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# **Walls Built Up, Walls Written Down: Of Symbolic Value, Material Effectiveness and Media Representation of Barriers in Padua, Italy**

Francesca Musiani

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## **Introduction**

Tell me thy mind; for I have Pisa left  
And am to Padua come, as he that leaves  
A shallow plash to plunge him in the deep  
And with satiety seeks to quench his thirst.

-- William Shakespeare, *The Taming of The Shrew* (1590)

Padua is a city of 210,000 inhabitants, in the North-eastern Veneto region of Italy. As William Shakespeare knew well, it hosts one of the most ancient universities in the world; it is also surrounded by a prosper industrial area, and constitutes a notable touristic and religious attraction, due to the important remains of the medieval city and to the Cathedral of St Anthony, a landmark relished by pilgrims worldwide. Despite its qualities, though, in the last few years Padua has not been depicted primarily as a place where to relieve one's academic or artistic thirst: to give it a place in the media spotlight, instead, have been its "walls". Barriers: from the one in Via Anelli, the most famous one so far in the international press, to other, smaller and more recent barriers that, by themselves and as part of a larger discourse on integration and security, have also received a great deal of attention in local newspapers and newscasts.

Expanding and updating a line of analysis I have started in 2007,<sup>1</sup> this essay means to contribute to the investigation of the "Padua Walls" phenomenon. By trying to move a step further from current debates on negative and positive features of the proliferation of "walls" in Europe and the world, I argue that such barriers – and the politics behind them – should be read as symptoms more than as solutions (regardless of their actual effectiveness as such). I propose an interpretive key for the "Padua Walls" phenomenon that treats them as signals of a lingering malaise (of which Padua is a case study but by no means the only example) that stems from the current devolution of concepts such as solidarity, belonging, community.<sup>2</sup> By doing so, I address both the concreteness and materiality of such barriers and of their construction, and the representation that media have produced, in parallel, of them as processes and concepts. Particular attention is paid, in the blend of case studies and discussions that constitutes this article, to the

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<sup>1</sup> Francesca Musiani, *The Padua Wall: Immigration, Conflict, and Integration*, Peace & Conflict Monitor, 25 October 2007.

<sup>2</sup> "Devolution" is used here in its meaning, antonym to evolution, of "decline, deterioration", rather than in its political signification of power transfer from national to regional levels.

juxtaposition of symbolic value and practical efficacy of the “Padua Walls”, and its implications in the formation of societal rites and policy-making choices.

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### Yet More Walls? The “Valeri” School as a Case Study

Alle loro domande abbiamo il dovere di rispondere,  
tanto più perché sono confusi.  
Non hanno capito cosa è accaduto.  
La diversità sarà il tema del giorno, psicologica e sociale.<sup>3</sup>

-- Ignazia Nespolo, director of the “Diego Valeri” elementary school,  
shortly after the installation of the net between the school and the C.T.P. (2008)

The last “wall” built-up in Padua is to be found, or should be, at the end of Via Monte Santo, number 24. It has been erected during the Easter holidays of 2008, with the aim of separating the elementary school “Diego Valeri” from the “Centro Territoriale Permanente” (i.e., Permanent Territorial Centre).<sup>4</sup> In this centre, men and women gather every day to learn Italian language and societal practices, while acquiring a certificate that will attest of their professional qualifications in a variety of handicraft jobs. They range in age from early teens to late fifties; they come from Mediterranean Africa, former Soviet republics, the Far East of Asia; they hope to use their diploma as plumbers, cooks, nurses. What has been labelled, like some of its infamous predecessors, as a “wall” in its own right, is now bound to become the redeeming fracture between two realms that have interacted, in apparent peace and with little or no complications, for the fourteen years of their co-existence. But if one actually goes to Via Monte Santo – in fact, a blind alley – the “wall” is not to be seen, nor could it be, as there is no construction made of brick and mortar that the word could remind of: it is actually a barrier, a wide-mesh net of metallic wire, two metres in height and ten in length, precarious and bound to collapse at any time. Children students of the “Valeri” school usually enter the main gate, as they have done for years, at half past eight. Adult students of the C.T.P. enter the gate of the Centre, just a few meters away, half an hour later. The closeness of their entrance gates has always enabled them to smile at each other, wave at each other. Even after March 2008, they keep on smiling and waving. Children run in the backyard during the pauses between classes with untamed happiness, despite the cold spring.

