What's in a word? Contextual diversity, urban ethnography and the linguistic limits of the street.

1. Introduction

Scholarly treatises on urban public space often single out the street for special attention. In his ecological study of the topic, Vikas Mehta, for example, posits that 'streets hold a special place in the domain of public space and are both literally and metaphorically the most fitting symbol of the public realm' (Mehta, 2013: 9). Other commentators, wary of Jacobsian eulogies to the piquancy of street life, have been keen to underline the street's inextricable contradictions which, in part, point to the contested dimension of public space itself. Hence, Michael Keith, while noting the 'cherished place of the street in the lexicon of urbanism' (Keith, 1995: 297), asserts that 'the street is also simultaneously dangerous and desirable, the site and material cause of inter-community violence and the condition of possibility of intercultural identification' (303). Regardless of whether one is attending to questions of conflict or is simply measuring footfall, the street generally is assumed to possess a multiple array of social, spatial and symbolic attributes that together have rendered it a key motif in urban studies. As such, it tends to function as a synonym for all publicly-accessible open spaces – be these squares, markets, promenades or pavements – and only finds its categorical limits in the contiguous coloured spaces of the non-built environment: the (green) parks, gardens and allotments; the (blue) canals, rivers, lakes and seas; and the (yellow) beach.

As a microcosm of the city, the street is a well-established site of urban ethnography. From William Foote Whyte's classic *Street Corner Society* (1964 [1943]) to Mitchell Duneier's *Sidewalk* (1999), to Suzanne Hall's study of migrant entrepreneurship on a London high street (2012), researchers have long been drawn to the ordinary urbanisms afforded by this most prosaic of spaces. Even when not the result of extensive fieldwork, discussion about the street typically summons up a semblance of ethnographic intimacy precisely because, lying at the heart of everyday experience, the street tempts us into ruminating on the intricacies of urban life.

For such a seemingly mundane space, the street nonetheless poses some immediate methodological and theoretical quandaries. How do we approach the street as a research field? Do we opt first for mobile strategies such as 'walk-alongs' (Kusenbach, 2003), or do we

attempt to spatially delimit moments of encounter and observation? To what extent and under what conditions can the street and its various social worlds offer a critical window on wider urban and social processes? Such straightforward questions demand carefully situated responses.

As a unit of sociological inquiry, the street is, in fact, a deceptively tricky concept to pin down. It can be at once a toponym, a specific spatial form, a reference to the users of this same space, as well as a synecdoche for urban life as a whole. Life on the street is also embedded in economic, social, legal and sensory structures that wax and wane in often very nuanced ways. But what is almost always overlooked is that the street is also a word – an English language word – whose accumulated meanings do not always translate smoothly across to other linguistic and cultural contexts. Indeed, irrespective of its ubiquity, the street in some parts of the world has not always occupied a 'cherished place in the lexicon of urbanism'. There is thus a risk that general claims made in its name, whether about social encounter, cultural diversity or civility, are rendered parochial if not redundant the moment the 'street' is posited as a sociological truth. What might appear so matter-of-fact in our scholarly conversations about cities is actually grounded in the uneven political economy of international urban studies that, to put it bluntly, is framed by the hegemony of Anglophone research and its assumption of being in a position to embrace and understand contextual difference.[1]

My aim here is not to deny the possibility of 'the primacy of the street' (Mehta, 2013: 9), but rather to underline the partial, contingent nature of such a proposition. Nor do I want to underestimate the complex and incongruous ways in which the 'street' can be understood and applied in English. Of course, there may be times when the 'street' seems the most suitable shorthand to encapsulate the disparate dimensions of the urban public realm, but unless this is accompanied by a good dose of strategic essentialism, the generalised street in the long run risks foreclosing our capacity to identify, comprehend and contextualise difference. For this reason, I want to argue that the street can be better understood as a particular *keyword* about urban space and public life. This draws on the well-known formulation of Raymond Williams for whom keywords are those common yet complex words 'we share with others, often imperfectly, when we wish to discuss many of the central processes of our common life' whose 'meanings [are] inextricably bound up with the

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[1] I do not want to suggest that ideas and concepts in other languages are not without their blind spots. See, for instance, Claire Hancock's (2016) discussion of the distinct meanings of terms such as *identité* and *politique* in French geography and how these reflect the particular trajectory of the discipline in France, which, in part, is framed by its long-running suspicions of Anglo-American dominance in the field and its own bid for universalism.

problems [they are] used to discuss' (Williams, 1983: 15, 14). Sitting at the heart of the Welsh Marxist's fascination with terms such as 'culture' and 'community' was the recognition that semantics and usage were generated within specific social and material conditions and in turn were generative of social practice. By taking what Williams dubbed a 'cultural materialist' approach, keyword analysis is alert, first and foremost, to the twists and turns in meaning over time and across space, including those contradictory and philologically incorrect uses. Potentially far-reaching and disruptive, such an approach has the capacity to pull the carpet from under the feet of those – be they politicians, academics or people 'on the street' – who insist on having the last word.

