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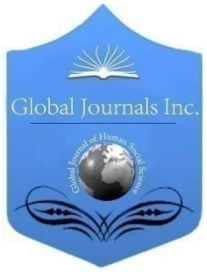

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# The Tranvieri Gym Young Immigrant Boxers in the Neighborhood Bolognina

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*Abstract-* The paper describes the social organization of boxing gym "Tranvieri", located in Bolognina, a working class neighbourhood in the city of Bologna which has been rapidly changing over the last twenty years due to the closing of factories and the arrival of immigrants, especially from Maghreb. The gym population has changed accordingly: currently about two thirds of those attending the gym as a leisure centre are children of immigrants. I studied the practices of everyday life by these young boxers born in Italy but without citizenship who daily frequent this gym once finished vocational school, work, family responsibilities. Boxing is for them not a solution to the frustration inflicted by a social world they perceive as indifferent if not hostile towards them, rather the possibility of not being represented in it as excluded people.

*Keywords:* *urban space; boxing; young immigrants; neighborhood; ethnography.*

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# The Tranvieri Gym Young Immigrant Boxers in the Neighborhood Bolognina

Giuseppe Scandurra

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## I. Introduction

This paper aims at inquiring the practices of everyday life by a group of young men who spend a significant part of their week, once they have finished school and family commitments and work, at the "Tranvieri", a gym in Bolognina, a district of the first outskirts of Bologna.

Along with fellow anthropologist Fulvia Antonelli I stepped in this gym for the first time in February 2007 (Antonelli & Scandurra, 2008, 2010) after having conducted from January 2006 to January 2007, along with a group of colleagues, a social investigation on the territory Bolognina (Piano B, 2008) in order to describe the profound changes that have affected this area after the closure of the metalworking factories at the end of the eighties and the arrival of numerous immigrants. This gym represents fifty years of boxing history in Bologna – it was opened in 1950 – as well as a major place of the culture of leisure in one of the territories most popular in the city. (Circolo Dozza ATC, 2005).

Tranvieri was set up shortly after the end of the Second World War. Since it started its activity it has not changed much: despite having moved from the basement of a local circle of tram drivers to just a few hundred meters far away, the boxing society Bolognina maintains the characteristics of a working men's club. The gym is not very big and, when active and crowded, it barely manages to host the group of training boxers. The entrance is in a side alley of the road connecting the main square of Bolognina to the fairground and is scarcely visible, if not for a sign that indicates its presence.

### *a) Young immigrants*

The overall objective of this paper is to investigate the transformations of Bologna through the analysis of games, sports and physical recreation for children of foreign origin. Focusing on a specific place, a boxing gym, my goal is to inquire the practices of a group of boys who, on a non-professional basis and, in the majority of cases, just to pass their free time, share the physical space of a boxing gym. Most of the Tranvieri's boxers today are young men of foreign origin, mostly Moroccans. Studying their practices of everyday life, between February 2007 and February 2010, we were able to investigate problems, needs, hopes of a "second generation" of immigrants: almost all of them arrived in Italy as children and attended school here. (Scandurra & Antonelli, 2010).

The physical education they receive by learning how to box translates into practices and embedded knowledge that give relevance to their daily lives through a continuous production and reproduction of meaning and meanings that have value outside of that sport space. Knowledge that affects the way in which they build their identity as citizens and that is relevant to their citizenship.

While in the last thirty years in Italy there has been a growing interest, even in the context of research in social sciences, for the younger generation and their relationship with the urban space, especially with regard to the "young foreigners" (Zoletto, 2010), however this interest is mostly related to cultural identity and migration legacy, social inclusion or exclusion in the sphere of education and/or employment or some fundamental aspects of formal citizenship. Minor importance has been given to the analysis of their spare time and of the formal and informal places devoted to play seen as environments where a corporeality is built and consequently the boundaries of a multicultural citizenship are defined.

Sport seen as a way to spend their leisure time by a group of young people of foreign origin, is commonly regarded as a minor issue, a "safety valve" for a society such as Italian society, more and more flattened on a hyper-productive conception of life. Still, the sense that the "inhabitants" of these local gyms give

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to sport is not reducible to a simple physical activity. How do you become a boxer or, more simply, a gym-goer? How is produced and reproduced a body knowledge in this physical space? Is it mere knowledge of the body or is it a knowledge that through the body becomes a means of belonging to a "community"?

A boxing gym, designed as an area for recreation, physical and mental wellbeing and socialization through the exercise of a sport, must be placed within a broader reflection on the relationship between body and space and on the role that should be given to corporeality in the urban space. There are such bodies indeed which are considered the "natural" occupants of specific urban spaces and others that are considered "out of place" as soon as they become visible in places that were not meant for them. (Satta & Scandurra, 2104)

In an innovative cross between urban studies, immigration, social studies of youth and childhood, this paper aims to focus attention on the link between sport and urban areas, between bodies and cities, between differences and socio-spatial order in Italian cities, within the specific literature of leisure studies. (Huizinga 1938; Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Dick, 2003; Coleman & Kohn, 2007; Stevens, 2007; Sugden, 2007; Rojek, 2009)

*b) The old boxers*

> We did in Bologna two meetings a week, on Monday and Friday at the Paladozza, the sport palace of boxing... and the audience was huge. When have you ever seen at the port palace eight thousand people who go to see a boxing match? Let's say that memories are beautiful because it was another life, another sport. (Albano)[1].

With this words Albano, who directed the gym for years, remembers the 50s, the 60s and the 70s, the "golden years" of boxing when Bologna was the capital of boxing in Italy. Almost all the people I interviewed and who have lived these matches as direct protagonists or as mere spectators described me this period as unrepeatable because boxers were "brave" and "heroic".[2]

Today other boxers fight in the gym, almost all of foreign origin, who did not experience that period, the golden years. The stories of the boxers of today bring out the problems and the real difficulties that a career in this sport involves and deconstruct the myth of boxing lasted until the end of the Seventies. (Oates, 1987; Philonenko, 1991; Quercioli, 1994).

It is no coincidence that in the gym the boxers of the past continue to train at the same place where they started their careers. This place for the "veterans" of Tranvieri, located precisely between the ring and the benches, is an institutional strategic place because from this angle you can have a full view of everything that goes in the gym. That is the place where stories are told, where the memory of the gym is passed on to new members. (Figure 1)

Ernesto, a former amateur boxer, is one of the most respected members of the gym by virtue of his daily presence there since more than forty years. He is the one who can afford to represent the world of boxing in other ways then the "official" one, because his loyalty to the history of boxing and gym is indisputable. Like him, other former boxers of the golden age as Dante were willing to tell us even the dark side of boxing and the difficulties they encountered in their professional careers: the unfair defeats, the combined meetings, the power of the sponsors (De Franco, 2006). Often emerges in these stories the "hunger" of men, who, in those glorious years, practiced boxing to gain something: buy a motorcycle, hanging out with the girls on Saturday night, purchase fashionable clothes.

> I think I was a good amateur boxer [...]. My sport was motorcycling [...]. My friends and I wanted to be like Marlon Brando in "On the Waterfront". But racing bikes it takes money [...], and I put all the money I took from boxing on racing. Once they called me on Friday to make a boxing match on Saturday night and I hadn't been in the gym for six months because I had had a motorcycle accident and I broke a couple of ribs. I agreed to do it because you took money. Then finally I stopped both racing and boxing. I stopped boxing because I was to let others win. It is obvious that they always called me with people who were much more trained than me. One who called me on Friday to make a match on Saturday, he had to give me a lot of money in those conditions [...]. In the factory I took about 75 thousand lire a month when I became qualified, and for this match they offered me 300 thousand dollars. I did it for money, but then I got bored of taking blows. (Dante)

The gym has helped many boxers as Dante to leave the street, as many former boxers often have said to me: that is fights, thefts and clashes between gangs.

> The gym... I started in the '60. I was nineteen years old. The gym gave you a certain discipline and kept you from street fights. In the gym I vented with the others! I wasn't a bully, only 70% of the young boys of Bolognina spent their time fighting in the street. (Ernesto).

*c) The young boxers*

If we compare the words of Albano, Dante and Ernesto with those of the protagonists of our study, the reasons that prompted them to train in the gym are not dissimilar. The boxers of today are young people from twelve to twenty-five who partly are attending vocational

[1] For privacy reasons all the names listed in this paper do not correspond to the real ones.

