Evicted from Eternity: The Restructuring of Modern Rome

Bjørn Thomassen


Opening sentence of chapter 1, p.7.

In one of the presentations of his recent book, *Evicted from Eternity, The Restructuring of Modern Rome*, Michael Herzfeld told his Roman audience that “this is the most personal book I have written”. He was not just trying to please the locals. This book is indeed filled with emotions and the presence of the anthropologist in the city of eternity. There are the emotions of the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld. First and foremost, and running through every page, there is his love for the neighborhood Monti and its inhabitants. There is his love for the eternal city of Rome, and all its paradoxical complexities, imperfections and endless beauty. But there is also outspoken anger. There is his “anger of identification” (p. 24) with those victims of the housing crisis and the gentrification processes driving the original inhabitants out of Monti, replacing them with a new class of resource-rich buyers and renters. While those buildings carry the memories of the Roman city center, they are slowly turned into a real estate speculation area and a UNESCO cultural inheritance site. This occurs exactly as the living memory of the buildings that provides “inheritance” its cultural significance is disappearing together with the people who made Monti a *rione*, a “neighborhood”, a place and an identity where people are *monticiani* before they are Romans, and proudly so. There are the emotions of the people and persons described, which invite the reader into this laboratory of intricate human relations and curious forms of sociability, into this particular “Romanness” of diffidence and civility, cynicism and humor, rudeness and kindness, this chaotic blend of distance and closeness, carelessness, apathy and engagement that for long had been waiting for an anthropologist to stop by. It is not necessarily a criterion for success (it can at least be an ambivalent one), and it is certainly not our role as anthropologists to please people, but the *monticiani* I happen to have talked to are proud that Herzfeld not only stopped by, but made Monti his home and wrote it out from the inside.

“Evicted from Eternity” is therefore also a book about politics, and in more than one way. The underlying theme of evictions is tightly connected to economic-political processes which involve both real estate speculators, bankers, local politicians and, significantly so, the Vatican. The book also entails vivid discussions of both political bureaucracy and of local and Italian party politics. Furthermore, Herzfeld perspectivizes the ethnographic account by evidencing the local-global connections that become tied together in concrete practices and lived experiences, and sometimes in