

# An instituting-organisational framework for the interpretation of urban commoning

## Lessons from a neighbourhood park

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### Introduction

What makes a neighbourhood public park a well-maintained, vibrant, and inclusive space, where a variety of people – especially those who are less likely to have access to quality domestic space – can spend time, socialise, feel comfortable, and safe? Who's responsible for planting, cleaning, and taking care of it? Should all these activities be the exclusive 'maintenance' responsibility of public actors or should park users be directly engaged in caring for it?

Planning literature provides a variety of answers to these questions, none of which appear to be definite. Many studies on urban commoning – i.e., processes that sees various actors

organising and caring over a space perceived as an urban common – provide arguments in support of the functional, pedagogical, or political significance of engaging people in the act of caring for a public space. At the same time, these arguments are counteracted by many studies showing the downsides of commoning, such as public institutional withdrawal

*Drawing from critical scholarship on commoning processes, this article discusses the disciplinary relevance of a commoning case that took place in a neighbourhood park on the northern outskirts of the city of Catania in Italy. Based on our direct engagement in the process, we tell the story of its rise and fall with the aim of reflecting on the possibilities and the pitfalls associated with a collective effort to take care of a neglected public space.*

*The case is presented for its argumentative value and is discussed through the lens of a theoretical framework developed intersecting Argyris's theory of organisational learning and Esposito's 'instituting thought'. The purpose is to argue the centrality of two important dimensions of a commoning process, organizational consistency and inclusivity.*

from spatial welfare, privatisation, creation of self-elected governing enclaves, etc.

As a matter of fact, the issue of who's responsible for a public park takes the planning scholarly debate into the hearth of a much larger political debate on the premises of our democratic system and the actual legitimacy of the role of Public Institutions as embedded in the 1948 Italian Constitutional law. What is the reason behind the desire for the direct involvement of park users in its governance and caring? Do we want to question institutions' ability and or legitimacy to do that? On the contrary, do we want to consider commoning as an occasion to strengthen public institutions, and, if so, what are the conditions that would support it? This article addresses these questions proposing a theoretical framework that we call 'instituting-organisational', developed at the nexus between Esposito's instituting thought (2020; 2021) applied to

urban planning (Li Destri and Saija, 2023) and collective learning theories, especially Argyris' work on organisational learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Argyris, 1995).

The instituting-organisational framework is used to discuss the case of a public neighbourhood park called 'Parco degli Ulivi' (Olive Trees Park, OT Park from now on), located in the northern outskirts of the City of Catania, Italy. Here, a dozen residents and representatives of local organisations, including the two authors, have organised under the label of 'Collaborative for the Olive Trees' (OT Collaborative, from now on) and hosted events inside the park for roughly one year in 2023. Despite the good premises and goodwill, this collective effort aimed at caring for the park has encountered a number of pitfalls. This paper proposes a reflection on the obstacles faced by the OT collaborative using them as food for thought for the planning scholarly community concerned with commons and commoning processes. The purpose is to encourage scholars to dig into the very nature of such processes, in search for those elements that matter the most if these processes ought to be truly emancipatory and inclusive; if they

also ought to not undermine but, on the contrary, keep public institutions accountable, while standing the challenge of time.

The paper is structured as follows. After introducing the instituting-organisational framework (section 2) and the context (section 3), we clarify our methodological approach (section 4) and present and discuss the case, focusing on the motivations and obstacles faced by the local organisations and individuals involved (sections 5 and 6). In conclusion, we focus on two characteristics (organizational consistency and inclusivity) that we think can add some elements to the debate on commoning processes.

### **Intersecting organisational and instituting theories in the urban commons' testbed**

It is hard to find a planner that is openly against public parks – i.e., public spaces with permeable land, trees, bushes, playgrounds, benches, etc. – in residential neighbourhoods. In Italy, since the 60s, they have been mandatory, as national planning laws (L.765/1967 and DM 1444/68; see Baioni et al., 2021) list them as 'planning standards,' i.e., spatial infrastructures for socialisation and recreation of urban residents that have to be guaranteed by urban plans. Contemporary planners have even more reasons to plan for parks, which are praised for their ability to also provide important ecological services beyond socialisation, playing a key role in the challenging game of making cities more resilient to climate change.

However, a closer look at the reality of many medium-sized Italian cities may reveal that both social and ecological advantages of parks should not be taken for granted; certainly not in the contemporary era, in the face of an increasing contraction of the public welfare state, corresponding to a decrease of the institutional will or abilities to manage many of the urban public parks inherited by neighbourhoods as 'planning standards'.