Fear – the most problematic one, the one that refuses rationality and does so for no particular reason, except an all-encompassing but vague sense of anguish – apparently lies within adults only.<sup>5</sup> The reason? A few days earlier, a young man from Bangladesh, student at the C.T.P., has wanted to take a picture of the yard where a few kids were

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<sup>3</sup> “We have an obligation to answer their questions (N.d.A. of the children students), even more so because they are confused. They didn’t understand what happened. Diversity, psychological and social, will be the theme of the day.” (my translation)

<sup>4</sup> Felice Paduano, *All’elementare Valeri è calata la barriera*, Il Mattino di Padova, 23 March 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Elvira Scigliano, *Valeri : genitori soddisfatti*, Il Mattino di Padova, 20 March 2008.

playing – he said – in order to be able to show to his far-away family where he was, in the company of whom, studying what, in his new host country. This act, certainly an ingenuous move, but not a vicious one, did probably constitute a violation of the boy's privacy, as many are ready to admit; an undesirable act for a parent, and maybe it was; but it went so far as being described as the move of a potential paedophile, and that, for sure, it was not.<sup>6</sup> A “media moment” ensued, a complaint was filed, protests rose. For a few days, common sense and reason disappeared, as other episodes showed: a man whose habit was to distribute small toys to kids outside the school, for advertisement purposes, was suspected to distribute “envelopes” with unspecified, harmful content; two journalists monitoring events in front of the gate were deemed too suspicious-looking and dismissed by the Carabinieri, the Italian military police. The teachers of the C.T.P., by disposition of the educational institution itself, were instructed to accompany the adult students of the establishment directly into classes, as a precautionary measure.

This blind fear, with no discernible direction or cause, further aggravated by the excessive liberties taken by media in their representations of facts, led the director of the “Valeri” to build that barrier, almost out of “therapeutic necessity”. That entanglement of wires, if touched and seen even briefly, appears as supremely useless with respect to its alleged purpose of separation – the infamous picture could still be taken at present – and even more, of protection from physical invasions of the “Valeri” school's space, invasions that would be easy to achieve for whoever willing to do so, regardless of the mobile.<sup>7</sup>

The barrier's only purpose is the attempt to bring a temporary peace of mind to a few tormented parents; a great example of placebo effect, it is certainly no “wall”. But this introductory story serves as an example of how the *ethnification* of a family and community's anxieties<sup>8</sup> reprises a recently consolidated convention in media discourses, the one that tells the story of an intolerant, racist, almost segregationist town.

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## Via Anelli: a Legacy and a Burden

Non è un muro, ma una recinzione,  
che si frappa fra due luoghi.<sup>9</sup>

-- Marco Carrai, town councillor for security in Padua,  
shortly after the construction of the Via Anelli Wall (2006)

(T)he development of more effective conflict regulation  
(can be achieved by) building fences  
low enough for good neighbourliness to develop.

-- Nina Fallentin Caspersen, *Good Fences Make Good Neighbours?*, (2002)

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<sup>6</sup> Adina Agugiaro, *I protettivi muri di Padova*, Il Mattino di Padova, 19 March 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Costanza Costanzo, *Sono un'insegnante : questa è una sconfitta*, Il Mattino di Padova, 16 March 2008.

<sup>8</sup> As defined by Giuseppe D'Avanzo, in *Tra i muri fantasma di Padova : false barriere contro la paura*, La Repubblica, 31 March 2008.