'Street' does not appear in either Williams' original 1976 publication or in the posthumous project *New Keywords* (Bennett, Grossberg and Morris, 2005). My goal is not to fill this gap. Instead, I aim to 'provincialise' the English-language street by considering how analogous terms in other languages operate differently and how other kinds of open space and their related vocabulary play equally - if not more important roles - in structuring ideas and experiences of urban life. The geographical focus of the article is a southern European country – Italy – but the general issues raised here, I believe, apply elsewhere, including cities located in the so-called 'Global South'. Italy has been the principal object of my research as well as my country of residence for the better part of two decades and while English is my mother tongue, Italian is the language I use on an everyday basis. As both a social scientist and translator, I am attuned to the challenges of thinking about urban concepts across different cultural contexts, both internationally but also within Italy itself. Given Italy's internal divisions and disparate histories of urban development, its cities provide an interesting lens through which to address the interconnections between spatial form, urban public culture and language.

The paper starts by proposing a cultural materialist approach to keywords and how this approach can be conceived in relation to ethnographic practice and the task of translation. I then consider how we might move towards a deeper understanding of the divergences and convergences between the 'street' and its counterparts in other languages and I propose the multilingual thesaurus of urban terms *L'Aventure des Mots de la Ville* (The Adventure of Words of the City) (Topalov et al., 2010) as a preliminary tool for grappling with such dilemmas. I proceed to discuss terms and spaces associated with urban life in Italy where, rather than the street, it is the piazza that has traditionally commanded a prominent place in ideas and experiences of the public realm. However, some cities, especially in the Italian South, are widely deemed to lack illustrative examples of such spaces and are

simultaneously cast to the margins of national and international imaginaries about Italian public life. At this point, I turn my attention to Italy's principal southern metropolis, Naples, where a key trope of urban life is neither the street nor the piazza but the alleyway (or *vicolo*). I discuss the changing historical contexts and value systems in which the term *vicolo* has been used to designate a distinct urban space and locus of social life, and reconsider the famous 1925 essay by Asja Lācis and Walter Benjamin on Naples, which, I argue, overlooks the aporia represented by the Neapolitan *vicolo,* in part due to their generalised use of the word '*Straße*' (street). In drawing general conclusions, I suggest how a sociological inquiry of the street can be strengthened by combining a cultural materialist keyword analysis with urban ethnography.

2. Keyword analysis and ethnographic practice.

There is a general dearth of sustained interest in the vocabularies of public space in Anglophone urban studies. One notable exception is Allan Pred's reconstruction of spatial politics in late-nineteenth century Stockholm (1990). In it Pred examines how the building of boulevards and the renaming of streets as part of the grand design to turn Stockholm into a modern European capital led the working classes to elaborate a 'popular language of spatial orientation' or 'folk geography', for instance through the creation of an alternative nomenclature, as a means of resisting the bourgeoisie's ideological imprint on the city. However, despite his highly evocative considerations on the political import of language in relation to the built environment, Pred unfortunately did not leave us with a clear methodological template for further research.

A more practical starting point to addressing the linguistic connections between social life and urban form is offered by Raymond William's cultural materialist inquiry into lexical polysemy. Williams' work has recently received a mini-revival among social scientists. Marie Moran's 2014 study *Identity and Capitalism* draws on keyword analysis to chart the meteoric rise of 'identity' during the late twentieth century. Moran argues that 'identity never "mattered" prior to the 1960s because it did not in fact *exist* or operate as a shared political and cultural idea *until* the 1960s' (2015: 3 original italics), and she connects its emergence as a classificatory device to the rise of consumer capitalist society. Meanwhile, writing in this journal, McGuigan and Moran propose cultural materialism as a sociological research paradigm that 'provides substantial resources for carrying out multidimensional analyses of the relations between culture, society and economy in general that avoid both economic reductionism and […] cultural [idealism]' (2014: 172–73).

Rather than reiterating its relevance for sociology, here I want to go a step further to think how a cultural materialist analysis of keywords might be brought into conversation with ethnography. One could reasonably retort that most ethnographers are already mindful of how they and their interlocutors use words. I do not deny this: my conviction is that keyword analysis is especially conducive to developing such a concern. Contrary to a common misconception, keyword analysis is not about identifying and designating the meanings of terms at the centre of discussion. Rather, as Williams insisted, it is about expanding our understanding of social and cultural transformations through the study of word use. As an inductive, open-ended research process, keyword analysis therefore demands a sensibility that, I believe, has much in common with ethnographic practice: meticulousness; long-term commitment; the cultivation of intimacy (be it with words or people); and the readiness to embrace serendipitous encounter.