As a matter of fact, many public parks, especially those owned by relatively 'poor' municipalities (mid-sized, depopulating, etc.) and located in struggling residential areas (low-income neighbourhoods, public housing complexes, etc.), are often spaces of abandonment, pollution, crime, and fear (Sreetheran and Van Den Bosch, 2014). On the contrary, for those parks located inside or in the proximity of 'hot' real estate areas, the risk is to see privatisation and development taking over trees and bushes (Grazzini and Bordin, 2024).

In the context of an increasing influence of neo-liberal dynamics on cities, there is an increasing scholarly attention on the issues of governance of public spaces like public parks. This has been recognized even by urban design scholars warning about the fact that public actors often have to rely on partnerships with non-public actors while retreating from their direct responsibility over spatial welfare (Carmona, 2015). Spatial governance is exactly the focus of the broad literature on commons that does not necessarily

focus on public parks but it could be useful to summarize in the following paragraph.

Hardin's seminal work on the tragedy of the commons (1968) focuses on mechanisms for managing common-pool resources which are subjected to the so called 'prisoner's dilemma,' i.e., the fact that individual users often act in their own self-interest, choosing to betray each other, leading to a worse outcome for both than if they had cooperated. According to Olson (1965), the prisoner's dilemma can be overcome within small groups of users with strong ties, using incentives and without coercion. Weimann et al. (2019) have proved that this also apply to larger groups while Graham et al (2019) have studied the characteristics of the different incentives (tangible rewards, but also social recognition or psychological mechanisms) that encourage collective action (Graham et al., 2019). Others have focused on alternative governance arrangements (Holahan and Lubell, 2022) and the collective learning mechanisms behind them (Kim et al., 2020). Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom (1990) provides a major contribution to such a debate, arguing that collective action for the virtuous management of common-pool resources is possible through the establishment of arrangements for shared governance.

From the perspective of this article, Ostrom's argument can be interpreted as there can be a third way between:

- the social-democratic idea of the exclusive responsibility of public actors over the man-

agement of resources and spaces – like public parks – for the collective interest;

- the liberal idea that the invisible hand of the private market will, at the end of the day, provide what is needed by society, even parks.

As a matter of fact, Ostrom shows the possibility that individuals who care for a common can 'gather', converge, collaborate, and organise with the purpose of its management, eventually establishing formal collaborations with either public or private actors. Ostrom has inspired a very large body of literature on the governance of the commons over the past three decades, which has evolved by shifting attention from the actual nature of the managing arrangement and of the spatial object to be managed (the common) toward the nature of the actual process leading to such an arrangement (the commoning process; De Angelis, 2017). Studies have also begun to see commoning as the expression of social movements reacting to neoliberal dynamics (Dardot and Laval, 2014; Stavrides, 2019; Varvarousis, 2020). The focus on processes also allows an acknowledgment of often conflicting nature of commoning processes that are related to social mobilisation (Viderman et al, 2023). Along these lines, others argue the importance of interpreting commoning as a political struggle rather than a search for a technical solution for spatial management (Velicu & García-López, 2018) and, in general, to be aware of the power dynamics they imply (Partelow et al, 2023). Recent literature has looked at such a political na-

ture within the framework of 'caring,' stressing the significance of commons as infrastructures of care, i.e., places where relations of interdependence emerge and can be nurtured through the act of caring about something with others (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; Barbagallo et al., 2019; Care Collective, 2020).

Ostrom's studies have also inspired planning scholars to interpret urban public spaces – including parks – as commons managed by forms of shared governance (Micciarelli, 2014; Ciaffi, 2019; Vittoria et al., 2023). In particular, literature on parks seen as urban commons (Mitrašinić and Mehta, 2021) includes a great variety of cases. People can get together either to fight against threats over the beloved park (Tedesco, 2023) or to contrast abandonment and dismay with events, volunteer work, clean-ups, resident-led gardening, etc. (Arvanitidis and Papa- giannitsis, 2020).

Despite the interesting and hopeful cases documented by scholars, a close look at the literature makes clear that commoning is not necessarily a recipe for success.

