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Alcohol and the city

The logistics of alcoholic flows in urban transformations

Alessandro Gerosa

Introduction

NoLo, an acronym for 'North of Loreto' is the way a semi-peripheral area of Milan has been recently renamed by a group of new inhabitants, middle-class students or workers between the thirties and the forties attracted by affordable rents that triggered an upscaling process in an area with a previously bad reputation (Novak & Andriola, 2008). Due to this sudden transformation two co-existent stratified visibilities are still visible (Brighenti, 2010): the first is that of an unsafe neighbourhood devoured by urban blight, threatened by drunken people that when the sun goes down swarm through the streets bringing alcoholism and drug addiction; the other is that of a growing trendy scene of cool bars serving craft beers and cocktails. Alcohol, with its containments, leaks and overflows is a protagonist of both visibilities with two evident, opposite directions: in the first it is an intoxicating poison, in the second a 'liquid pleasure' (Burnett, 2001). This can be exemplified from the following notes, taken during a meeting concerning the plan for creating a Urban Commercial District [DUC] in the area:

Representatives from more than thirty neighbourhood shops and associations are seated in circle. In few minutes, the debate becomes monopolised by a discussion over migrants' shops, and alcohol. For the delegate of the merchants' association, they constitute the main problem for the neighbourhood as they sell cheap alcohol underhand all night long. The main category to adverse this representation is composed by other alcohol retailers, owners of hipster bars: one says that he talked with an illegal vendor that now stopped selling alcohol after midnight, others illustrate good experiences with them. When this debate stops, the discussion becomes focused on the best strategy for the area to be recognised as DUC: the cool bars are now mentioned as the main resources to rely upon, and they take the lead when a "control room" is formed to pursue the next steps. In this brief article I will start analysing the empirical case of NoLo. Then, based on the preliminary findings, I will advance a conceptual framework, using alcoholic flows as analytic lens to read urban transformations and inequalities.

Channelling, dosing, and leaks in NoLo

'In the end, all this movement started from the desire to drink a beer together without having to go elsewhere'. This is how Lia, an inhabitant, explained me NoLo essence. Alcohol was previously available in the area, but as a 'disreputable pleasure' (O'Malley 2004), under the guise of a cheap and rough liquid. What lacked was a local scene capable of channelling alcoholic flows into an aestheticising circuit to be transformed and poured to become resonant with the upscale taste of new consumers.

The low rents of commercial spaces and the recent internal migrants (distinct from previous foreign

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migrants) created the conditions for the development of what I propose to define as a localised logistics of containment, channelling, and dosing of alcoholic flows.

This process did not happen as entirely planned from above or spontaneously from below: it was a mix of the two, with owners of commercial spaces starting to consider more convenient to rent these spaces rather than leaving them unused, and mostly young micro-entrepreneurs seizing the opportunity. The first new 'hipster bar' opened in January 2016, selling craft beers and cocktails with immediate success: in the following months, many bars opened in vacant spaces while existing

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ones refurbished their interior and/or name to become part of the expanding circuit.

To optimise its logistics, both externally and internally, some expedients were taken. For example, to gain visual predominance over those of the 'degraded' neighbourhood, the

bars clustered tightly in a small area: while NoLo refers to a wider area, the new commercial venues grouped alongside two short streets and a small roundabout. An internal optimisation can also be observed, allowing bars to coexist symbiotically as each of them occupies a distinctive niche, focusing on a singular product or atmosphere: walking by the two streets and square composing 'NoLo alcoholic circuit' in few minutes a wanderer will pass by one bar tailored for a LGBTQ+ clientele, another specialised in multi-ethnic happy hours, the perfect one to sip organic wine, the best where to drink a refined cocktail, and so on. This way everyone benefits from the positive externalities of the network, without harsh intra-competition.

Alcohol is the protagonist of this process: aptly transformed and altered, it becomes the defining feature of bars, that can take part in the circuit depending on the quality of their alcoholic offer. This manipulation is not only physical, but cultural too: as another inhabitant told me referring to a pub that remained excluded from NoLo circuit: 'it is not a matter of the products served, but of the atmosphere you experience'. The double identity of bartenders as both manual and cultural workers here becomes evident: they do not only need to craft the cocktail in itself (or to spill craft beer), but also to 'culturally' craft them to match the taste and ethos of consumers in coherence with the other bars composing the circuit, while also resonating with the genius loci of the area. Lodo, an owner and bartender of one of the bars, performed this task elaborating part of the cocktails on the menu as 'stories', inspired from experiences with customers and people of the neighbourhood; Lao, another bar-owner, expressed this necessity by stating that 'You need to adapt your style: to open a hyper-chic bar here would be madness, this is a popular zone, where you need a warm, not cold, welcome'.

Alcohol agency is also evident as binder of the bars to their environment, in its attractive function of facilitator of new connections for entrant inhabitants and to the development of a collective community identity. However, the process of transformation of alcohol from disreputable to respectable pleasure is not absolute: leaks always stream at the margins of established circuits. In NoLo, migrant groceries and small shops continue to sell underhand cheap alcohol to those unable to afford the refined drinks, lacking the cultural capital to enjoy them, or simply refusing to do so. If the ideal type of cool bar's refined alcohol is the cocktail assembled by the mixologist, or the craft IPA, the ideal type of this other kind of alcohol is the Moretti double-sized beer bottle.

