Chapter 7
1,460 Days of Love and Hate: An Ethnographic Account of a Layered Job

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Abstract Building on four years of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the office of the Mapping San Siro action-research group (Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Polytechnic University of Milan) in one of the main social housing neighbourhoods of Milan, in this contribution I will investigate the role and meaning of the Urban Living Labs (ULL) from an 'internal' perspective. An ongoing process of building relationships and caring for a space has allowed me to develop a reflection on multifaceted dimensions of daily life in the neighbourhood. Moreover, through anthropological literature, I will critically analyse the frustrations often experienced by researchers involved in fieldwork and planning. These frustrations highlight issues that go beyond the neighbourhood, showing the territorial dimension of the space. I will then highlight some ethical implications as clues that offer a more grounded understanding of daily life, rather than solving those implications with ready-made answers.

Keywords Urban Living Lab · Fieldwork · Scalarity · Frustration

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7.1 Introduction: Just a Usual Day of Work

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It's 8:30 a.m. I park my car close to Off Campus, the office of the Polytechnic University of Milan I have been managing since April 2019, together with the action-research group Mapping San Siro, in one of the biggest social housing neighbourhoods of Milan.[1] In 2019, we installed a wooden table and benches donated by a Swedish company at the entrance, in collaboration with the municipality and other local actors. I wonder whether their Nordic design goes well with the rationalist architecture of the concrete blocks of the neighbourhood. Over the last few months, the benches have become a socialization place for groups of residents who use this public area to meet and play cards. But damn! Rubbish is everywhere.

I raise the grey shutters of Off Campus, take a bag and gloves, and go out to start my collection: beer bottles, cans, torn cards, and plastic bags with food residue. A resident who passes by complains about the noise and disorder that we have promoted through our intervention. Another asks me if I am paid to collect waste.

I return to the office, tidy up the desk, and sit down. I correct a couple of student papers and wait for Irene, an anthropologist who is going to collaborate with us for a few months. In the meantime, Ida, project manager for the Polisocial programme of the Polytechnic,[2] also joins me. She sits at the head of the table, raises her laptop screen, and immerses herself in her work. We all wear masks and observe social distancing due to the ongoing pandemic. Irene arrives on time. We sit looking at my computer monitor and call Stefano, the third anthropologist of the group, via Skype. Irene wants to talk to us about some research that has just begun on some foreign communities in the neighbourhood.

At 10:30 a.m., our weekly team meeting begins, online again. Our discussion focuses on the management of a communication campaign linked to Covid-19 screening offered to the residents of San Siro by a Milanese hospital, the University of Milan, and ALER (the Lombardy Residential Building Company), which manages most of the apartments of the neighbourhood. The communication campaign, promoted by a network of local subjects, guaranteed a good number of tests among the residents. From specifically operational aspects concerning the distribution of leaflets and the organization of appointments, our discussion moves to a more reflexive level. We ask ourselves about the meaning of our role in this public

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[1] San Siro comprises 6,135 dwellings and a population of approximately 12,000 residents. It was built during the 1930 and 1940s to provide accommodation for working families employed in the local factories. It is now inhabited mainly by a young and foreign population (largely from Morocco and Egypt—see Cognetti and Padovani (2018) and Capanema Alvares in this volume). The Great Recession of the late 2000s, which erupted with the financial crisis of 2007–2008, worsened the living conditions of the residents, exacerbating the socio-economic polarization between San Siro and other parts of the city (see Comune di Milano and Assolombarda 2018).

[2] The programme aims to 'place the university in close contact with the dynamics of change in society, extending the university's mission to social issues and needs that arise from the territory, on both a local and a global level' (http://www.polisocial.polimi.it/it/home/).

health action, and we evaluate the difficulties encountered, the frictions existing among the institutions involved. Meanwhile, my phone keeps ringing and ringing. This morning, I manage the switchboard that has been activated to give information and help people with reservations for the tests.