Many have led attention toward the risks associated with commoning, such as the retreat of institutions from their political responsibilities (Vitale, 2013), increasing privatisation of public goods, or, more generally, the use of 'agreements with the civics' as a way for decision-makers to cover up social conflicts (Quintana and Campbell, 2019). In addition to that, commoning processes often encounter the risk

of becoming social enclosures where 'a self-selected few' end up managing and deciding over something supposed to be for the benefit of all (Jeffrey et al. 2012). Finally, on the basis of the work of Mady and Chettiparamb (2017), one could argue that public institutions might still be the starting point in contexts characterized by long-standing deep divisions within civil society. This paper aims at advancing such a debate on urban commoning – i.e., a process through which individuals 'get organised' for the purpose of protecting, caring, enhancing, mobilising around the actual status and/or future prospects of a urban common – through the introduction of a specific theoretical framework where the verb 'getting organised' refers to the following two facts:

- Individuals, who care for or have an interest in an urban common and voluntarily adhere to a collective (Olson, 1965; Weimann et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2019; Holahan and Lubell, 2022) become an 'organization' when the collective assumes a common name and a shared mission that is usually formalized into public documents and narratives. Argyris and Schön (1978) call these documents 'organizational maps', stressing their being a point of reference in the way individuals perceive the organization (what Argyris calls individual cognitive maps).
- Individuals, on the basis of their own understanding of the organisation's purpose – which depends on their theory-in-use [i.e.,

“the theory that individuals espouse and that comprises their beliefs, attitudes, and values” (Argyris, 1995, p.20)] – contribute to collective actions, i.e., actions carried out not by individuals in an independent fashion, but rather collaboratively by a meaningful number of members of the collective; these actions are supposedly conceived so that their pursued goals comply with the collective’s shared mission.

According to Argyris, one of the main challenges faced by collaboratives and organisations is the frequent mismatch between organisational and individual cognitive maps, especially in a process of organisational learning and change (in which such maps evolve, at both the organisational and the individual levels). As a matter of fact, documents and narratives are never as clear and exhaustive as hoped for and there is always a gap of understanding, a distance of perspectives amongst members, which end up becoming divisive in the long run. For these reasons, organisational learning experts suggest that organisational learning occurs when such a mismatch is minimised, making sure that each member has a profound understanding of what keeps people together despite inevitable individual differences.

Things become even more complicated, in the cases of an ‘organising’ process aimed at the caring for a public space, especially if the process gives birth to a ‘brand new’ collective aiming at playing an intermediary role between the indi-

vidual experience of spatial users and the public institutional actor who owns and supposedly manages it. In this case, borrowing Esposito’s (2020; 2021) terminology as applied to planning theory by Li Destri Nicosia and Saija (2023), the challenge for the collective is to be ‘instituting’: this term refers to a temporary, but not short-lived, civic organisation that is a collective political actor emerging from the convergence and the reciprocal recognition of the individual experiences. A civic organisation is an ‘instituting’ one if it constantly links the level of the law with the one of individual experience, enlarging the circle of inclusivity. It is like to say that a commoning process is desirable if it generates a form of civic organisation whose purpose is constantly related to the points of convergence in the people’s perception of problems and the opportunities in the portion of geography they somehow ‘inhabit’ and care for.

According to our instituting-organisational framework, a desirable commoning process should then have the following two characteristics:

- Alignment between the evolving scope of the organisation embedded into the organisational map and individual cognitive maps and theory-in-use (Argyris).
- The evolving scope of the organisation remains representative of the individual instances, maximises individuals’ inclusion, and has an impact on existing public institutions and the level of the law (Esposito).



## A view of the Olive Tree (OT) Park

Source: Authors' archive, 2023

Fig. 1

It is against these characteristics that, in the following paragraphs, we'll test a case of a coming process related to an urban park.

### The context

The OT Park (3,8 ha; Fig.1) is located at the heart of the Catania 4° District, called "San Giovanni Galermo-Trappeto-Cibali", that extends for about 736 ha hosting roughly 40.000 residents (ISTAT). The Park was planned as part of the 1969 Comprehensive Regulatory Plan of the City of Catania, characterized by a central concern over the provision for minimum quantities of square metres of public spaces (standards) for public services forerunner of the 1968 National Decree Law. In particular, the Catania Plan provided for the creation of a new park system across the various city districts. However, such an early stage of planning did not imply a rap-

id implementation, since the OT park was designed and implemented only many years later, between 1997 and 2001, thanks to a project funded by European Regional Development Funds 2000-2006. Funds covered the expropriation of 3 hectares of rural land south of the Trappeto Public Housing complex as well as the landscaping and the construction of pedestrian paths, fountains, lighting, benches, and a playground. In the final design, several elements of the pre-existing agricultural system such as rural terraces and irrigation channels were integrated into the park landscape.

Even before its official opening, in 2001, the local newspaper reported neglect, vandalism, waste dumping, drug dealing, and fires (La Sicilia, 15.07.1999, p. 20), a deficient road system (La Sicilia, 06.10.2000, p. 22), and explicit concerns by residents.