Williams' own approach famously relied on a cross-reading of the original thirteen volumes of the OED, coupled with his deep knowledge of erudite and popular literature. The corpus of available texts has since greatly increased and become more easily accessible with the advent of information technology. Online archives of newspapers usually come with word searches that present exciting, albeit time-consuming, opportunities for diachronic analysis of language across different settings, which not only reveals the amnesia inherent within public discourse but can also expose unfounded claims about the meanings and genealogies of terms. Uncovering alternative lexical uses does not invalidate current applications of words: rather it urges us to be attentive to the layers of historical meaning that seep into or are filtered out of contemporary usage and how such a process reflects broader societal changes. Hence, while I believe there is much scope to integrate keyword analysis into an ethnographic project – both as a means to assemble a 'thick understanding' of concepts prior to entering the field and as a research strategy during fieldwork itself (from exploring the terminology articulated by a select group of people to tracking the same terms, for example, on social media) – this only starts to bear fruit when we are in a position to connect variations in meaning to the conditions of their making.

For the purposes of this paper, however, there is an obvious limit to Williams' work and that is its largely monolingual focus (something he himself acknowledged (25)). Other scholars who have adopted a cultural materialist approach have tended to follow suit. Moran's argument about identity is undermined by its unspoken Anglocentrism. In France *identité* has long been implicated in nationalistic discourse (Hancock, 2016), while in Italy '*identità*' did

not enter forcibly into public and academic debates until the 1980s, in part due to the protracted hegemony of a materialist Left in intellectual and cultural life (Dines, 2015).

In order to operate across cultural and linguistic contexts, keyword analysis needs simultaneously to engage with the processes of translation. The task of translation is never about facilitating word comprehension alone but is also the struggle to convey layers of meaning. A cultural materialist perspective on lexical variation can, before anything else, offset the assumption that one's own language is clear enough to be automatically reproducible. It reminds us that the significance embedded in a word in one language may be partially lost when translated into another, even when a morphological equivalent appears to exist. By pausing to dwell on these differences, keyword analysis provides an interstitial space between the source and target languages that compels us to contemplate the transmission of meaning. Such a commitment resonates with the enterprise of ethnography itself, which, in its more reflexive variant, is already often construed as a mode of translation (Sturge 1997).

Three points about keyword analysis should be taken on board in order to encourage greater critical awareness about the limited reach of ideas and the incompleteness of translation, *regardless of whether one is working between different languages*. First, commensurate terms in different languages may possess very different, even contradictory, sets of meanings, as well as divergent histories, as in the case of 'identity' noted above. Second, the attributes held by a keyword in one language may be associated with an entirely different word in another that, in turn, might also have separate referents, as demonstrated by the incomplete overlap between the Italian-language piazza and the English-language street. Third, a keyword in one language may simply not exist in another, in the sense that while it is translatable the equivalent term does not share any of its historically generated meanings. For instance, a highly loaded term in political and everyday discourses about urban life in Italy is *degrado*, which can be translated as 'degradation' or 'blight', but neither of these English terms is able to capture the history and controversy that surrounds its iteration in Italian.

3. Towards a multilingual understanding of the street

Like 'culture' or 'identity', I want to argue that the 'street' can also be understood as a keyword. Doing so can shed light on the social, cultural and economic situations in which it has accumulated meaning over time, but it also makes us more alert to competing terms and ideas in other languages. Common etymologies do not necessarily correspond to shared variations in use. There is little comfort to be gained, for instance, in just parading the Latin

roots of morphologically equivalent words such as *street* (English), *straat* (Dutch), *Straße* (German), *strada* (Italian) and *stradă* (Romanian). Of greater significance is the fact that *Straße* only became a widespread term with the rapid urbanisation of northern German cities in the nineteenth century, or that *strada* has a markedly different relationship with urban public space compared to the *street*.

Urban thinkers could be forgiven for concluding that such a concern for words is simply too implausible to pursue and is thus best left to linguists. Nonetheless, besides a predisposition to contextual diversity that is acquired by adopting a cultural materialist perspective, there are sources of assistance that, if anything, serve to countercheck claims made through words. A particularly useful resource is the 1,500-page thesaurus of multilingual urban terms *L'Aventure des mots de la ville* (Topalov et al, 2010). This volume, the culmination of more than ten years of international research, collects 264 detailed genealogies of common words about the city in Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. As general editor Christian Topalov explains in his introduction, it is less a dictionary than 'an invitation to the multiple possible paths within cities, words, time, languages and urban societies' (2010: xv). The entries, which are compiled by architects, sociologists, historians, anthropologists and geographers, draw on a diverse range of sources, from dictionaries and encyclopaedias to administrative documents and literary works, and are divided into four groups: categories of settlement; divisions within cities; types of dwellings; and different kinds of open space.