After lunch, we go out into the street. I walk around San Siro carrying leaflets. I reach a courtyard to say hello to a gatekeeper whom I know very well. He is sitting on a step, reading an advertising brochure in the shade of a tree. A young boy next to him performs the last technical tests with a bicycle on which a large bag has been mounted to deliver food. The gatekeeper says it is his first day on the job. Meanwhile, Raffaella[3] is waiting on the pavement for her drug dealer. On the phone, she shouts, asking him if he has tinfoil with him. She moves nervously, leaning on the parked cars. After a few minutes, he joins her with a friend. They enter the courtyard.

Back in the office, I call the coordinator of an educational project with whom we collaborate. We agree to programme some workshops which we will conduct in March at a local school.

At 5:30 p.m., I meet one of my students on Zoom. Meanwhile, Matteo, a photographer and a close friend of mine, joins me for a walk around the neighbourhood and to take some pictures. At 6:30 p.m., I get in the car and turn the key, but damn again! The battery is flat and the engine does not start. I make a few calls, but then I remember that there is a garage a few metres from our office. I ask the owner to help me out. The man comes with a briefcase and two electric cables. While accompanying me to the car, he explains that he has lived and worked in San Siro for thirty years. His words are full of resentment and anger. He blames the problems of the neighbourhood on the visible effects he perceives every day: for him, foreigners are the cause of the progressive deterioration of San Siro; that's it. 'Do you know that there was a shooting here on New Year's Eve?', he asks, pointing to a parking area in front of our office. 'The person who was shot in the head was lying here. What do you think can be done?', he asks me.

This lengthy field note is a good description of a typical working day in the Urban Living Lab Off Campus, located in the centre of San Siro. It represents a single day among 1,460 days[4] accumulated in four years as a postdoctoral fellow, carrying out ethnographic research on violence and urban space and supporting the activities of the action-research group Mapping San Siro.[5] I believe this field note strongly brings out two dimensions of my work, which I would like to reflect on in the following pages. The first has to do with the different levels on which my colleagues and I find ourselves operating. From the care for a physical space to the management of institutional relations, from participant observation to the coordination of a communication campaign, from applied activities to theoretical reflections, working in an Urban Living Lab has basically meant developing what I call a 'layered professionality'. In a circular process, this multiscalar profession has been poured into and reflected in my research activity.

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[3] For confidentiality, apart from those of my colleagues, all names I mention are fictional.

[4] Up to January 2022.

[5] www.mappingsansiro.polimi.it.

The second dimension relates to a more methodological and ethical sphere not really problematized by anthropological literature, which questions my positioning as a researcher in an action-research group. While being significant and prominent, fieldwork often hides strong frustrations. What does dealing with these frustrations mean? How can they influence my work and the possibilities of change within the action-research process in which I am involved? The next pages therefore also represent a short story of 'love and hate', satisfaction and anger, successes and defeats; of contradictions inherent in any research process that aims to approach territories and their intrinsic ambiguity.

7.2   A Multilayered Job

Since its foundation in 2013, Mapping San Siro has progressively developed both research practice and theoretical reflection based on fieldwork (Cognetti and Ranzini 2016). Born as a workshop aimed at a group of urban planning students, the group was structured by accentuating its interdisciplinary nature, thanks to the permanent involvement of cultural anthropologists. Along this path, Mapping San Siro crossed the definition of the Urban Living Lab (Steen and van Bueren 2017), not only recognizing itself in it but also attempting further elaboration. In fact, the group currently defines itself as a *socially* oriented Urban Living Lab (Franz 2015), that is, a process-oriented space focused on social innovation, user empowerment, and codesign (Maranghi and Cognetti 2020). Other experiences implemented in the Milanese context starting from the early 2000s in some ways influenced the actions and reactions of Mapping San Siro and their recognition and distancing. For example, I refer to the Neighbourhood Laboratories[6] promoted by the municipality as part of an important redevelopment project (Neighbourhood Contract II) of five social housing neighbourhoods of Milan (see Cella 2006),[7] or to the Community Hubs promoted by the Cariplo Foundation since 2017. While the Neighbourhood Laboratories were intended by the municipality as 'front offices to inform and communicate with residents and to develop activities related to participatory planning' (Maranghi and Cognetti 2020, p. 99), the Community Hubs were especially oriented to urban regeneration (Calvaresi and Pederiva 2016). The research dimension, inherently part of Mapping San Siro, was thus lacking in these experiences.