<sup>9</sup> « It is no wall, but a fence, that interposes between two places. » (my translation)

The Padua Wall, and more recently the Padua of Walls, have become recognizable labels in European press and public debates on immigration and integration. The most (in)famous “wall”, the one in Via Anelli, is the first chronologically to have occupied the media spotlight. For two years between 2006 and 2007, it has been reported on in the national and international press, with mixed levels of accurateness and completeness, more than the famous touristic and religious landmarks of the city. The world-renowned Cappella degli Scrovegni and the cathedral of St. Anthony, to name just two of them, have been overshadowed by documentaries, special TV reports and paper articles,<sup>10</sup> all describing a dark barrier of iron gone rusty, ninety-six metres long and three high: the “wall” between Via Anelli and Via De Besi. The barrier contours a former ghetto of six buildings, three hundred apartments of roughly thirty square metres each, where families and groups (up to ten people per apartment) squatted beyond the limits of capacity: immigrants that rented just a bed, a one-time usage of the shower or the kitchen. And sneaking into this desperate reality of hundreds of people, for the despair of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants, were not only the loud music, the garbage and the excessive beer drinking, but the brawls and mostly, the drug dealing. As it has been extensively analysed by now, this is why the “wall” was born, to make it harder for dealers to disappear in occasion of the sudden arrivals of the police.<sup>11</sup>

What now? The “wall” still presides over a no man’s land, but of a different kind, one that is bound to change for the best relatively soon, and maybe already is. The six buildings (originally built to act as dormitories for a few hundred students of the nearby University of Padua) voided by the end of 2007. More than 400 families of regular immigrants that were the unwilling co-protagonists of the out-of-control situation have either been relocated in other parts of the city thanks to the local administration’s mediation, or have been able to do so on their own. The urban requalification of the area has been one of the main points of Mayor Flavio Zanonato’s recent campaign for re-election, and if the promises made will be kept (Zanonato has succeeded in being re-elected in June 2009),<sup>12</sup> half of the area (about 12,000 square metres) will be redeveloped as a new residential neighbourhood, and the other half as offices buildings. This might well mean better days for all stakeholders, as the president of the lobbying committee for the Stanga quarter says: “things are going way, way better”.<sup>13</sup> The inhabitants of the neighbourhood should, after some very difficult years, find some more peace than they were able to experience for years, along with a higher commercial estimation of their estate properties. More specifically, the immigrant families that were the former inhabitants of the six buildings are living in more decent places, and far from the forced cohabitation with criminals, find tranquillity and stop being associated with the criminals themselves. However, many

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<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Christian Fraser, *Ring of Steel Divides Padua*, BBC News, 28 September 2006 ; Don Murray, *The Wall of Padua*, CBC News, 29 January 2008 ; Hans Karssenbergh, *Walls of Incompetence*, Inspiring Cities, 29 August 2006.

<sup>11</sup> See Musiani (2007) for a more detailed explanation of the facts and analysis of the Via Anelli specific case.

<sup>12</sup> Staff Writer, *Così Flavio si è ripreso Padova*, Il Mattino di Padova, 22 June 2009.

<sup>13</sup> D’Avanzo (2008). (my translation).

argue that the price paid by the municipality, in terms of message given to the local citizenry and eventually to the world, has been too high by choosing the construction of the barrier as the most suitable solution. Besides the more or less menacing physical appearance it might assume, a wall remains a wall, a symbol stronger than most one could think of, “explosive from a communication perspective”.<sup>14</sup> One can wonder what does this mean, at the present stage, in terms of the burden left to the city of Padua.

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## Padua, the City of Walls?