So, for instance, the principal term for street across the Arab world is *shâri'* (1103–1107). Although this word has ancient origins, it did not enter into common use until the nineteenth century following urban expansion under the Ottoman Empire and during the twentieth century it often competed with colonial-era calques such as *bulvâr* (*boulevard*) and *karânîsh* (*corniche*). The position of *shâri'* within the urban spatial hierarchy differs around the region, from being confined to the area outside the pre-colonial Casbah in the case of Algiers to being ubiquitous in more modern cities such as Amman, while, regarding its associations with social life, it vies with a host of other terms such as *darb* (road, gateway or gully (421–426)) *hâra* (an alley that, especially in Cairo, lends its name to the surrounding neighbourhood (559–563)) and *zuqâq* (dead-end street (1365–1368)).

At the time of writing, this monumental piece of scholarship had received only a measly forty-six citations on Google Scholar, which perhaps reflects the fact it was published in French, but certainly confirms the general lack of interest in multilingual vocabulary in urban studies. It must be said that the entries are uneven, ranging from captivating

summaries to dry encyclopaedic prose. Moreover, they are rarely concerned with the ideas and values embedded in terms that were of such interest to Raymond Williams, and there is no attempt to excavate the class-based and gendered heteroglossia that was at the heart of Pred's study. Certainly the presence of Arabic makes the volume stand out, even if there are no other non-Western languages and, although Latin America is included, there are no references to the everyday terms of Anglophone and Francophone cities of the Global South. Nevertheless, this compendium of urban keywords provides a unique platform from which to start thinking about how language is interwoven into the socio-spatial particularities of different cities and hands the baton to ethnographers to take into the field. *L'Aventure des Mots* is by no means a Rosetta Stone but it is dynamite to the presumption that the 'street' is a universal concept.

4. The street and other competing places in Italian urban culture

The morphological equivalent for 'street' in Italian is *strada*. These two words share general social and spatial associations such as *giochi di strada* (street games) and *attraversare la strada* (to cross the street). As the designation of a specific spatial form, *strada* also encompasses the extra-urban dimensions of the 'road' (*strada di montagna* – mountain road) as well as the motorway (*autostrada*). Meanwhile, the principal toponym for an urban thoroughfare in Italy is *via* (literally 'way'), while a major artery taking the title of 'road' in British cities could also be named a *viale* or *corso* but not a *strada*. Otherwise, *strada* and *via* have, during the modern era, acquired numerous interchangeable meanings, such as *rete stradale/viaria* (road network) (Topalov et al, 2010: 1164), although *via* has far fewer secondary meanings and is usually less identified with the social dimensions of urban space. These topsy-turvy lexical associations suggest that there is no straightforward overlap between *strada* and 'street' and that, between the two, the Italian word is less indelibly linked to the city.

In any case, as a general spatial form, the street in Italy does not possess such a broad reach with regard to ideas about public space or urban life compared to Anglophone cities. More striking are its historical associations with modernisation and nation making: the geometrical lines of the new streets of post-Unification Italy cut through the labyrinthine network of sinuous lanes and brought ancient walls tumbling down, and in the process introduced the accoutrements of modernity such as pavements and streetlamps. During the post-war period the actual or proposed clearing of the historic fabric of cities for new traffic routes became a rallying call for heritage and community campaigns, which, from their

varying political and class positions, contributed to a shift in consensus away from modernist planning.

Instead, the idea and experience of the public realm has been traditionally bound up with a different type of space: the piazza. Italy is certainly not unique in this respect. One only need think of the role of *plazas* and *praças* in the urban life of Hispanic and Lusophone cities in Europe and Latin America (Low, 1998) or the function of the *sâha* as an imperial, colonial and post-colonial site of public gathering and political contest in Arab cities (Ziadeh, 2011). This said, given the nature of urban development and the historical transmission of forms of public assembly, the multi-layered meanings of the piazza are particularly pronounced in Italian culture. The philosopher Norberto Bobbio has pointed to the imprint of the piazza's political and social import upon the Italian language. While it bears explicit democratic, populist or authoritarian connotations in Italian, as in the examples *rivolgersi alla piazza* (to resort to the piazza, i.e. to search for popular consensus) or *scendere in piazza* (to take to the piazza , i.e. to protest), equivalent expressions in English, French and German instead use the words 'street', '*rue*' and '*Straße*' (Dardi, 1992: 49).

Indeed, while there are no notable scholarly studies in Italian that concentrate on the socio-spatial properties of the street, there exists an abundance of monographs on the Italian piazza as a spatialisation of social life (Canniffe, 2009); as a site of civic memory (Isnenghi, 1994); as a key arena for reading political conflict over history (Zapruder, 2003); and as a measure of architectural order and harmony (Nuvolari, 1989). Thanks to its famed assets, coupled with global fantasies about Italian public space, the piazza is now acknowledged across the world, by dictionaries and shopping malls alike.

