Prologue

One September afternoon of 2001, a woman attractionist and I were walking back toward the attraction she had put up and parked in the tree lined area between the cemetery and the hospital of Dolo, besides all the other attractions. Abruptly, she started to tell me that one evening she had driven through another provincial town not far from where we were. At first, she had not recognized it at all, but soon after she suddenly realized that such unfamiliar looking town was one of her circuit’s regular stops and that she had in fact brought her attraction there only two weeks earlier, as she did every year for the local fair. She felt dismayed by her misperception, but had to admit that indeed she did not know the quiet, sombre, and empty urban centre she was crossing. Whenever she stayed there, there were lights, music, noise, pleasant smells from the food stands, laughter, children’s delighted cries, and young people’s excited shouts, couples and families strolling around and chatting. “We bring life to towns, we make them change, and when we leave, everything disappears and it [the town] goes back to what it was,” she concluded still trying to make sense of her encounter with the unheimlich, as her experience can be appropriately described.

Shortly before that same September afternoon, she and her fellow attractionists had complained to the Dolo town government about the location assigned to them, reminding it how attractions’ traditional place had been on the main road facing the Brenta canal. There the attractions are highly visible and all entering the town have to drive along them and are therefore enticed to stop and enjoy themselves. The reply was that the annual fair produced traffic jams and required an ad hoc traffic plan, if only for few days, that could instead be avoided if the fair was moved to the peripheral area of Dolo cemetery. In any case, the law the Italian parliament
passed in 1968 gave local administrators the responsibility to confirm a fair’s traditional location or find another one so as to suit the town’s interests while still providing traveling attractionists with an opportunity for work and an income. Thus peripheral areas rather than central market squares (the place where fairs were originally held) seem to have become administrators’ preferred choice these days.

Introduction

As the above story tells poignantly, at the beginning of the twenty-first century traveling attractions are not always warmly welcomed in Italian towns’ and cities’ centers, and the temporary changes they bring to the urban environments with periodical regularity tend to be now perceived as upsetting the habits of sedentary populations. Attractions and circuses are still hosted, but for shorter times and preferably away from central areas that, even when they do not have a historical or artistic value, are to be protected from the merry crowds, noisy confusion, and occasional conflicts traveling attractionists are seen to bring with them. The expectation, if not the requirement, that the daily ways of urban dwellers be respected by their non sedentary fellow citizens assigns a new meaning to the rubric “urban education,” where urban is reminiscent of its original meaning, namely a way of life that is imagined as distinguished by urbanity and by urbane manners enacted in social interactions.

Such persistence of meaning across centuries and momentous changes helps us to remember that the process of mass urbanization was more than just the migration into towns and cities of rural or mountain populations: while the latter reaped the opportunities offered by the urban work environment and became craftspeople, factory workers, or service employees, at the same time they were also expected to learn the civil manners that are desirable, if not necessary, in urban contexts where many different people have settled and live together, meet, and work side by side. As a popular Italian saying goes (no doubt grounded on a biased and ethnocentric perspective), the air of the city liberates a person (from the villagers’ close social control). In addition to this, urbanization also civilizes the person’s ways, by polishing and refining them in the way expected of a town or city dweller.

Furthermore, the effects historically attributed to urban life are emphasized by the fact that Italian society and its cultures have in modern times and until recently contrasted and opposed town and countryside, urban centre and urban periphery, regions’ capitals and provinces’ towns. Such opposition was compounded by the fact that up to a certain time and within a type of economic development concentrated in well defined areas such as the Italian “industrial triangle” (Milan, Turin, Genova), leaving the countryside or the mountains was, and in many cases still is, the only option for a more decent life, even if it means living in the peripheries of the big industrial centers built at the expense of the surrounding rural areas. The Italian peripheries are inhabited by working class or immigrant families who moved out of the town or city centers because of their limited income and work opportunities, or who were relocated when their central and rundown neighborhoods became fashionable and underwent extensive and expensive renovation.