

Alternative urban narratives:
Telling the Esquilino district of Rome through history
traces and collective memories
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The extensive scientific literature on memory has highlighted both the inextricable link between memory and place (Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004), and the problems that center on the topic of collective memory. By adopting the British historian Eric Hobsbawn's notion of "invented tradition" (1983), memory events and places have been questioned to highlight the reiteration of cultural models and symbols that actually represent political élites' wills.

The geographical research on this topic has shown how collective memory involves a process of selection of historical events, both on an individual and a social level. Often the history of individuals differs from official public narratives and discourses, precisely because it is not mediated by the need for representation "from above", aimed at soliciting a sense of community and belonging (Minca, Colombino, 2012).

As a partial resolution of the *vexata quaestio* between history and memory (Le Goff, 1977), much of the critical re-reading of the past started from the places of collective memory, in the wake of the *spatial turn* that has covered all social and humanistic disciplines (Apaydin, 2020). For contemporary history, as well as for other disciplines, this turning point has

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centered on the growing interest in stories and narratives referring to specific places, which often see the cities as protagonists (Bortolotti, 2002; Portelli, 2007).

The Esquiline district of Rome is a relevant case study, as for at least since three decades it has attracted the media and scientific community's interest in its multiethnic connotations, the spread of illegal activities, and social/urban degradation (Banini, 2019). Due to the growing presence of immigrants and homeless people, the district is described as the meeting place of the *eternal city* with the edges of the world, a sort of showcase of late-modern contradictions, the situated expression of the strong bond between globalization, international migration and new poverties (Scarpelli, 2009; Attili, 2007).

However, the Esquiline is also a space connoted by a strong historical legacy, not only for the presence of important archaeological traces, catholic basilicas and historic aristocratic villas, including Villa Altieri, seat of the "Palace of Culture and Historical Memory", but also because it hosts what the French historiography has called *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1984; 1992; Vallat, 2008; Isnenghi, 2010).

The Esquiline's places of memory are linked above all to specific moments of the so-called "short century", mainly those of fascism and World War II. From the "stumbling stones" laid throughout the district to the Museum of the Resistance (ex SS's prison), from the commemorative plaques on the facades of many buildings to the street names dedicated to the historical figures of Italian history, the district can be considered as a palimpsest of signs related to both national and world history. What does remain of that past in the experiences of the resident population? What memories, feelings, meanings are linked to those historical traces? How and when do those traces operate? Is it possible to direct local memories towards transnational current issues? How to connect local memory to the current

global presence in the district? How to valorize the historical/cultural heritage of the Esquilino, beyond the above mentioned mainstream discourses?

Adopting a trans-disciplinary perspective, this contribution presents the first results of a research, funded by Sapienza University of Rome, aimed at answering these questions using qualitative methodologies, with the ultimate objective of proposing initiatives related (but not limited) to heritage tourism in the Esquilino district, with the active participation of both natives and immigrants.

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