Certainly, from the second half of the nineteenth century on, the historic piazza found itself vying for spatial supremacy with the new spaces created by national public works programmes. If the post-unification thoroughfare surgically exposed cities to improved circulation of people and goods, the hybrid space of the *galleria* (arcade, essentially a covered piazza-cum-street) became a site of bourgeois consumption and association, not unlike the post-Haussmann Parisian boulevard. The Futurists celebrated these new urban spaces as signs of movement and progress, while the lingering presence of the historic piazza was treated with disdain as a submission to historicism and stasis (Rainey, Poggi and Wittman, 2009: 67–70; 143–145), although, ironically, the Fascist regime was equally adept at driving imperial avenues through ancient neighbourhoods as it was at mobilising the monumental piazza for propaganda stunts.

During the second half of the twentieth century, with rising living standards and the expansion of cities, the street and the piazza both colluded to accommodate the dramatic rise in motorised traffic. It was primarily the latter, however, that would be eventually 'liberated' for pedestrians. One of the first cases in Italy was the closure of Piazza Maggiore in 1968 in the Italian Communist Party's citadel of Bologna, which was not just envisaged as a form of traffic control but as a showcase for its socialist municipal project (Jäggi, Müller and Schmid, 1977). By the 1990s, the pedestrianisation of historic piazzas had become convention, especially among centre-left administrations, but this now sought to harness the tourist and symbolic capital of such spaces under the banner of urban regeneration, as was the case with the removal of the car park from Piazza del Popolo in Rome in 1998.

If the piazza has continually functioned as a paragon of Italian public space, albeit a contested and at times detested one, its status also mirrors the deep divisions that exist in the country. For what is presumed to be the 'Italian piazza' has in reality long been associated closely with the specific traditions of Central and Northern Italy. Iconic sites such as Siena's Piazza del Campo played a leading role in the construction of an Italian urban and civic culture following Unification. In sharp contrast, coeval declarations about the dearth of appropriate urban forms in the Italian Mezzogiorno further acted to exclude this region's cities from the cultural foundations of the new nation state. The physical layout and social composition of cities such as Naples and Palermo, with their dense warrens of narrow alleys, dangerous classes and susceptibility to contagious disease and disorder, provided a unified Italy with negative templates from which to countermeasure the progress of the economically favoured North. This 'lack' of piazzas in the South, alongside a coterie of other purported deficiencies (civility, a modern class structure and so on), has persisted throughout Italian history and has been internalised among southern elites in their counter attempts to reclaim and domesticate the urban realm (Gribaudi, 1997).

Since the 1990s Naples has been subject to urban regeneration policies that, like other cities across Italy, have paid particular attention to the refurbishment of central public spaces, but with the additional declared mission of inculcating civic values among the populace. A key site has been Piazza Plebiscito, which until 1994 was a giant car park and since its closure has been publicly projected as a symbol of urban renewal and a sign that Neapolitan-style 'Italian piazzas' did indeed exist in the city. As a focus of my ethnographic research, this space offered fascinating insights not only into the different ways in which people responded to the pedestrianisation of urban space but also into the meanings they assigned to the idea of

'piazza' during a period (1998–2000) in which this spatial form had acquired heightened significance in local and national debates.

Thus, for a male, middle-class environmental activist who I interviewed at the municipal tourist board in the adjacent Royal Palace, the 'piazza' did not just signify a distinct physical place but also the frontline between decorous conviviality and inappropriate sociality. While the past was articulated through childhood memories of a pristine setting and a detached account about subsequent urban neglect, the present-day piazza was conceived in terms of civility, decorum and citizenship; terms that had emerged in public discussions about the city, particularly on the mainstream Left, during the course of the 1980s and which in turn reflected broader shifts both in the Left's ideological grammar and the governmental imperatives of urban renewal. My interlocutor compared Piazza Plebiscito to a Venetian canal in order to underline its rediscovered monumental harmony and the irreversibility of its vehicle-free arrangement. Alas, the reformist administration was 'far more advanced' than its own 'citizens', some of whom desecrated the piazza by turning it into a 'racetrack' for their motorcycles.

In contrast, an unlicensed crushed-ice drink vendor and resident of the nearby Spanish Quarters, one of the poorest popular neighbourhoods of the historic centre, spoke approvingly about how the liberated space enabled interaction with spendthrift tourists and provided a vast, spill-over arena for social practices and informal economic activities previously confined to the surrounding backstreets. The piazza denoted a space waiting to be filled: the fact that 'the piazza was beautiful' had nothing to do with its monumentality or coveted civicness but because sometimes it could draw *nu cuofano 'e gente* ('a load of people' in Neapolitan dialect). While the street vendor acknowledged the administration's role in permanently transforming Piazza Plebiscito, he expressed little interest in either the debates about its new status or the large public events that were staged there. Instead, the super-sized piazza made sense because it afforded opportunities for the self-management and self-policing of informal and at times mildly illicit recreational pursuits. Hence, he earnestly proclaimed that the piazza was just like Amsterdam because its quiet colonnade now offered a hassle-free location to smoke hashish 'as if it were legal'; he enthused that the same spot became an afternoon rendezvous for local mums and toddlers who entered the pedestrian zone on their mopeds; but he noted that he and other locals swiftly tackled any acts of untoward behaviour such as dangerous driving that were seen to jeopardise their own indecorous modus vivendi.