Finalmente da qualche giorno sono ritornata a dormire in pace!<sup>15</sup>

-- Gisella “la Gisa” Scanferla,  
inhabitant of Via Manara, Padua (2008)

To name only the foremost of these burdens, every barrier built in Padua after the Via Anelli one – whatever the purpose and the aspect – now becomes a wall in media and communication discourses. This is certainly a convention and an effective label for journalists to attract attention, but also a reminder of ghosts past, that force the municipality to come to terms with the unpleasant reality: it is not enough to force drug dealers out of an area for them to just disappear into thin air – expelled from Via Anelli, all the effort that pushers have needed has been to move the centre of their dealing of a few hundred metres, in the parking of the Centro Giotto mall close by. And how is this dealt with? New barriers, two gates made of metallic grid, specifically designed against over-jumping, called “Orsogrill”. For a cost of 20,000 Euros, they separate two streets from the parking of the mall: Via Galliano, for seven metres, and Via Venezia for six.<sup>16</sup>

What strikes at a first sight is the total uselessness of these barriers. In Via Galliano, just at the sides of the gate, there is a smaller wall, this time made of bricks, less than a metre high. It is the easiest thing to jump over this as a first step to climb the higher barrier, and this is what most of the dealers do every time they need, seemingly with little fear of being caught or disturbed in their activities.

Another “wall” was built in Via Cairoli, a small street close to the train station and the avenue connecting it to downtown, Corso del Popolo. The barrier in question is in this case a simple horizontal bar, like the one you would find at the entrance of a garage, that enables the way into the street only to pedestrians, with the alleged aim – not dissimilar from the Via Galliano one – to make things a little less easy for the (mostly Italian) clients of the (mostly Moroccan and Nigerian) pushers that are the sad legacy of the Via Anelli evacuation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Michela Morello & Rosj Camarda, *Il muro di Padova: un muro di solida paura*, Sociologia Urbana e Rurale 86, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> “Finally, in the last few days I was able to sleep peacefully!” (my translation).

<sup>16</sup> Gabriele Righetto, *Elaborare un’urbanistica dell’accoglienza*, Il Mattino di Padova, 22 August 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Felice Paduano, *C’è chi scommette su Via Cairoli*, Il Mattino di Padova, 16 March 2008.

The most recent addition to the “Padua Walls” reported by the press is the one in Via Manara. Once again, no brick-and-mortar wall, but rather a flowerbed with no flowers, a few metres in length, that forbids any access by car to the two “buildings of the shame” in the street, entirely occupied by prostitutes, who show up here and there in the street to lead clients into the houses.<sup>18</sup>

A situation that, day after day and night after night, became unsustainable for the inhabitants of the immediate neighbourhoods – and among them, a dynamic housewife that has become a popular figure at Stanga, Gisella “la Gisa” Scanferla, the drive behind the gathering of signatures that led to the intervention in the street. “Between the prostitution and drugs under my windows, I was unable to sleep, so I just started screaming,” she said. Still, despite the fact that the barrier has temporarily helped to increase the quality of her sleep, she firmly believes that the wall of Via Anelli has merely shifted problems, not solved them, and the one erected in her street is not going to be more effective. “They blew on confetti, these barriers are palliatives. All we will achieve is the walling of our town, and it will be us that live in prison.”<sup>19</sup>

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### **Imagining Safety: Walls as a Symbolic Exorcism of Fear**

What about uncertainty, insecurity, loneliness  
and the future being a site of fear instead of hope?  
(...) What about seeing in the neighbourhood only a jungle  
to be warily and fearfully watched,  
in the stranger only a beast to hide from?  
(...) Life has not got to be like this.

-- Zygmunt Bauman, *Alone Again: Ethics After Certainty* (1992)

These barriers in Padua, of high symbolic value but very little material usefulness, thus join the first Via Anelli wall, which is now left to overlook an empty space soon to be inhabited by those who will be able to afford it at a substantial price. Are these 130 metres of barriers, all put together, enough to label Padua as the “city of the Walls”?

This stereotype appears to blend the politics of fear together with another kind of politics, which an Italian commentator described as the “politics of false imagination”.<sup>20</sup> Fear always calls for simple, straightforward and iron-fisted answers – especially the lingering fear that combines social uncertainty with urban degradation, lack of basic principles of civil life with petty, street-wise crime; the kind of fear that transforms the reality of the threats to personal safety into perception of pervasive insecurity. There is nothing more definite in appearance than a protective barrier to separate oneself from problems, of whatever kind they may be: as Morello and Camarda point out: “(t)he solidity of an extreme measure will stay, as well as having indicated a solution in front of a failure, that

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<sup>18</sup> Staff Writer, *Via Manara, barriera contro lo spaccio*, Il Mattino di Padova, 21 October 2007.

