# Milan since the Miracle. City, Culture and Identity

**Review Number:**
267
**Publish date:**
Monday, 1 April, 2002
**Author:**
John Foot
**ISBN:**
9781859735459
**Date of Publication:**
2001
**Price:**
£45.00
**Pages:**
240pp.
**Publisher:**
Berg
**Publisher url:**
http://www.bergpublishers.com/Default.aspx?tabid=1439
**Place of Publication:**
Oxford
**Reviewer:**
Anna Cento Bull

This book is a fascinating collection of chapters which partly analyse and partly evoke different periods, spaces and above all images of Milan since the 1950s. It does not fit into a neat academic category or discipline, beyond its being loosely a historical overview of the city. History, in this case, is neither social nor economic or political - nor is it a combinations of these. Rather, the primary focus is cultural, and the leit-motif throughout the book is the transformation of Milan from an industrial city divided primarily into a bourgeoisie occupying the historic centre and a working class, as well as marginalised strata, living in the peripheries, to a post-industrial metropolis dominated by and emblematic of mass consumerism, immaterial goods, and a composite, multi-ethnic population. In this 'new' city, the old fault line between centre and periphery has lost its meaning, to be increasingly replaced by a continuum of urban spaces and urbanised countryside, extending well beyond the city's boundary. The shift is looked at primarily through an analysis of the different images of the city constructed by film-makers, television producers, photographers, designers and politicians. The underlying approach considers a city to be made up of a variety of spaces, interests, symbols, conflicts and lifestyles, where power is unevenly distributed and different social groups and actors produce images which are 'mediated through language, mass media, memory, photographs, films and the environment' (p. 159). As Foot clarifies, such images 'are never fixed and are continually being reformed and deconstructed'; furthermore, they are the product of contested ' physical and moral constructions' (p. 159).

What kind of images, then, does the book analyse and what is their conflictual nature? Most are negative images, as portrayed specifically in films: Milan as the impersonal and exploitative industrial city which

depends on migrants for its wealth yet offers them only exclusion and segregation, or Milan as the capitalist city dominated by profit-making, cold human relations and, increasingly, by violence. The Milanese periphery was portrayed recurrently, the author reminds us, as the Bronx. This image of exploitation and violence, of inhumanity, was often contrasted with a mythical image of a pre-industrial, rural society for whose destruction cities like Milan were directly responsible. A more positive image was that constructed by the left parties, which presented the peripheries as places where a working-class collective and communitarian (sub)culture was able to counter the exploitative culture of 'capitalist' Milan. Both were myths, Foot warns us, even though at times the author appears to accept that such subcultures did exist, albeit only in some 'old' peripheries. They later disappeared under the onslaught of consumerism and individualism, symbolised by the decreasing importance of public, shared spaces and the increasing role played by private spaces, and in particular by the family living rooms where television occupied a place of honour. 'Within the home, the *salotto* or *soggiorno* (living room) began to be seen as the television room, used solely or largely for the activity of television watching [.] Where there was no *salotto* in the home, the set was usually placed in the kitchen/dining room, where it inevitably began to dominate the semi-sacred meal times of the Italian family' (p. 90).

Television, to which Foot reserves an entire chapter, brought mass culture to Italy (and Milan). Its effects were widely condemned for fostering cultural uniformity and standardisation, as well as for bringing down average levels of knowledge and culture. But Foot is extremely careful not to subscribe to a simplistic view of mass popular culture and consumerism as being inherently bad, in the same way as he rejects the automatic assumption that television inevitably shapes viewers' outlooks and values in ways which are totally beyond their control. In addition, there was an early, 'collective' phase of television viewing, during which social, gender and generational barriers were at least temporarily broken down (pp. 86-90). This was followed by a retreat to private viewing and the re-erection of barriers, albeit of a different kind. In Milan, the peripheral estate of Comasina was one of the first to register a mass diffusion of television sets: '90 per cent of families had bought a set (presumably on credit) by 1962' (p. 89). As Foot remarks, 'the very isolation of Comasina from the centre of Milan - with its glittering attractions, cinemas, dance halls and theatres - encouraged this process of television purchase and use' (p. 89). This new phase marked but the beginning of a process which culminated in the 1980s with Berlusconi's commercial television and the triumph of American-style glamour and lifestyles.

The spectacular rise of Berlusconi's media empire and the success of his exclusively middle-class, purpose-built residential areas coincided with a new image of the city being promoted by designers and politicians alike, which best symbolised the transition to a post-industrial city: 'Milano da bere', or 'city to be consumed', was 'an advertising slogan for an after-dinner drink which became the symbol (at first positive, later negative) of a whole epoch and political style' (p. 165). Milan was transformed into and re-launched as a city of fashion, media, luxury goods, new entrepreneurs, extravagance and glamour. The new image coincided with the period in which a revamped Socialist Party, headed by Bettino Craxi, dominated local politics, and corrupt practices became an acceptable way of life - at least until the Tangentopoli scandal, during which the image of Milan became one of unscrupulous business people and politicians bent on promoting their own interests in defiance of the law and of any sense of public spiritedness. Tangentopoli Milan is reconstructed with great care, especially the link between the rise of new immaterial industries - typically fashion, which revolves around egotism, appearance, frivolity, and glamour - and the parallel emerging images of self-gratification, hedonism, conspicuous consumption. Foot does not hide his own distaste for the 'Milano da bere' image and even more for the social reality that underpinned that image and clearly sees the legacy of that period continuing to exercise profound effects upon the city. The conclusion to his book is pessimistic: 'The rampant individualism of the modern metropolis has crushed any kind of collective civic culture able to organize society in a rational fashion [.] If Milan ever had a civic culture, it has one no longer' ( pp. 182-3).