Over the years, Mapping San Siro's approach has increasingly been defined around four elements that put in place—in a circular way—multilevel actions, all of which can be found in my field note. Taken together, the four elements concretize the idea of a socially oriented Urban Living Lab, crossing it with the action-research paradigm (Castelnuovo and Cognetti 2013). First of all, 'situating' can be defined as staying

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[6] Laboratori di Quartiere in Italian.

[7] The programme was promoted in 2005 by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport, the Lombardy Region, and the Municipality of Milan.

in a specific territory, taking care of it, and building relationships from daily inter-actions and practices. Opening our office in San Siro[8] at least three days a week means reactivating an abandoned commercial space and stating the importance of social housing neighbourhoods through our work. Collecting rubbish and sweeping means assuming responsibility for a specific urban place, deconstructing the territo-rial stigma (Wacquant 2008), and claiming spatial justice against its marginalization (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2014). The second element of this approach, which also emerges in my field note, is 'networking'. Since 2014, the group has coordinated a network of local actors called *Sansheroes*, aimed at fostering a complex and deep-rooted knowledge of San Siro, useful for building shared visions of transformation (Maranghi 2019). Networking also means working to carry out collective actions and building relationships at a supralocal level, as I described using the communication campaign linked to the Covid-19 screening. The third element is 'inquiring', that is, conducting research through an interdisciplinary methodology and fieldwork.[9] My note immediately highlights some typically urban research themes, such as job insecurity in the case of the boy intent on preparing his bike to deliver food to homes; marginalization and drug dealing in the case of Raffaella; and intergenerational and interethnic relationships in the case of the mechanic I met before going home. Further-more, I could easily add other themes, less directly linked to observation: urban and health policies, participation, public space, and so on. In Mapping San Siro's view, inquiring is strictly associated with teaching, in a circular way: 'The learning process is a hybrid process where research and teaching practice are connected, and the focus is on how the co-creation of knowledge can generate action and impact. A virtuous circle between practice—experiential and situated—and theoretical elaboration takes shape', wrote my colleague Ida Castelnuovo and Prof. Francesca Cognetti, the super-visor of the group, some years ago (Castelnuovo and Cognetti 2013, p. 41). Teaching constitutes an equally important part of our work (previously mentioned in relation to correcting papers in the morning and the Zoom call at 5:30 p.m.), which allows us to share our practices outside the group and reflect on them recursively and reflexively. Finally, the fourth element is 'acting', that is, the idea of engaging small 'levers of change' through our work, a dimension already inherent in the first three elements mentioned but which also acquires its own peculiarity, as testified by my phone call to the coordinator of the educational project with whom we collaborate.

The scheme presented, as exemplified through my field note, highlights the different levels on which we are called to operate as researchers engaged in a socially oriented Urban Living Lab. Working close to a territory, with different networks, teaching, doing research, and planning means implementing disparate actions that, from the everyday life of the neighbourhood, reach levels of broader

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[8] The space was given in usufruct by ALER, the public company that manages San Siro.

[9] Mapping San Siro research was at first oriented on three main themes: home and dwelling; court-yards, public, and common spaces; and vacant and underused spaces. Other themes were added along the research directions of the individual social scientists involved. For example, I have person-ally developed a line of investigation into the relationship between violence and urban space, also crossing the three main themes of the group.

abstraction. The degree of organizational complexity and the skills required (communication, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, time management, and so on) define a hybrid professional figure that combines various fields of knowledge and practices such as managing an office, cultivating relationships with the residents of San Siro, coordinating institutional tables, and writing academic papers.[10]

Referring to this last point and further deepening the theoretical dimension of my reflection, it is worth considering how this 'layered professionality' is poured into and reflected in my ethnographic research. In fact, my entire investigation resulted in an ongoing process of building relationships that allowed me to open my own interpretations of multifaceted dimensions, inherent in the daily life of the neighbourhood as well as the policies and structural dynamics that govern it (Grassi 2018, 2019, 2020).