[2] Almost all the old boxers of the gym emigrated from South Italy to North after the Second World War to find a job in the local factories.



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schools and partly are struggling with their first experiences in working world. Many of them live in the neighborhood and here spend much of their free time. In their stories the entrance to Tranvieri emerges as random choice, but when we questioned about their deepest motivations they always responded they needed to vent, to self-discipline or to socialize.

> I'm just nineteen years old; I started about one year and a half ago. I started because I had some problems at home and the only place where I was at ease was the gym […]. I made this choice because instead of going around to bully I decided to come to the gym with initially no intention of fighting. (Anuar)

> That's why I started going to the gym. The main reason was the discussions between my mother and my father... I went out and I vented outside, on the street... I hated smoking, drinking, dancing outside on Saturday and Sunday and so... (Kalhed)

The stories of young boxers as Anuar and Kalhed, both sons of Moroccans citizens come to Italy more than ten years ago, are full of references to tensions in the family, in the school environment, in the work place, all places where most of them had to learn the meaning of the word "failure". The practices of everyday life by Anuar and Kalhed are the same of their other gym mates born in Italy but without citizenship. (Figure 2)

This guys went to the gym because it allows them to feel respected, to prove their worth, to prove strong without the burden of self-destruction that the affirmation of itself in aggressive forms produce in other contexts, as it emerges clearly from an interview with another boxer of Moroccan origin, Samir:

> Once a guy told me "fuck off" and I threw a table on him, and I broke his back. I did not something like that. This guy always told me: "You're a Moroccan, go back to your country." They wanted to suspend me from school but I had never done anything and I was not punished. (Samir)

Vocational schools of Bolognina frequented by Samir, Kalhed, Anuar represent places of humiliation. Most of these young boxers regard the schools of the district as total institutions where, more than acquire knowledge, they learn only the awareness of their subalternity. (Sayad, 1999; Giacalone, 2002; Guerzoni & Riccio, 2009)

> I liked to go at school. My father ruined me because he said I wasn't good enough to go to proper school. He sent me to vocational school and I really hated this school. I hated mechanics; I hated becoming an electrician [...]. I wondered why you must always be compelled to become a carpenter or an electrician […]. I wanted to be a lawyer? (Kalhed)

The majority of the boxers protagonists of research came from stories of forced migration, economic hardships, social insecurity and daily life where the common meeting places are courtyards, abandoned basketball and football playgrounds, more generally the big streets of the neighborhood, as Erzan, a young boxer of Albanian origin told me:

> In boxing gyms you can not find one rich, because it is people who must have be nasty […]. In the gym you see poor people, myself, for example, people who are bad, who know what it means to live in the street, what it means to beat each other on the street, people who box to prevent themselves from fighting in the street [...]. There were two friends of mine who have been in the prison. Then one came here with me. This guy was a beast and he said me: "I want to make money fast." I told him: "Listen to me, be careful!", and he said me: "No, I'm going now to steal a car, then steal in a store" [...]. I grew up with him… with him I started boxing. (Erzan)

The gym for these guys is not different from other places of spatial segregation that characterizes certain areas of this suburb. What distinguishes these guys from their mates, vocational schools mates for example, almost all born in Italy but children of North Africans people, is the pursuit of self-control, of discipline, expressed doing boxing. Boxing gym for these kids is not a solution to the frustration from a social world they perceive indifferent if not hostile towards them, rather the possibility of not being represented in it as excluded people. (Grillo & Pratt, 2002; Queirolo Palmas, 2006)

*d) Saturday and Sunday*

The gym includes two rooms. The first, intended for training, contains a twelve-string ring positioned in front of the entry: tools – bags, speedball, punching bag, headboards, benches, scales, racks for storing weights, exercise bikes – are distributed all along the walls of this first room. In the middle of the room lies a space that ends with a large mirror on the wall, where boxers are trained on the blow technique, interrupted by two sacks and a suspended pear. The second room is much smaller and is used as a men's locker room. For women there are no lockers. (Fox, 2001; D'Aguanno & Montesi, 2006)

The gym is open from Monday to Friday from 17:30 until 20:30, but, in fact, opens its doors also outside official hours. The very young gym-goers, for example, arrive at the gym at 17:30 earlier than the masters themselves: Ernesto opens the Tranvieri before the training hours in order to put the weights and all the tools, repair damaged cords, place the unpaired gloves. The young boxers demonstrate, by helping Ernesto in



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these maintenance work, the relationship of trust that binds the "old" members and the new one, which is independent from the relationship they have with the two coaches of the gym, Tito and Sante. Boxers who go to the gym straight from work, which have a longer boxing experience behind them, arrive later instead and stay well beyond the official closing time: the long, hot shower after training, the gossip and jokes in the locker room are a way to ease the tension after the fatigue of school, work, the gloves and the ring.

The Tranvieri is always open over the year: apart from a short summer break in August and some holidays, the courses have a duration that goes well beyond that of traditional gyms. Even in these times of formal closure, however, as well as on Saturdays and Sundays, when the coaches do not work if not during periods of intensive training, the gym continues to be a gathering place daily.

> Oh my God, but do you have in your mind what an African mother is? They're crazy, completely off their head!... go at your friens to ring the bell and the third degree starts: she starts screaming that her son is never at home... no, no, we prefer give us an appointment at the gym or somewhere else! (Marcel, boxer minor of Cameroonian origin)

Ernesto, who holds the keys, opens on Saturday afternoon a little before and allows children who live in the district to train. Often, in these situations, younger brothers and friends who have never entered the gym join young boxers. On Sunday morning, also, the gym becomes an "illegal" soccer field.

> We play but please don't go and tell it around. Samir, for example, plays soccer, Anuar plays soccer and so his brother Kalhed, they are very good. Look at how many Moroccans play in A Series, there are many. Rather they should play more in our teams, they are good. But be careful, if someone gets hurt while playing here, it is a mess; on Sunday you're not insured, of course. However, come if you like (Ernesto when I asked him if I could go to play soccer with the other boxers in the gym on Sundays)

In these occasions, when Italian coaches are not there and the boys led by Ernesto are in charge of management, the prevalence of guys of North African origin becomes blatant. (Valeri, 2006)

On Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings a hybrid language, between Arabic and Bolognese dialect is spoken in the gym, while the repeated cohabitation in this narrow space of veterans, young boxers and the boys of Bolognina allows them to insult and banter often resorting to stereotypes that in another context, such as the weekly training, would be considered racist.

> There's no way, you're just an Arab… do you really have to bugger around for a penalty up to this point? (Ernesto, in one of his verbal exchanges during a play)

The weekend games are also opportunities for new boxers recruitment, because most of these guys around sixteen then join the Tranvieri: when they join the gym many of them have already entered into this space, used the showers, learned how to use the tools, only they have never seen a coach (Turner, 1967; Roets, Vandenabeele & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012). Tito and Sante are aware that the gym it is open on Saturday and Sunday, but turn a blind eye, being also aware that the Tranvieri is also an agency of socialization for the kids in the neighbourhood.

*e) Cultural Intimacy*

The Tranvieri can be described as a group of heterogeneous people who share, on a daily basis and for several hours in the afternoon and evening, rules, bans, standards of behaviour, a way of perceiving time and space. By studying the social organization of the gym it is legitimate to speak of «cultural intimacy» (Herzfeld, 1997).

> If you stay in the gym for one day, three months, one year, you know that he also wants to get what you want to get and then you seek to help him. Help him on how to pull the blow, on how to behave in the ring. There are no different nationalities in the gym, most of people are foreigners and there have never been trouble, we always help each other. (Anuar)

Estimation and encouragement by the gym fellows, as well as the fact of training in a group, are elements that strongly influence a boxer's performance, because the individual psychological factor – consisting of perseverance, determination, self-confidence, coldness in the ring – is strengthened or weakened by the group that on a daily basis attends the gym: if his teammates do not consider him "a good one", it is unlikely that a boxer will be able to step into the ring, even holding sufficient physical qualities. (Beattie 1996; Heiskanen 2006).