I have some sympathy with this conclusion, even though the picture it paints is perhaps too black. I also concur with much of the author's reading and interpretation of a city in which I was born and lived between 1951 and 1959, and again between 1978 and 1985. It was easy for me to relate to the personal involvement

of Foot into his subject-matter, which is referred to openly and with a hint of irony in the book: among the historical photographs of the city included in the volume, two show the author in the area where he lived. This same involvement may, however, have led Foot to focus on certain aspects only, and to neglect others. There are some significant omissions, as well as a disconcerting sense of a silent city with plenty of images but very few 'voices'. The two aspects are connected, since the inclusion of certain cultural processes and events could have brought more voices into Milan. As it is, one gets the impression that the images that counted were increasingly constructed by people in power and/or with power and imposed upon the city with few or no pockets of resistance. The only exception appears to be that of the 'classic' working-class neighbourhoods during the economic miracle, which successfully constructed the myth of class solidarity and socialist/communist subcultures, and voted for the left parties at successive elections in the 1960s and '70s. As Amalia Signorelli, following Bourdieu, pointed out in her book on urban anthropology, such neighbourhoods were able to accumulate 'considerable symbolic capital, which could then be employed in the struggles for power which took place at the political level' (*Antropologia urbana. Introduzione alla ricerca in Italia*, Milan, Edizioni Guerini, 1996, p. 132). The myth of working-class solidaristic culture was therefore a resource, it was a form of capital which, together with social capital, could be used to empower the socially weak and dispossessed. It created powerful counter-images and facilitated the socio-political integration of migrants. What happened when these forms of symbolic capital all but disappeared? Foot suggests that they were not replaced by any new forms so that the dominant images of recent decades coincided exclusively with the images produced by the dominant social groups. This may or may not have been the case, however. It could be simply an impression created by the omission of other, no less important aspects of city life and culture.

I would like to spend some time discussing some of these omissions. The first is that of local radio stations, particularly Radio Popolare, which gave the citizens a chance to express their opinions on the politics and culture of the city and became an important focus of opposition to Craxi's Milan. When I lived in Milan in the 1980s, Radio Popolare had a large audience among the young (admittedly the young within the left), who constantly discussed among themselves and directly contributed to the diffusion of the issues it raised. The station started to operate in 1976; indeed it has just celebrated 25 years of uninterrupted broadcasting. It has been written that Radio Popolare was born with the precise intention of 'giving voice, through the active participation of the public and cooperation with the different social realities, to the most marginal groups in official communication, such as students, ethnic minorities and immigrants, gay people, prisoners and pacifist movements' (G. Cesareo and B. Scifo, '"Ecco Milano!." Sviluppo e contraddizioni del sistema radiotelevisivo in Lombardia', in D. Bigazzi and M. Meriggi, eds, *Storia d'Italia. Le Regioni dall'Unità a oggi. La Lombardia*, Turin, Einaudi, p. 1094). The authors appear convinced that the station has by and large fulfilled its original aim, succeeding both in establishing stable roots in the city and in playing a strongly critical and oppositional role. Another omission is that of popular music. Admittedly, Milan is not Naples, and music does not have such an encompassing influence upon the culture (and the image) of the city. Yet Milan has a strong musical tradition, quite apart from the one associated with Verdi and La Scala. In the old days of the economic miracle, 'cantautori' or writers/singers such as Gaber and Iannacci created powerful images of the city's peripheries, and the *balere* were popular places in which music was produced and consumed. Some cantautori were also showmen and cabaret singers, such as Nanni Svampa. Their shows included songs but also sketches, sometimes involving the audience, often with political and satirical content. From the 1970s onward mass popular music occupied central stage and Milan became an important centre for pop music consumption and production, developing yet another 'immaterial' industry out of a pre-existing, but relatively modest, discographic sector. The exclusion from the book of radio, music and theatre (particularly Giorgio Strehler's Piccolo Teatro, Dario Fo's La Comune experiment, and all the other theatrical cooperatives set up in the 1970s) in favour of cinema and television leads to an inevitable overrepresentation of leisure and free time in terms of isolated, individual activities and a corresponding underrepresentation of what has been termed 'conviviality', that is, 'the element of sociable pleasure in many kinds of purposeful activities and [.] the variety of ways in which people together make and remake the world. Conviviality in this broad sense is represented not only by cheerful activities like singing in pubs or street dancing at a block party, but also by the small-group rituals and social bonding in serious collective action [.]' (L. Peattie, 'Convivial Cities', in J. Friedmann and M. Douglass, eds., *Cities for Citizens. Planning and the Rise of Civil Society in a Global Age*

, Chichester, John Wiley and Sons, 1998, p. 247).