These alcoholic leaks have a function too: they allow lower-class inhabitants to enjoy the pleasures of inebriation and thrill during leisure, but the downside of their low price and high accessibility is that their sources are small shops unequipped of internal spaces and toilets.

It is in these situations that alcohol shows its historic and 'original' characterisation of liquid bearer of sensorial attacks against established notions of decorum, due to its overflowing nature: alcohol is usually consumed for its positive sensorial effects, but at the same time it tends to overflow over the environment in the form of urine on walls and doors, vomit, night-time noises and quarrels. Therefore, the above outlined processes of channelling and dosing of alcoholic flows in NoLo are not only finalised to refine alcohol to the upscale aesthetics and taste of new inhabitants, but also to control and curb the overflowing externalities of alcohol that constitute an attack to decorum, leaving at the same time intact its quality of pleasant liquid for the palate of customers of the socially accepted nightlife economy. In this sense, my suggested notion of logistics of alcoholic flows not only refer to the entire range of operations that allow the aestheticisation process to take place and to function efficiently over time, but also to the governance of alcoholic flows that prevent their overflowing nature to erupt and reveal itself in the urban fabric.

This governance process can be empirically observed in the reaction that occurs when it fails, and alcoholic overflows concentrate in small areas. In other words, when alcoholic threat to decorum becomes again visible and under media spotlight, as for instance happened in a small public garden in NoLo. An easily accessible area within the urban fabric, in a zone otherwise devoid of squares, the *Transiti* small garden became an easy meeting place for people that bought alcohol at the shops and then consumed it there. Problems followed, linked to night-time noise, fights, and drug dealing. After vast media coverage and inhabitants' protests, the local administration decided to close the garden with an iron fence to prevent people from gathering there and 'disreputable' alcohol to clot in a single space.

The two populations are not necessarily in conflict: the multicultural neighbourhood identity is part of the allure for new inhabitants, often possessing an open attitude toward migrants: when asked why she was so attached to NoLo, Cinzia, another bartender of the area answered that 'Milan is usually a cold city, but here this multiculturalism, this thing that there are many young people from the north, south, foreigners, gives me a great desire to be together'. Conversely, people drinking cheap alcohol can appreciate hipster bars and urban regeneration. Miguel, a local inhabitant living next to an 'hipster bar', explained that he does not hang out at that bar because he does not want to spend 7 or 8 € for a cocktail and usually buys beers from groceries, but he is happy that it opened because it helped to re-qualify the road and limit alcoholism, a serious issue in the area, as did a couple of Arab shops too that do not sell alcoholic drinks for religious reasons. Nevertheless, in the eyes of public opinion, depending on whether it spills from the circuit's faucets or from the marginal leaks, alcohol becomes a cool pleasure for respectable people or a disreputable pleasure for urban blighters. Applied to urban toponymy, it divides what is perceived as 'trendy NoLo district' from the 'dangerous Via Padova'.

The logistics of alcoholic flows as analytic lenses to read urban transformations

Existing literature has already analysed alcohol as a liquid with an agency (Barua, 2013) and has focused on its contentious history as disreputable pleasure to look at class and power relations (Rorabaugh, 1979, p. 176). With this brief contribution, from empirical findings in the new Milanese area labelled as NoLo I suggested the usefulness to consider alcohol as a 'vibrant matter' (Bennett, 2009) in the field of urban studies, so as to look at the *ad hoc* configurations of human and nonhuman forces at work in nightlife entertainment economic circuits. To comply with this task, I suggested that it is the logistics of alcoholic flows, their containment, channelling, dosing through regulated faucets as well as that the governance of their overflowing nature that the researcher should look at, insofar as such logistics could be considered one of the hidden infrastructures beneath the construction of

'authentic urban places' (Zukin, 2010).

However, it is not only through these flows and their shifting governance that alcohol is transformed, and such transformation is not simply socio-cultural, and moralistic: the material composition of alcohol undergoes significant alterations too. This may occur in the moment of sourcing (as bars may buy higher quality ingredients), production (e.g., the process of craft brewing), or preparation (as in cocktails skilfully made by a mixologist): in all these cases the transformation is material and perceptual, physical and cultural. Channelled and regulated, alcohol nevertheless shows its own agency by overflowing social, legal, and physical circuits. It shapes physical spaces and intermediate cultural practises, drives gentrification or regeneration processes, and triggers social conflicts between categories. It leaks through aestheticised circuits, reappearing in its humbler guise as poisonous and disreputable pleasure for the populations that cannot afford its upscale version.

Assuming alcohol as a liquid with its own agency thus entails, first and mostly, a perspective turn: not only to see how individuals treat, manipulate and consume alcohol, but how alcohol influences the individuals involved in these circuits and the ones outside them and what the materiality, effects and flows of alcohol can tell us, as analytic lens, about urban transformations, conflicts and inequalities. The boundaries of the alcoholic circuit sign the boundaries between decorous and undignified consumption patterns, or in other terms between allowed and deprecated consumption, particularly in the Italian case where the discursive dyad of decorum and decay has been observed as active governmental instrument for the production of marginality (Tulumello & Bertoni, forthcoming).

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