
The Olympics and urban decorum

Over 12,000 individuals, including numerous homeless persons, are set to be removed from the city centre ahead of the Olympic Games in Paris, scheduled to take place from 26 July to 11 August.

As stated by public authorities, the decision aims to facilitate a process of 'social clean-up'. In the light of this event, it is argued, Paris must present itself to the world as a perfect "*ville lumiere*", devoid of any flaws or shadows.

As is often the case, the consequences of these decisions fall most heavily on the most vulnerable members of society, namely those without a roof over their heads but who, like everyone else, have a sky. This phenomenon is occurring in numerous affluent urban centres. In Italy, such incidents have occurred on several occasions, with municipal resolutions and law enforcement officers eager to remove even those who sought to peacefully oppose the eviction of the innocent from the city centre.

These issues were previously discussed at a European meeting on city centres. One participant asserted that the homeless are an integral part of a city's identity and that it is unreasonable to relocate them to distant suburbs or outside the urban area solely for the purpose of maintaining the downtown area pristine. As if these people were being disrespectful to the city, when it was the homeless themselves who were being disrespected by being treated as waste to be disposed of.

The argument is that the city's decorum must be in order for it to be a magnet for the highest number of tourists. It is a question of money, of keeping the wheels of the economy turning.

In recent weeks, however, there have been calls from the citizens of Barcelona, Malaga and Mallorca for tourists to be sent back home. There are too many of them, and they are threatening to upset the balance of urban life, argue the local residents. For instance, as real estate prices rise, landlords prefer to rent to tourists for short periods at high prices rather than to local residents or workers.

Many public spaces have become open-air restaurants. The hours of day and night are disrupted by a frenetic bustle that consumes time and space, hardly noticing the beauty of the city, looking but not seeing.

Indeed, this tourist 'invasion' brings with it plenty of money, but cities are expected to be homes for some and not for others who, instead of bringing money, ask for money.

It is not a question of displacing and removing. It is a matter of recognizing that something is fundamentally wrong and that the problem cannot be solved by shouting 'go home!'. What is needed is a culture and a policy that does not bow down to the market and to external appearance. The city is in danger of losing its vocation as a meeting place where different people get to know, respect and appreciate each other. Restoring the soul of the city is the task of citizens and public administrators, remembering that urban decorum, which is not only aesthetic, is not threatened by the homeless as much as by merchants who have no qualms about selling off an entire city.

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