Perhaps the exclusion of theatre can be explained by the fact that it is an activity largely restricted to the city centre and to the middle classes, two other underrepresented protagonists of Milan before the 1980s. We are told by John Foot, for example, that the old bourgeoisie has largely disappeared, replaced by a new, yuppy-style, nouveau-riche, aggressive and extravagant middle class, but the process is not analysed in any depth nor does it produce 'voices', apart from those of Berlusconi and his acolytes. What happened to the old bourgeoisie? Did it sink without trace? Did it put up a fight, opposing images to images and symbols to symbols? Was it simply bought off? Did it retreat into splendid (but sterile) isolation? How much trading and negotiating went on behind closed doors in the most secluded 'palazzi'? Milan, after all, was the city where Enrico Cuccia, Italy's financial 'éminence grise' operated as the undiscussed boss of Mediobanca, the most powerful Italian merchant bank which acted as a powerhouse for the country's major industrial groups. Milan is also the city where the Banco Ambrosiano operated for years before it collapsed in 1982 amid a gigantic scandal of political and economic corruption, long before Tangentopoli and even before the Socialist Party's period of political dominance. Calvi, Sindona, Gelli, P2, the IOR, the Vatican and the Mafia were some of the protagonists of the scandal, and their enemies were the Bank of Italy, Cuccia himself, La Malfa and many honest and brave public servants and magistrates. Milan's prestigious newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, fell for a time under control of Calvi and P2.

There is no mention of the scandal or any of its protagonists in Foot's book, yet their inclusion might arguably have had the effect of changing the author's reading of the socio-economic transformation of the city. Clearly the rise of Craxi and Berlusconi was preceded by a widening web of shady financial dealings and underhand alliances with corrupt and/or criminal groups which shook at its foundations the old Milanese bourgeoisie. In this context, how useful is a periodisation which largely separates the 1960s and '70s from the 1980s and '90s, associating the latter period with widespread corruption and a 'clientelist and nepotistic culture' (p. 165)? The dark side of Italian capitalism became visible in the city well before the end of the industrial phase, even though the prevailing images were still those linked to 'another' Milan: a bleak, hard-working, conflict-ridden, highly politicised place, but also a place of economic legality. What I am trying to say is that the images of the city and its socio-economic transformation may not have proceeded necessarily in unison, as the book seems to suggest. While Tangentopoli and its images (at first positive, later negative) fit in well with the loss of traditional industry and an industrial proletariat and the triumph of 'immaterial goods', the Sindona-Calvi undertakings, the growth of Banco Ambrosiano, the illegal exports of capital which marked 1970s Milan had profound socio-economic effects upon the city but do not appear to have produced memorable or durable images. This raises the question whether they are not discussed precisely because they were not mediated by images. In other words, the 'constructivist' approach adopted by the author runs the risk of overlooking any social processes which are not reflected through the prism of cultural representations: what is not captured in images sinks into oblivion. This is why it would have been desirable, in my view, to reproduce voices alongside images.

It is possible, however, that the 1970s events referred to above were left out (together with mass political demonstrations and terrorism) because they would have detracted from the main purpose of the book, which is to compare and contrast the period of the economic miracle with the boom of the 1980s and its aftermath. In one telling sentence, Foot comments that, seen against the enthusiasm with which television was welcomed in Milan even in the early days, '1968 seems more of a blip than the proof of any real revolt against capitalist values' (p. 107). As an extension of 1968, the 1970s may therefore have been relegated to the margins of the narrative. This certainly has the merit of allowing the author to focus on those aspects that really interest him and to make a strong case for tracing consumerism and individualism (mainly through his analysis of television) back to the period when collectivism and a mass proletariat appeared dominant. My reservation remains the one outlined above, that is, that the choice of certain types of media and leisure (television and cinema) at the expense of, say, music and theatre, may have influenced an interpretation that stretches individualist values back to the early 1960s, rather than extending collective behaviour - or at least 'conviviality' - well into the 1980s and beyond.

Lastly, the book contains some very interesting discussions of theoretical debates which were either

influential in Italy in the past (such as the debate around consumerism and cultural assimilation), or inform studies of cities and urban spaces today. Foot approaches these theories in a refreshing manner. Rather than appearing in a separate section at the beginning of the volume, they are interspersed with the historical narrative, allowing for a seamless continuum of empirical observation, analysis of events and theoretical discussion. All in all, quite apart from any perceived omissions, this is a hugely enjoyable work, which brought back many memories of a city which seems to attract and repulse in equal measures. I left Milan in the middle of the '80s vowing never to go back, yet I have since been drawn to it again and again for both work and pleasure. I have seen its transformation into a multi-ethnic city, described vividly in the book, together with the outward signs of multiculturalism, if not (yet) with real social integration. As well as making fascinating reading, the book stimulates new ideas and offers new incentives for research, and I do not think more could be asked of it.

**Other reviews:**
[2]

---

**Source URL:** http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/267#comment-0

**Links**
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2558
[2] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews