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## Voices of a City Market: An Ethnography

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(Article begins on next page)

**Review of *Voices of a City Market: An Ethnography* (Adrian Blackledge & Angela Creese, 2019)**

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## **Review of *Voices of a City Market: An Ethnography* (Adrian Blackledge & Angela Creese, 2019)**

Almost three decades have passed, but I can clearly remember the special excitement of my childhood's Saturday mornings, when my grandparents took me with them to Porta Palazzo ("Porta Pila" for the locals), Turin's main market. Everywhere around us the sellers' screaming voices invited people to approach the stalls by promising "unbeatable offers", "high-quality products", and "unique opportunities"... likewise screaming voices then responded probing the quality of the items exhibited and negotiating their prices... all in a complex and fascinating performance involving a variety of linguistic codes, gestures, and practices. As I pass through those same stalls today, a strange feeling pervades me. On the one hand, everything looks familiar, consolidated, deeply rooted in an established tradition certainly dating back to well before my childhood's visits to the market. On the other hand, everything seems to have noticeably changed over time: the confluence of Italian dialects characterising my memories has turned into a larger melting pot containing the most varied languages. Local products are now put side by side not only with foods from the Mediterranean tradition, as it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but also with lychees, papayas, dates, halal meat, lacquered ducks, insects, and a number of other products coming from Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America. And the clientele has evidently changed too, not only in terms of geographical origin, but also and above all as regards practices, with *habitués* visiting today's Europe's largest open air market side by side with curious tourists and disengaged *flâneurs* entering "into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy" (Baudelaire 1963, 9), but always keeping a certain measure of

detachment and even alienation (see in particular Benjamin [1938–39] 1969).

Such an ambivalence is not unique to Porta Palazzo, but characterises most present-day city markets. In fact, whilst, on the one hand, contemporary marketplaces maintain—and are increasingly emphasizing, especially as a result of the trend known as “locavorism”—their historical roots and local connotations, on the other hand, they incessantly incorporate new users, new sellers, new products, and new experiences. These are precisely the issues considered by Adrian Blackledge and Angela Creese in their recent book *Voices of a City Market: An Ethnography* (2019), which draws on four years of ethnographic research involving six universities, as well as a number of non-academic partners, aimed at studying a wide range of city contexts (i.e. businesses, the cultural heritage sector, sports clubs, legal and welfare advice settings, ...) characterised by “superdiversity” (cf. Vertovec 2007; Meissner and Vertovec 2015). More specifically, the volume focuses on contemporary city markets, depicting them as the most representative spaces where the multiple processes and effects of migration and the “diversification of diversity” become tangible.

An original combination of research rigour, creative writing, and artistic materials produces a highly expressive text that places the reader at the very centre of the market and of the multifaceted processes of translation taking place within it. In fact, as the book clearly shows, the market is the place where identity and otherness incessantly face each other, opening the way to dialogue and new identities, but also to misunderstanding. However, while in some cases misunderstanding leads to incommunicability and even conflict, as reported in a number of episodes, it also represents the space for innovation and creativity, where cultures recognise themselves as different and separate, but not necessarily irreconcilable (cf. La Cecla 1997; Stano 2015). In this sense, bodily communication plays a crucial role: being less formalized

than the linguistic code (whose rigidity is remarked by several dialogues in the book), it allows for smoother processes of translation, as it creates the space for gradual “adjustments” (see Landowski 2005) to otherness, thus facilitating communication and exchange.

But how can we describe and analyse such complex and multifaceted processes? Blackledge and Creese effectively solve this crucial question by opting for multimodality; that is to say, by combining various texts and resources, such as accurate reports of the activities taking place at the market, first-person accounts by the multiple players (i.e. sellers, buyers, and also people simply strolling through the stalls) who interact within it, extracts exploring the researchers’ feelings and thoughts, migration tales, short poems, photographs, price lists, products inventories, and so on and so forth. All these materials are juxtaposed without any specific order or hierarchy, in a distinctly polyphonic text. Even the criterion adopted for the titles of the eight chapters of the book, which evidently refer to the most common food products sold at the market and involved in the narrated episodes, appears nonetheless deliberately artificial. Rather than offering a discourse *on* the market, in other words, the text is conceived as a way to give expression to the discourse—or, better, the discourses—*of* the market itself; that is to say, the multiple and sometimes overlaying “voices” speaking within and through it.

It is in this sense that *Voices of a City Market* can be seen as a sort of “puzzle”, which attempts not so much to provide answers, but rather to raise questions, as emerges clearly in the opening (Part One) and closing (Part Three) remarks. In these sections, in fact, various voices—i.e. from a young researcher to the professor leading the project, from the butchers working at the market to the photographer and poet who contributed to the realisation of the book, etc.—take part in a passionate dialogue, contextualizing and at the same time problematizing the research. This allows the

volume to address crucial issues in ethnographic research, such as the difference between reality and representation, the importance—and difficulty—of selecting the final materials out of the initial researchers' notes and putting them in a form suitable to foster awareness and comprehension, or the delicate balance between truth and meaningfulness, always comparing different perspectives and ideas and calling on readers to adopt their own vision.

The result is a work that might look challenging, as it is highly fragmented and not always easy to read, but which undoubtedly succeeds in giving expression to the very essence of the market, of the humanity inhabiting it, of the voices speaking within and through it. A book that is conscious of its complexity and originality, certainly suitable for experts but also for *bricoleurs* (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962; Floch 1990) who do not mind re-combining its pieces to unfold the multiple meanings underlying them. After all, this seems to be more and more the challenge posed by city markets themselves—and, more generally, by the superdiverse cities in which we live, whose meaning can no longer be considered complete (if it ever could be), but emerges today more than ever as a text in continuous re-definition, adjustment, negotiation. Such a text, exactly like Blackledge and Creese's book, invites us to abandon any form of modern detachment or alienation to fully redress the part of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, that is to say, "a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness ... reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life... an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I', at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive" (1863; English Translation 1964, 9–10). This is an invitation that I will surely consider next time I will be walking through Porta Pila's stalls; and it is a challenge that any habitué, tourist or modern "stroller" should

accept if s/he wants to hear and to comprehend (that is to say, to understand and at the same time to “incorporate”) the multiple voices of today’s city markets.

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