The selected fragments from these two interviews[2] start to draw out the disparate meanings that are invested in the piazza as a word and an idea. The separate allusions to the Italian and European North – gestures of a 'folk' comparative urbanism – work to situate the 'piazza' within contrasting experiences of, and claims to, public space. To equate the new Piazza Plebiscito with a canal or an entire foreign city intimates at the malleableness of the idea of the piazza, and simultaneously distances it from the *strada* – as a space of traffic congestion on the one hand, and of limited monetary return on the other. Ethnographic attention to urban terms thus demands precision: to the historically contingent variations in use and broader discursive frames (such as citizenship), but also to the possibility that their semantic limits may be transgressed in order to articulate divergent values about the public realm.

5. Open spaces, straight lines and alleyways in a southern Italian metropolis

In Naples the historic common term for piazza was *largo* (literally open space) and in nearly all cases 'piazza' was only introduced as a toponym after Italian Unification. As well as imposing name changes, the Italian state also bequeathed the city with a new road network following the cholera epidemic of 1884. Besides satisfying the speculative urges of constructors and capital investors, the objectives of the post-cholera Risanamento (healing programme) was to endow the South's seething, over-crowded metropolis, then still the most populous city of Italy, with clean, safe and orderly urban spaces and to eliminate some of its worst housing (Snowden 1995). The centrepiece of the intervention was the mile-long boulevard – Corso Umberto I, named in honour of the assassinated King of Italy – that carved through the portside slums. The journalist Matilde Serao famously called the new thoroughfare a 'windshield' because it had shunted poverty behind the elegant facades of the buildings erected along its course. The name 'Corso Umberto' never caught on among local people. Instead, it quickly came to be known as 'il Rettifilo' or the Straight Line. Similar to Allan Pred's observations on Stockholm, the popular non-use of the official title was a form of linguistic resistance and spatial reorientation. This was less the result of anti-Savoy sentiment (the urban poor of Naples were generally not known for their Republican tendencies), than a means to domesticate an extrinsic urban form. Today, Corso Umberto is the first name of choice only for public officials, the suburban middle classes and unwitting visitors. The fact that Rettifilo and many other unofficial monikers for the spaces of the Risanamento and

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[2] For an in-depth discussion of my research on Piazza Plebiscito, see Dines 2012: 114–168.

subsequent clearances are still in use is testimony to how these streets continue to be perceived in contradistinction to other local spatial forms, in particular to the narrow, crooked, uneven, dark and pavement-less *vicoli* (alleyways) that crisscross the various popular neighbourhoods of the historic centre.

The new streets of the Risanamento are briefly alluded to in Asja Lācis and Walter Benjamin's essay 'Naples', one of the most famous commentaries ever to be written on the city. Even though locations are not usually named, with a bit of local knowledge it is possible to work out some of the places that the Latvian theatre director and German philosopher visited during their day trips from the island of Capri between 1924 and 1925. Hence, the city is described as 'anarchical, embroiled, village-like in the centre, into which large networks of streets were hacked only forty years ago' (Benjamin and Lācis, 1978: 166): an unequivocal reference to Corso Umberto and the other boulevards. From their peregrinations around the city, the two authors created a beautifully evocative text that captured their fascination with the vitality of Neapolitan life. The essay introduced the Benjaminian notion of *porosity* – the interpenetration of time and space and of the public and private in urban life – and has been credited as a pioneering attempt at grappling with alternative urbanisms in European history (Robinson 2006: 30–35). This said, the two authors' representation of Naples has rarely been considered in a critical light (although see Gilloch, 1996: 21–36). Indeed, as a discussion of a distinct city in southern Europe in the mid-1920s, the essay is not without its clichés. One commonplace given a dust down is that much of Naples does not appear to be a city at all, but rather a giant village whose communal life resembles 'the African kraal' (Benjamin and Lācis, 1978: 166). Moreover, for all their deliberation on porosity, Naples is depicted as a place that essentially sits outside history and is disconnected from the mundane realities of the nation – precisely at a time, as Graeme Gilloch rightly notes (1996: 35), when the Fascist government was rapidly consolidating its grip on power. With Naples existing in its 'streams of communal life' (171) and 'blissful confusion' (170) such a detail never gets a mention.

Of more immediate interest is that the authors overlook some key socio-spatial differences that structure the city, in part as a direct result of their choice of words. It is telling that Lācis and Benjamin do not make any lexical distinction between the straight lines and the alleyways. The original German version of the essay (Benjamin and Lācis 1991) in fact refers to *neapolitanischer Straße* (Neapolitan street), *Straßenecke* (street corner), *Hauptstraße* (main street) and *Fahrdamm* (roadway). The equivalent German word for *vicolo* (*Gasse*) is never used, although *Nebenstraße* (side street) is used once and translated as 'side alley' in the English version. Like many Anglophone researchers after them, public space falls under the

broad rubric of the street/*Straße*. As a consequence, space in Naples risks being interpreted as homogenously porous, and perhaps it is no surprise that the two authors gifted the city with yet another stereotype, albeit a more sophisticated one.