After all, cities have always questioned the traditional assumptions of anthropological work, as stated, for example, by Rivke Jaffe and Anouk de Koning:

> Urban landscape clearly extends beyond people's specific experiences and horizons, and is shaped by economic and political processes at the scale of the nation and the region. These features complicate the archetypical forms of anthropological fieldwork, based on long-term immersion in the socio-cultural life of a local community (Jaffe and de Koning 2016, p. 14).

The analysis of cities unequivocally calls for a multiscalar methodology, moving from a microsocial to a macrosocial approach and back. Urban space not only refers to the 'built environments' (Lefebvre 1974; Low 1990; Massey 2005), but is inscribed in their very fabric, their design, and their geographical distribution. A 'sense-experienced urban space' goes together with 'a non-ethnographic urban space', the urban space that we cannot see here and now (Fava and Grassi 2020). If this hypothesis is true for urban anthropology in general, it assumes even more value for anthropology practiced within an Urban Living Lab. Mapping San Siro's activity essentially demonstrates this: its progression establishes the requirement for working close to the territories, but it, in its attempt to be interpretative and applicative, also needs to go beyond them.

7.3   Dealing with Frustrations

In at least two points—when I cleaned up the space in front of our office and when I talked to the mechanic—the field note highlights a dimension that has been little considered by anthropological literature and by urban studies more generally, concerning the frustrations that fieldwork often entails. I certainly do not want to minimize the satisfaction and results achieved in these four years, but I want to reflexively show a grey zone often hidden by the rhetoric of committed research. The presence of waste in San Siro, for example, is a problem felt by most of my

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[10] The hybridity of our professionality questions the theme of interdisciplinarity and the relationship between different researchers who, on the one hand, maintain their disciplinary specificity and, on the other, continually contaminate their gaze through collaboration (Cognetti and Fava 2019).

interlocutors. We need to refer to many causes in order to understand it: the low investment in the neighbourhood by some residents, due to the precarious housing conditions; insufficient institutional attention on the part of the municipality responsible for waste disposal; or the dumping of bulky items and debris by people outside the neighbourhood. However, beyond these explanations, cleaning the public space in front of our office every day is a hard job that puts into question our approach and goals. Why insist on taking care of such a small space in the neighbourhood? Are we perhaps imposing an idea of public space and 'urban decorum' (De Giorgi 2005) that does not correspond to that of the majority of the residents? Similarly, the issue of problematic interethnic relations in the neighbourhood is a 'wicked problem that cannot be approached from a single perspective' (Rittel and Webber 1973). But the complexity of the analysis collides with the words of the exasperated mechanic, whose only answer is racial hatred. How should we respond to this man's actual exasperation? Perhaps these questions would arise in any research, but they certainly emerge amidst the daily practice of a socially oriented Urban Living Lab, so close to planning and the dimension of change. These questions speak of anger, irritation, and impotence—'bad feelings' that we would usually not like to know in our idealized activity as experienced researchers.

More than other disciplines, contemporary anthropology has made reflexivity one of its fundamental characteristics. Clyde Kluckhohn (quoted in Remotti 1990), among others, spoke about anthropology as a mirror through which readers could reflect themselves. But what can we do when this mirror gives us back the worst part of us? Many ethnographies report anecdotally on situations in which anthropologists have experienced difficulties, but without making these an object of actual reflection. The introduction to *The Nuer*, published by Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard in 1940, is emblematic in this respect. Perhaps for the first time in the history of the discipline, the relationship with the interlocutors is publicly described in its fullness, also referring to the problems encountered in accessing the field: 'I arrived in Nuerland early in 1930. Stormy weather prevented my luggage from joining me at Marseilles, and owing to errors, for which I was not responsible, my food stores were not forwarded from Malakal and my Zande servants were not instructed to meet me' (Evans-Pritchard 1940, p. 9). And, further on 'Nuer are expert at sabotaging an inquiry and until one has resided with them for some weeks they steadfastly stultify all efforts to elicit the simplest facts and to elucidate the most innocent practices' (Evans-Pritchard 1940, p. 12). Since then, anthropology has certainly made great strides in including its interlocutors within the research process, questioning the power this exerts, and trying to smooth out its distinctive asymmetry (see Clifford and Marcus 1986). Throughout this process, the field has been thematized and problematized, also taking into account the frictions, contradictions, difficulties, and dangers it can activate. For example, some spoke of the dangers of fieldwork (Nordstrom and Robben 1996), some of boredom (Taussig 2004), and some—even those not strictly in the field of anthropology—have directly touched on the theme of frustration, although often just looking for strategies to fight it (see Goldsmith 2003; Parker 2001).