<sup>19</sup> D’Avanzo (2008). (my translation).

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Spinelli, *Bendati verso il precipizio*, La Stampa, 30 March 2008.

is what terrifies most people.”<sup>21</sup> A “wall” provides people with a chance to feel safe, or at least to imagine safety – in a way, to deceive themselves: for some time, it allows not to look at reality. Therefore, here is the construction of “walls” in Padua: wherever they are needed, whenever they are needed. If they are the way to exorcise a collective psychic syndrome, appease a wave of emotions, it matters very little that they are “just” symbolic, or even, phoney.

The newly-re-elected mayor of the city, Flavio Zanonato (at present, one of the few left-wing mayors in north-eastern Italy), has showed and shows in his recent public statements on security matters in Padua a blend of common sense, artificial calmness and straight-to-the-point attitude that only partially conceals his irritation. Can the net at the “Valeri” school be possibly defined as a wall, if not tongue-in-cheek? – he asks rhetorically. Is a garage door a wall? Can a flowerbed be one?<sup>22</sup>

The anxieties of the Paduans reflect those most people in the Veneto region: figure out how they can best defend the well-being and comfortable living standards they have earned with hard work, after a history that goes from the glorious past of the “Serenissima” Republic of Venice to phases of absolute poverty. In this scenario, a keen irritation by the mayor of Padua can be perceived when comparisons are made between him and many of his homologues in other Venetian cities, that have often preferred the elementary and reassuring recipe of “order and cleanliness” in their work as administrators – having already too many troubles, to put it in sociologist Ilvo Diamanti’s words, in promoting urban aesthetics to be able to address the deeper issues of urban ethics.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than as a placebo, the first citizen of Padua describes the “ghost walls” of Padua more in terms of a drug administered early in the disease to prevent more extensive, or more complicated, damage. One can very well think that the “Valeri” net only has a placebo effect, but this is not the essential issue at stake, he says. It is a matter of priorities: the municipality built the barrier due to the perception of its necessity by the families of the children students, and a more important objective is that educational institutions can still be effective ones for “us and them. I don’t want the us and them to exist.”<sup>24</sup> Fourteen percent of the student population of Padua is of immigrant descent, and rising; for the administration, it is crucial that this percentage keeps on rising. If the “ridiculous” net had not been put in place, the following year many of those students would not have enrolled at the same school due to family pressures – a much more despicable defeat than a few metres of net, the mayor says.

Even if possibly legitimate for a mayor in critical circumstances like the ones at stake, this reasoning, which responds to a very precise political choice and strategy, only rises new and controversial questions. If one gives a barrier to some of his citizens because this is the answer they “need”, doesn’t it set a critical precedent? What is the point where answers needed by some but arguably undesirable for others, and/or potentially dangerous, will be denied rather than provided? Who is going to make the choice of not providing them? These questions would better be explored, and the reason is well

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<sup>21</sup> Morello & Camarda (2008).

<sup>22</sup> Eric Jozsef, *Immigrés aux pieds du mur*, Libération, 7 April 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Ilvo Diamanti, *L’infinita periferia dell’Italia*, La Repubblica, 2 December 2007.

<sup>24</sup> D’Avanzo (2008).

summarized by this blogger on the issue: “if he really doesn’t want the us and we to exist (...) if he doesn’t want (the barrier) to exist, he better not build a phoney, placebo, symbolic wall. Because if it is symbolic for him, for the families that requested it it’s very much real, and when it won’t work, they will ask for a better one.”<sup>25</sup>

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### Securitisation: Our “Hard-Won Idiocy”

If there is a lucky relevance in the concept of liquid fear,  
it is the physical image of what, not having a solid content,  
slides over, trickles through chinks and floods any surface that comes across.  
If applied to a specific case,  
the concept materialises in its solid ambivalence.

