrant’s entrepreneurs participation to these initiatives. Despite this, ethnic economies survive in the areas in different ways: in the less extended Carmine area, despite the commercial gentrification of the whole neighbourhood and the strict application of local and regional laws “against” the ethnic business realities, foreigners shops and services have until now found a form of coexistence with the new ones. The new and old economic realities are all part of what is now perceived as a vibrant university and cultural quarter, the ethnic shops being sometime functional to students, city users and the first generation of gentrifies that arrived in the neighbourhood. A different situation can be seen in Genoa where the territorial extension of the old town has generated “gentrified islands” within a more general urban frame that still presents very problematic areas. In this case, commercial gentrification has affected the gentrified areas, leaving ethnic economies free to survive in partially gentrified places, or in the still problematic ones. In both cases, despite the quite different debate constructed by the two cities at local level, the survival of ethnic economies is left to a spontaneous market process, that cannot be guaranteed for a long time.

On the contrary it’s possible to say that an effort to invest on ethnic economies as a part of an already established local economic system was explicitly done only in Turin’s, both due to the relevance of the Porta Palazzo market for the whole city (underlining the core role played by immigrants in the market – actually an institution in the context of the city of Turin’s history – survival), as well as to the more general integrative capacity expressed by the whole city in the last years. Without denying the unavoidable rhetorical dimension of Turin’s choices, their rather provocative role in the mainstream

\textsuperscript{13} International business links especially with the countries of origin support these forms of entrepreneurship providing resources for importing and exporting capital and culturally specified goods (Mora, 2006).
discourses on immigration should be considered, highlighting both the substantial actions that have been carried out, as well as their cultural value in the broader Italian contest and debate.

References


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