However, from the point of view of the researcher, what does dealing with frustrations mean and entail? First of all, the etymology of the word can come to our aid.

Frustration, from the Latin *frustratio*, means 'delusion', deriving from the verb 'to frustrate'. Frustration refers to those who believe that their actions have been in vain. In this sense, it is easy to see how the frustration experienced in the field is a fundamental alarm bell leading one to ask oneself about one's own advancement. However, what I would like to suggest is the need to accept frustration, to *remain* within it, to make it a reflective element on the basis of which to redefine the (action-)research process. Let me return to my field notes for the very last time. Let me shift the focus from my anger about the rubbish and my discomfort with the words of the mechanic to the moment of the group meeting in which instead we were able to recognize the frustration and make it a resource. I refer to the moment at which, analysing the problems encountered in the management of the screening, our discussion opened up to a new dimension. 'We ask ourselves the meaning of our role in this public health action, we evaluate the difficulties encountered, the frictions existing among the institutions involved'. Our actions collided with problems, making us think that our efforts were in vain. However, these problems were accepted by us, integrated into a horizon of meaning that led us to advance interpretations on themes such as the quality of institutional presence in the marginal neighbourhoods of Milan, the role of local knowledge in the activation of the community, the importance of territorial networks, and so on. Basically, expanding our gaze beyond the local context allowed us to look at more structural issues, thus relativizing the frustrations that emerged through our fieldwork.

7.4   Conclusions

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, together with media researcher Neta Alexander, recently published a book entitled *Failure* (Appadurai and Alexander 2020). Although the volume specifically describes how some forms of breakdown operate in financial and technological systems, a 'heterodox' reading of it can provide interesting insights into the somewhat analogous concept of frustration. Consider the first paragraphs of the text, where the authors write: 'We believe that the sense of failure is real and that it produces disappointment, regret, remorse, and other costly effects on individuals and groups. […] [It] is a product of judgments that reflect various arrangements of power, competence, and equity in different places and times' (Appadurai and Alexander 2020, p. 1). It is difficult not to find similarities—even if not merely with reference to research practices—with what I have described so far.

In order to analyse this category, Appadurai and Alexander (2020) mention four 'schools of thought' that help them think about it in a creative way: science, queer studies, business, and infrastructure studies. While business and infrastructure studies have no direct connections with my analysis of frustration, the other two fields are worth mentioning—even very briefly. As is well known, modern science is based on the failure and the idea of refutability: 'An experiment is successful if it refutes a false hypothesis and forces scientists to come up with a new, and often better,

explanation for the same phenomenon', state the authors (Appadurai and Alexander 2020, p. 4). Failure, like frustration, can indicate the direction not to follow, the attempt to modify, and the path to rework. This apparently simple observation is too often forgotten, especially in the 'regenerative' and 'empowering' world of planning, so conditioned by the rhetoric of success. Going beyond this rhetoric, Appadurai and Alexander (2020) mention the field of queer studies. Authors such as Ahmed (2010) and Berlant (2011), for example, invite a more nuanced comprehension of some dominant beliefs of our neoliberal era, primarily the so-called 'toxic positivity', that is, the idea the people should maintain a positive attitude in any situation.

The description of what, within a socially oriented Urban Living Lab, I have defined as a layered professionality (with respect to the skills requested and the type of actions implemented) focused on the need to deal with 'bad feelings', such as frustrations, as one of its inherent characteristics, beyond a predictable rhetoric of success. Loving and hating fieldwork (or, better to say, the satisfaction and delusions inherent in it) are part of the game. However, recognizing and accepting frustrations, or *remaining* within them, also by formulating alternative explanations, could take on an ethical value, a specific political positioning—political because critical of some dominant forms of thought—within the planning and more general academic world, I would suggest.

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