-- Michela Morello & Rosj Camarda,  
*Il muro di Padova: un muro di solida paura* (2008)

Despite the highly critical reviews of its immigration politics of recent years, catalysed by the explosive public image of the “wall and walls,” it could be argued that Padua is coping reasonably well with the immigration wave that is pervading the Veneto region. Entrepreneurs depend on immigrants as workforce just as immigrants depend on them as employers; a solidarity net is present and influential vis-à-vis local political organisations; in this context, the use of the “pervasive immigration is pervasive criminality” paradigm is not only a mistake, but a “hard-won idiocy” to paraphrase Italian actor and singer Giorgio Gaber, that can be paid heavily in the future.

Beyond the representations elaborated by political and media entities, as the easiest way to obtain a vast and convenient audience, it is obviously hard to believe that the problems of today and tomorrow can be shrunk into the simplification of the relationship between immigration, criminality and insecurity: *ethnicing* the social crisis is not the way to solve it. This goes beyond the realm of Padua and that of Veneto, despite the great success that the message of securitisation,<sup>26</sup> more police, more coercion, more expulsions, has had in the recent European elections, in Italy and a number of EU countries.<sup>27</sup> At least one thing is certain: that as a relevant issue, security is an all-encompassing question – one that creates a generalized consensus, not in terms of how to cope with it at national and regional levels, but in terms of the public interest it fosters for everybody, as individuals and members of different and overlapping communities.

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<sup>25</sup> Sociologia/Demopazzia, blog, 31 March 2008 (available at <http://demopazzia.splinder.com/tag/sociologia?from=20>) (my translation).

<sup>26</sup> See Ulla Holm, *The Implication of the Concept of the French State-Nation and 'Patrie' for French Discourses on (Algerian) Immigration*, Copenhagen Peace Research Institute Working Paper, 2002 : securitisation is the process by which a matter of public concern shifts to being framed as a matter of emergency, requiring extreme measures as the only possible way to cope with the exigencies of the situation.

<sup>27</sup> Elisa Molino, *I temi principali delle elezioni europee in Italia*, Euros du Village, 27 May 2009

At the same time, precisely because of its pervasiveness, it is very difficult for researchers to try and split the concept of security into its main components, that might be easier to act upon separately. A recent, comprehensive research at the national level in Italy has outlined how the citizens' demand for security does in fact include other, and more diverse, preoccupations.<sup>28</sup> Forty to sixty percent of the interviewees cite as a source of perceived lack of security the degradation of territory, food, climate; a third of them is concerned about possible economic troubles; two-thirds are convinced that economic and social conditions will only worsen to the detriment of their children's future. Criminality and threats to personal, domestic and familiar security only represent one, and not the most problematic, facet of security, the study concludes. Other fears linger, and imply a discussion and rethinking of traditional notions and claims such as prevention, assistance, "future".<sup>29</sup>

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### **Conclusions. Symptoms, Not Solutions: Walls and the Devolution of Solidarity and Community**

L'appartenenza  
non è un insieme casuale di persone  
non è il consenso a un'apparente aggregazione  
l'appartenenza  
è avere gli altri dentro di sé. (...)  
Sarei certo di cambiare la mia vita  
se potessi cominciare a dire noi.<sup>30</sup>

Giorgio Gaber, *Canzone dell'appartenenza*  
(*"Un'idiozia conquistata a fatica"*, 1997)

Most of the last four years of my life have been spent outside of Padua. It is and remains my town, though, and I maintain a keen interest in dynamics such as the Padua Walls not only as an Italian and Paduan citizen, but as a sociologist and observer of the birth and development of a European public space in its local manifestations. I hope that the balance between sense of belonging and physical distance, that currently represents for me the link to my hometown, can allow me to witness at the right "distance" what is happening there, beyond an imprecise sense of nostalgia and the usual stereotypes applied abroad to Italians in general, and in Italy to Venetians in particular. It is in such a state of mind that I think about the Padua Walls, and I realize that – beyond discourses on their

