

Porta Palazzo, Anthropology of an Italian Market

F. Xavier Medina

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Texte intégral

Rachel E. Black, *Porta Palazzo, The Anthropology of an Italian Market*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 221 pp. Foreword by Carlo Petrini.

1Markets are trading spaces of a universal nature. They are places where people buy and sell small quantities of goods – mostly food, though not exclusively. Markets are also prime, symbolic places for fresh products; displayed in an eye-catching way, the goods emanate a whole range of colours, textures, aromas and smells that captivate the senses.

2But markets are more than that. They are key places for observing social activity, public spaces where people meet, chat, convey and receive information, and many other things besides. Their markets can gauge peoples and their cultures. They are places where people of different origins and creeds meet and conduct business. In short, they are places where local social relationships are kept alive.

3In the book reviewed here – the result of a doctoral thesis by Canadian anthropologist Rachel Black, the Porta Palazzo food market in Turin clearly takes centre stage as one of the most important urban markets not just in Italy, but also in Europe.

4Black spent seven years conducting her fieldwork in Turin and then went on to defend her doctoral thesis at the city's university. Although her fieldwork on markets is more wide-ranging (she also worked for a few years on the Croix Rousse market in Lyon, France, even if those research is not at all present in this book), both her thesis and the book itself – an adaptation of the former – focus on the Porta Palazzo market as the social protagonist of Turinese city life, in a study that adeptly steers a course between urban anthropology and food anthropology. The market is far from being a place simply for buying and selling, for stocking up. In the author's own words, the market is the “belly” of Turin. It thus becomes one of Turin's main spaces, and through it, the city finds its principal reference as regards food.

5The book has a very short foreword by Carlo Petrini, president of the Slow Food movement, a general introduction, seven main chapters, a conclusion chapter, an afterword and, finally, some notes, a bibliography, an index and a few brief acknowledgments.

6Carlo Petrini's foreword is short (only two pages) and just testimonial. However, the fact that Petrini himself write this foreword links importantly Rachel Black with Slow Food and its university.

7The first chapter analyses the market as an anthropology fieldwork subject and space, and offers a discussion of the methodology – highly qualitative, as to be expected – that was used to approach the bulk of the work that follows.

8The second chapter situates us geographically and spatially – Turin and its market in the Italian context – and also historically, describing the evolution of this important urban space over the years in a changing, fast-paced context of urban growth and migrations.

9It is in the third chapter that the author focuses attention on what Porta Palazzo is like today. The market is formally described and then there is a more or less critical discussion of the renovation work that took place between 2004 and 2006.

10Once situated in the fieldworks the real analysis of the main thematic problems approached in the book begins. Thus, in the fourth chapter, the market is seen as a food supply centre for the Turinese people who go there. Food is situated at the heart of the observation and the discussion, and is regarded as the force that drives the market's social, cultural and relational activity. Men and women work, buy, sell, mingle, visit and bustle around the market, striking up individual social relationships with every step, which can be read in terms of the local, gender, family, the body, and so on.

11The author makes also her presentation in the field. She speaks very frequently in the first person and is included in the story (as a researcher, as a woman, as a worker in the market). At first, she was rather shocked and put off by different catcalls and comments (on her beauty, on her presence there). To her, this sort of language was loaded with meaning and “I took it too quite seriously as either a proposition or an affront” (p. 67). She also points out that: “Gender and sexuality became a heavy daily weight” (*ibid.*). In this respect, and after a few time, she discovered that her gender determined and limited her role as a researcher, and she tries to explore how the participant observer's gender identity becomes intertwined with the process of knowing.

12As the author points also out: “This study uses food as a medium for exploring men's and women's shifting social roles within the family and Italian society as a whole.” In this respect, the author seeks to read the interaction that reveals itself in the market in terms of gender, masculinity, femininity and relationships of power, all of which have culinary, gastronomic and food-related routine as the backdrop of a public stage that is the market. From here, she tries to explain gender and family relations in Turin (even in the North of Italy) from gender relations that exist in the market. A difficult exercise, but that the author solves in a suggestive way: the actors and (particularly) the actresses of the market are the voice of Turin.

13But Turin is much more than an ordinary urban space. It is one of the main cities in northern Italy, and is both industrial and active. Since the second half of the 20th century, the fact that it is such a vibrant city has made it a magnet for migration, initially from the rest of Italy and then from the rest of the world. Thus, the fifth chapter focuses on migration, particularly from abroad (mostly the southern Mediterranean region and Africa, and to a lesser extent eastern Europe and Latin America), and its interaction with the market and with food via the market. The market is a social reference point for locals and non-locals alike, and is also an important space for personal and cultural contact that is obviously not always free from tensions or heated moments. Revolving around food and in the relatively small space that it occupies, the market is a microcosm of the social situation of the city of as a whole. It therefore fosters contact with, and the discovery and knowledge of others who – via food and the market – can become closer, with both the upsides and downsides that this implies. This multicultural atmosphere, the hustle and bustle and the toing and froing of people have also helped to create an image and reputation for the market area, which is one of urban conflict, drug trafficking and delinquency.

14In this respect, both the Turinese and the market authorities have tried to promote this space as a safe and attractive area for multicultural trade, and as a heritage site connected with culture and tourism. And it is precisely on this topic that the sixth chapter of the book focuses: Turinese public policies and the promotion of the market space as an area for intercultural cuisine, intercultural communication and gastronomic tourism linked to cultural diversity. Market-related tourism is becoming very important, both in terms of numbers and economic potential (the Boqueria market in Barcelona and the Rialto market in Venice are two good examples), and Porta Palazzo is by no means an exception to that rule.

15However, when talking about food and fresh products (especially in Turin, the capital of the Slow Food movement), it is crucial to talk about the local, the global, local products and market gardening. Porta Palazzo market has a section dedicated to a farmers' market, which is separate from the rest of the market. The seventh chapter is given over to an observation of this small market within the market; it discusses local production and sales in relation to it, and examines the changes in consumption habits in Turin and Italy as a whole. Indeed, Slow Food began in Turin and has had a remarkable influence on the development of this discourse at a local level in general, and in the capital city of Piedmont in particular.

16This is a robust, well-structured and argued book (let us not forget that it has a doctoral thesis as its basis) that is also easy to read and very interesting. It is a book that offers an alternative view of the city, from the perspective of a market. It also talks about food, food habits and gastronomy (the core chapters actually end with recipes), understood at all times as elements that are inextricably linked to society and culture. In conclusion, Rachel Black's book provides us with a fresh, different slant on an urban space that, as she demonstrates, is far from being a place simply for buying and selling food.