One could conclude that as day-tripping tourists, Lācis and Benjamin were not in a position to apprehend fully the cultural and idiomatic nuances of Neapolitan life. But like any visitor in a foreign location, they also read and wrote about Naples according to their own historically grounded vocabulary. According to the *L'Aventure des Mots*, with the rise of modernity the old German word *Gasse* was gradually displaced by the Latin-based word *Straße*, and while the former continued to be used as a label for urban streets in southern Germany and Austria, it became especially rare in northern industrial cities (including Berlin, Benjamin's home city). Moreover, during the nineteenth century it came to be associated with lowlife and poverty (Topalov et al, 2010: 1169–1170), and by the early twentieth century had also acquired racialised connotations through its association with the passageways of Jewish quarters (Färber 2014). It could be argued, therefore, that *Gasse* was a moribund and somewhat problematic term when Lācis and Benjamin undertook to describe Neapolitan life.

My stress on what might appear just a minor omission is not hair-splitting. The *vicolo* is a fundamental social doxa and spatial trope in Naples that has been often a focus of intense conflict during the city's modern history. During the twentieth century, local authorities and planners were torn between carving through the *vicoli* to modernise the city and preserving an ancient urban system, while the colourful, raucous and at times violent life on the alleyway was seen to embody both the intensity and backwardness of urban life. A particularly influential reading of Neapolitan society by the English political scientist Percy Allum (1973) identified in the *vicolo* the static, premodern *Gemeinschaft* that stood in stark contrast to a *Gesellschaft* that was emerging on the city's industrial fringes. Meanwhile, attempts by architects to reproduce alleyway life in the narrow walkways of peripheral housing projects where many families from the city centre were relocated have largely failed and, in the wake of the global success of the *Gomorrah* TV series, have led these spaces to be publicly associated with urban squalor and predatory organised crime.

The *vicolo*, however, has also long been a place for staking counterclaims to the city. Growing up and surviving on the *vicolo* can be construed as a sign of artistry, resilience or defiance, depending on whom you ask. A widely viewed short video produced in 2016 entitled *Vicolo Esclamativo* (Exclamation Alleyway) celebrates the denigrated *vicolo* as a site for social practices that are unthinkable on the *strada.* Hence the *vicolo* is where the Sri Lankan Sasà is assimilated into the informal economy by carting crates of bottled water for a female

customer, where Ciccio can show off his wheelie skills on a scooter, where Antonietta, Titina and Mena set up an impromptu veranda during the summer and where Peppe finally gets arrested for too much thieving in his backyard. Without wanting to endorse the underlying sentimentalism, it is worth noting that the *vicolo* is also an idea that sells: in fact, the video in question was produced by a local t-shirt company specialising in Neapolitan themes (including one of a silhouetted alleyway scene) and now takes pride of place on the homepage of its website.[3]

These multiple frames suggest there is fertile ground for a cultural materialist exploration of the *vicolo* as a site that is both irreducible to the street and irreconcilable with the idea of a timeless *Gemeinschaft*. There have been some superb anthropologies of alleyway life in Naples (Belmonte 1989; Pardo 1996; Goddard 1997), but these fall short of positioning their studies within the broader context in which the idea of the *vicolo* has been made, remade and contested. An incontrovertible space of misery and underdevelopment in post-war political and planning discourses, since the late 1980s the *vicolo* has been jostled between the language of 'social exclusion' and optimistic visions of regeneration, heritage and tourism. In the case of the institutional Left, which administered the city from 1975 to 1983 and again from 1993 to 2011, the shift in representations of the alleyway reflected broader shifts in its worldview, from the communist fear of the lumpen contagion that threatened working-class solidarity to the post-communist pursuit of civicness and cultural citizenship. Such positions did not go unchecked among the rank and file. For instance, members of the Italian Communist Party in the Spanish Quarters (whom I interviewed for an oral history project on the neighbourhood's transformation after the 1980 earthquake) defended their popular roots. For them, the *vicolo* denoted the physical place where comrades struggled to organise politically – from door-to-door newspaper sales to campaigns against heroin dealing – but also the symbolic field in which they struggled for recognition notwithstanding the party hierarchy's predilection (albeit a fading one) for the industrial proletariat (Dines 2015: 81–82). Meanwhile, tourist interest in the *vicolo* over the last twenty years has been suspected, especially by a local bourgeoisie keen to promote the city's monumental heritage, to be a sign of undue fascination with '*folclore*'; another locally contested term that refers as much to the romanticisation of lower-class Naples as it does to a set of shared traditions. The disdain for the folkloric can rapidly turn to foreboding when this is considered out of place. Indeed, a female official met in the Prefecture during the late 1990s, who hailed from the middle-class

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[3] The video can be viewed at: http://www.creativiteeshirt.com/

hilltop suburb of Vomero, had no doubts about the cause of the unsightly behaviour in the neighbouring Piazza Plebiscito: 'that's the *vicoli* for you'. In sum, these assorted examples illustrate that any attempt to contemplate public space in the alleyways of central Naples faces historical and semantic quandaries that without scrutiny risks rendering discussion superficial and speculative.