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<sup>28</sup> Ilvo Diamanti (eds.), *La sicurezza in Italia. Significati, immagine e realtà. Seconda indagine sulla rappresentazione sociale e mediatica della sicurezza*, Research report by Demos & Pi and the Pavia Observatory, for Unipolis Foundation, November 2008, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> To belong / does not mean a random set of people / it is not the consensus to a seeming aggregation / to belong / is to have others inside oneself. / (...) I would be certain I can change my life / if only I could start to say "we". (my translation).

undeniably strong symbolic value and the challenge they pose in terms of how to communicate particular mindsets, priorities, integration and immigration policies – they are just one, the most media-savvy, part of the picture. The debate on these phoney walls, that become rock-solid barriers mostly because of the ways in which citizenry and media construct and represent them, hardly conceals in my eyes what are the bigger, more pervasive problems of Italian society and politics, well represented by my town's reality.

This reality is, to me, one of a land that has a long history of emigration, and has still not learned how to be one of immigration for such an important flow of people; a town unstitched from its own urban environment, a demos that has not yet understood the new configurations it is adopting, that came too fast for their own good. As it is the case for many Venetian and Italian areas, Padua suffers from a disease that one of its local glories, movie director Carlo Mazzacurati, has recently described as “welfare devoid of cultural nourishment.”

The “walls” are the point of the iceberg – the most visible symptom of this disease *and* at the same time, its temporary cure, enacted only when local outbursts of the disease became unsustainable. But as it often happens in Italian politics, elites think short-term. Rather than the “walls,” and what they might or might not contribute to solve, what should constitute material for reflection at a much deeper level are the new places and paths of aggregation, personal habits, collective rites of the city – all pragmatic signs of the powerlessness to renovate values and social links, an impotence that economic well-being has weakened, not improved.

Material of reflection should be the fact that a regular benchmark in University students' lives is the massive absorption of “spritzz”, the typically Paduan alcoholic beverage that hundreds of adolescents drink, to the point of exhaustion, every Wednesday night. What are the implications of the fact that for Paduan youth, the highlight of the week is a rite that leaves them almost unconscious because of the drinking, and the urban environment dirty and soiled by dozens of plastic cups, vomit, and urine?

Food for thought should be the observation that drug dealing does not only happen in a mall parking alongside a very visible barrier, but in the small streets of the old town, in the shadows of historical buildings. Shouldn't the awareness that this more discrete drug commerce aims at reaching the same “market” of educated youth weakened by the spritz, and often succeeds in doing so, have any implications for local policy choices?

Further reflections could, and should, build upon the painfully high number of deadly car accidents involving youth; the death of meaningful parts of local cultures such as movie theatres or home-made fabric shops, to the profit of multiplexes and malls; the “university-as-a-parking” concept versus the incredibly high number of people for whom the dream of a lifetime is to be a participant in “L'Isola dei Famosi”.<sup>31</sup>

Zygmunt Bauman says: “There is a point somewhere down the slope, now perhaps passed, at which people find it hard to conceive of any benefit they could derive from joining forces. (...) As some of the old, once solid, entities underwriting and endorsing individual identities lie in ruins, while others are fast losing their holding power, there is a demand for new ones”.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, what is really conveyed by the story of the Padua

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<sup>31</sup> Popular reality show inspired by the American « *Survivor* ».

<sup>32</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Alone Again: Ethics After Certainty*, London: Demos, 1992.

Walls is the quiet acceptance of a lingering unhappiness about the current “devolution” of concepts such as solidarity, belonging, community. An unhappiness that, beyond the walls, should worry responsible citizens and policy-makers at a much deeper level: because the quietness of the acceptance can at any time turn into rebellion, and the lingering unhappiness can abruptly detonate. The static, almost entrancing, presence of a wall – even if misleading with respect to its intended purpose – can be a very true signal of this danger; one we should rapidly decipher and act upon, for our own good, that of our cities, and that of our communities.