The exercise of sparring, or the combat simulation that takes place between boxers in the gym, is a decisive moment for the boxer who aspires to enter the ring in regular competition. Sparring plays at the same time a role of socialization since it often is followed by moments of confession and confidence in order to defuse the aggression exhibited on the square (Wacquant, 2000). The relations between boxers sometimes are formed through this sport. (Figure 3)

Each boxer has his own ideal sparring partner. On the ring, with Sante and Tito giving advice at the opposite corners of the square, sparring for the guys of Tranvieri is a baptism, a «rite of passage» (Wacquant,



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2000; Crossley 2001; Faure, 2004; Roberts, 2006). When Tito calls two boxers sparring means to do that he is focusing on them, he's going to make them fight. Or, if it is their first sparring, it means that the two boxers are destined to enter the main group of Tranvieri's athlete, and will prepare to fight.

Obviously the "pairs" are formed mainly on the basis of practical reasons. This is because not all guys the same hours of training, and if you do not take at least some boxer to do sparring, a gym can be a great environment in which to train, but do not form a context where boxers will become champions. Tito and Sante, for example, in their constant search for a great boxer, know they must focus on a novice boxer selecting new members every day, continuing to put the mirror in front of those who make less progress and gradually approaching the square of the most promising.

The ideal sparring partner when there is not much difference in weight is often a person who knows the boxer, one he trusts even outside the gym. Studying how the boxers find their partners within the Tranvieri made me realize also the relationships between the guys out of the gym involved in research. Obviously, leaving the gym, observing the practices of everyday life of these boxers once they stopped wearing the clothes of the streetcar, I could, reciprocally, understand how and why they formed pairs inside the gym. (Figure 4)

Some friends and acquaintances who then determine the formation of subgroups in the locker room, can be explained however by virtue of living in the same territory, as in the case of Samir, Anuar and Kalhed, neighbours and close for a period of time even roommates.

The road and the ring are interdependent in shaping the group of athletes who fights for boxing company Bolognina. Sharing the space of the gym, do sparring as we have seen, means building a relationship with each other (Mauss, 1936), the street often has the role to strengthen, or completely reverse these connection so that there is still more affinity in the gym between boxers or, conversely, a revision of the couples chosen by the two coaches.

One of the most interesting explanations of the link between street culture and the gym was provided to us by one of the coaches of Tranvieri, Sante. At the end of a meeting organized by Tranvieri during the final stages of the research, a sport reporter nostalgic of the great local boxers of the '50s and '60s asked the coach to organize collective vision in the gym of the most significant matches of old boxers of Bologna.

> I think it is wrong to consider Anuar or Yassine as Benvenuti [great boxing champion Italian, n.d.a.] because I think that every boxer needs to be himself, to find his way to boxing. For example, Anuar's blows are natural, they can from his experience on the road. This way of boxing will never be taken away from him and we can slowly teach him how to transform that blow in a proper hook. You can force him to shoot straight at a distance, but as soon as he will hit the ring, and be provoked, he will fight to defend himself in his peculiar manner. I believe my task as a coach is to adapt box to the natural qualities and personality of a kid, because if you take his features from him, he is not the same boxer anymore. They are not all the same; there is not a unique way of boxing that fits everybody. A good coach is like a tailor, who sews a dress suitable for every guy, enhancing their features. I want Anuar to become a good boxer remaining himself. If you take that from him you've taken everything. If you teach them to employ strength as well as their character they will know how to behave on the ring and in life as well, as boxers and as men.

*f) Generation gap*

Once established certain relationships of trust with a group of young boxers I began to get out of the gym with them. The relation ring/street is decisive for the gym. Tito is aware of how his gym draws the top boxers, such as Erzan, Khaled, Anuar or Samir, from the street. If once Tito could count on many workers, almost all Italians, who worked in the factories of Bolognina today the gym depends more and more, in terms of athletic achievements, on a group of young people of foreign origin who live a few hundred meters away from the gym.

When I asked Ernesto to describe his old gym mates, their life stories were not dissimilar to those of the current boxers of Tranvieri. Words such as "street", "punches", family issues and difficulties to integrate into the territory often return in the speeches of Ernesto as in those as Kalhed, Anuar, Samir or Erzan.

Bolognina, in the early years after the Second World War, was, for a twenty-somethings like Dante, Ernesto and Albano a territory to explore. Their parents, like those of Anuar, could not control them after school. Many old boxers, in a similar way as Kalhed told me, formed in these years "bands" of young boys which spent their time playing in backyards, parks, public squares of the quarter.