Conclusion: language matters on the street

In the early 2000s a Neapolitan branch of a British far-left organisation decided to name itself *Socialismo dal Basso* as the literal translation of 'socialism from below'. The choice of terminology was somewhat rash given that *basso* also refers locally to the ground-floor dwellings in the *vicoli* and hence is a metonym for the lumpenproletariat of Naples and its assorted habits and foibles. The fact that the *inglesi* had inadvertently paid tribute to the old Left's bogey that stood in the way of organising a disciplined proletarian movement was a source of general mirth among local activists, and the group – intent on introducing a salutary British revolutionary perspective to Neapolitan politics – died a quick death. The oversight in Lācis and Benjamin's essay on Naples was certainly subtler and camouflaged within its carefully weighted prose and, as I have suggested, was in part determined by the authors' historically specific choice of terms. Nevertheless, the point to be gained from both these cases is that attention to the multilingual and transhistorical nature of urban keywords can make an important difference.

In this essay, I have not simply called for a greater recognition of the polysemy of the street: I have also highlighted that claims made in the name of the 'street' may not always be immediately relevant beyond Anglophone contexts. I have considered the lexical landscape of the piazza and the *vicolo*, two very different spaces within the everyday vocabulary of Italian cities, neither of which can be conveniently bracketed under the idea of street or *strada*. To do so would be to lose sight of the particular dissonance that surrounds the representations and experiences of such spaces and would hinder the chances of conducting a meaningful ethnography. Cultural materialism provides a crucial corrective to decontextualised visions not just of the street but also of the *piazza* and the *vicolo*. Reflecting on the possibilities and limits of words forces us to consider how far the ideas contained within them travel and under what conditions. What does it mean to create a piazza in the centre or periphery of a city publicly declared to lack civic space? How is the Neapolitan *vicolo* resignified by local elites who for so long maligned it, at a time when this spatial form finds itself 'heritagised' together with the rest of the old city?

I want to reiterate that Raymond Williams' *Keywords* and Topalov et al's *L'Aventure des Mots* do not offer blueprints for research. They both possess evident limitations with respect to the goals pursued here. Williams did not engage with the urban and he starts and ends with the English language. *L'Aventure des Mots* does not dwell on the social dimensions of language but often restricts itself to austere *longue durées* of shifts in meaning. However, what they do is to provide enticing signposts that indicate possible routes for research on the street and other urban spaces, in which one is encouraged to bring into play cross-cultural, multilingual histories, to heed the historical and material circumstances that shape meaning, and to be prepared for disputes over the same historically and materially-shaped words. In empirical terms this may imply concentrating on the heteroglossia of a single street or comparing the divergent lexical dimensions of public space across different cities.

People's multiple uses of urban space are articulated through their active use of language, which in turn is rendered intelligible by the broader practices and beliefs that shape urban life in a given time and place. A keyword analysis of the street and (non-)equivalent spatial forms seeks to make sense of the changing interconnections between these larger frameworks and the micro-settings of the city, and to consider how historically and spatially specific terms constrain and enable different ways of seeing and acting. If the street is to be taken seriously as a site of sociological research and theory, then greater attention to semantic and spatial variation across linguistic and urban contexts can work to redress the sweeping assumptions about the social significance of the street that have hitherto held sway in Anglophone urban studies.

Translation is not the preserve of polyglots. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, 'to accept translations passively as a substitute for the "original" closes doors [but] we will not give up the foolish hope that a careful translation, sharing problems, will lead to language-learning.' (Spivak, 2011: xvii). If translation is an imperfect but necessary process that sometimes can offer only 'tolerably satisfactory' solutions (Sturge, 1996: 22), a cross-cultural engagement with the production and reproduction of ideas about the street and other places may at times be intolerably laborious, but it is necessary to arrive at a more contextually-based understanding of urban phenomena. Ethnography, as the double practice of field research and representation, should precisely be alert to such discrepancies. In particular, Anglophone researchers of urban life have a duty to acknowledge the finite reaches of the social worlds described through their words. If this might seem a daunting proposition to anyone attached to the semantic certitude of an apparently straightforward term such as the 'street', it can also be an exciting one. As Honoré de Balzac wrote in his 1832 novel *Louis*

Lambert, deliberating on 'the life and adventures of a word [...] is sufficient to launch us on a wide expanse of meditation' (1889: 4). Likewise, the incorporation of keyword analysis into urban ethnography opens up new horizons in research on the street and ultimately augurs a more incisive sociological analysis of the city.

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