Artemio, for example, recalls how after the Second World War he often heard his mother called "Sicilian" or "Moroccan". Once the former boxer confessed to me how he felt compelled to engage in fight with some bolognese guy who joked about his southern origin. At the base of the only violent reaction he has had in his young life outside the ring, Samir, as we saw earlier, there was precisely the accusation of being a "Moroccan shit".

Despite all these similarities, so deep in the practices of everyday life, in the relationship with the territory, in the way they invest on boxing career, in the



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difficult relationship with school and family, the boxers of the old Tranvieri don't identify with the new generation of boxers who train at the gym now.

> I feel nostalgic of the times when I lived in Bolognina. I remember that at midnight we went to take newspapers at the central station, now everything has changed. I've never been afraid of being robbed. Now via Barbieri - one of the streets of Bolognina mostly inhabited by immigrants, mostly North Africans [n.d.a.] - has changed completely. (Dante)

## II. Conclusions

In recent years, municipal authority has decided to rebuild on the ashes of the old factories engineering centres and business activities related to the tertiary sector. All typical jobs in the manufacturing sector deteriorated in the new service economy, where, how often Anuar told me, "You have to tolerate racist acts by the boss if you want to keep your work place". All the jobs accessible to immigrants do not warrant economic security or opportunities to rise. (Kats, 1990; Farmer, 2003) (Figures 5 e 6)

The gym, for some boxers as Erzan, often appears as the only hope because it is still a place where to build social capital and make friends, when, despite working for many years, they have never been able to make friends with their work colleagues.

Scholar Asher Colombo, for example, in studying the career paths of a group of Algerian immigrants comparing the current working reality in Milan to the French industrial one lasted until the end of the Seventies, bringing in his text reflections on the working world of French historians such as Dubet and Lapeyronnie:

> In a society organized around industry, immigrants found slowly their place in working world. Gradually, they were inscribed in the trade union struggles, shared the class-consciousness of their fellow workers and abandoned the status of immigrants. Their integration was the integration into the French republican. Working class and socialist suburbs were a powerful tool for integration of immigrants, internal migrants and foreigners. Thanks to workers, trade unions and the working-class community, the socialist suburbs could absorb the new populations. Their decline was the decline of this integration tool. The immigration problem is the consequence of this decomposition. (Colombo, 1998, p. 92)

Bolognina is not a ghetto or a suburb, but today is characterized by the growth of the industry based on information technology, the fragmentation of the labour, the transformation of public welfare at all municipal levels, all processes that have hit the African-American ghettos as well as French *banlieues*. With the closure of the factories the local labour market is increasingly marginalizing young immigrants who, in some areas of the country, are up to 25% of the total resident population, relegating people like Anuar on the edge of the service economy. (Wirth, 1928; Holston & Appadurai, 1999; Fava, 2008).

From the stories of Kalhed and Erzan emerges the existence of niches of unskilled service sector where they are hired without a contract. Samir told me more than once about vocational schools of the territory where he studied in differential classes for immigrants – the same schools that, years before, Artemio and others old boxers had attended successfully becoming specialized workers. (Figures 7 and 8)

If we assume as an imperative of ethnographic research to «reconstruct the meaning» that certain social practices play from the point of view of those who are involved (Bourgois, 1996) it is evident that every guy react differently to these objective transformations that more and more are narrowing the range of possibilities that the protagonists of research have in front of them. The gym itself is perceived by some of them as only refuge, by others as a place where to find "revenge". (Wacquant, 2004)

If Artemio and Dante found in the factory economic opportunity along with the chance to gain respect and dignity through work, Kalhed, Anuar and the big part of the protagonists of this research are aware that if they want to survive they have to suffer every day the injustices inflicted by their Italian colleagues. (Foot White, 1943)

Meanwhile, Bolognina is more and more undergoing of a radical process of gentrification. Years ago we asked the current mayor of Bologna the following question: "How do you regard the development of this suburb?" He answered: "It will be the world of the service industry". But what is the "world of service industry"? Which is the future of Bolognina and of our former industrial peripheries?

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