The other night, I walked with a friend of mine into the new San Nullo Park on Via Santa Rosa da Lima. We were both amazed by the size of the garden and sadly disconsolate, given the poor state the park is in. Numerous lampposts are already broken, numerous beer bottles shattered [...] And construction works have not yet been completed! In what state do you think the park will be handed over to the citizens at this rate? (La Sicilia, 23.10.2001, p.17; translated by the authors).

In the following years, the same newspaper talked about on the lack of maintenance for the OT park together with other green spaces in the city (La Sicilia, 30.08.2002, p. 20).

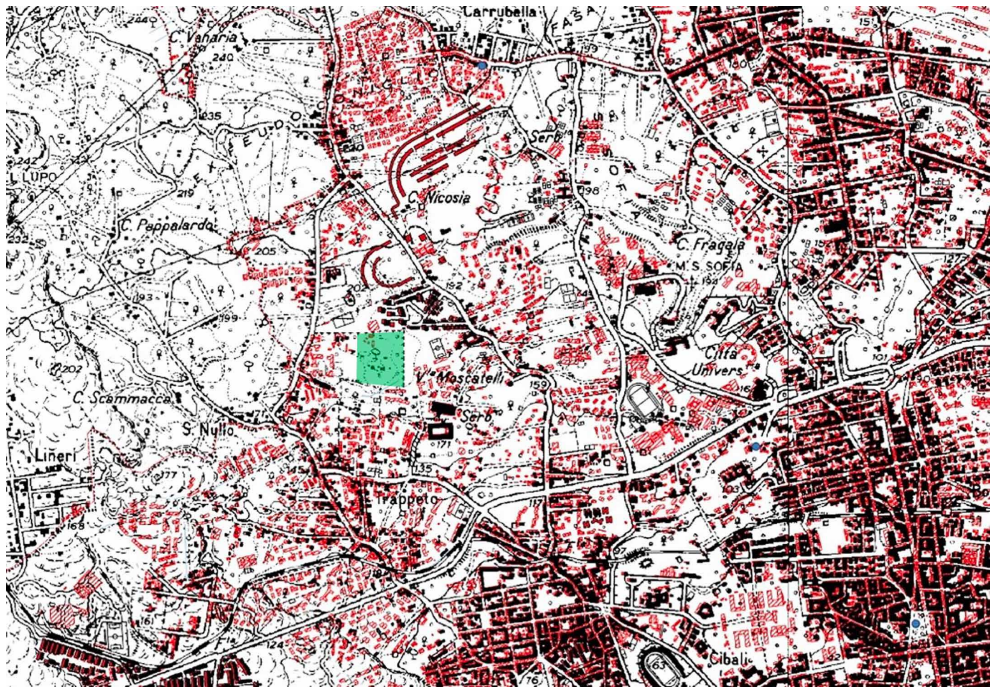
As a matter of fact, the OT park was created with the best of intention but did not open its gates to be the kind of social infrastructure envisioned by the plan. The reasons behind this are probably related to the physical and social character of the urbanisation it was meant to serve. At the end of WWII, the area north of the park was still largely rural, with the exception of a small public housing neighbourhood funded by the INA CASA program. South of the park, urbanisation was limited to the San Nullo and the south Trappeto villages, made of buildings along the two historic roads, Via Sebastiano Catania and Via San Nullo, running from the city centre to the top of the Etna volcano. Both in the northern and southern areas, urbanisation intensified during the post-war era (see Fig. 2), together with important public investments, following two very different mechanisms. First, in the San Nullo, south Trappeto area, private developments, and housing coops were

accompanied by the establishments of the first city services: a primary school was opened in 1957 (now relocated), the first city bus line arrived in 1964, and the local parish was established in 1966 (Chiarenza, 2018).

Second, the northern rural area, on the contrary, was developed thanks to the approval and implementation of the 1973 Piano di Zona Trappeto Nord, i.e., a plan for a public housing neighbourhood called North Trappeto providing for the construction of public houses and neighbourhood services for about 17.000 low-income residents.

Despite the good intentions behind the Plan, the social history of the North Trappeto complex follows the same tale of neglect, abandonment, and social distress of many public housing complexes all around Italy. This one, in particular, has acquired the reputation of being an area under criminal control as well as amongst the main drug dealing squares of the city (La Sicilia, 17.03.2023, online). As a matter of fact, San Nullo/South Trappeto and North Trappeto are not one but two 'neighbourhoods' (Fig. 3), where roughly 13.000 residents live today in an area of 210 ha, and where different urbanisation mechanisms have led to very different socio-demographics (low-income in North Trappeto and middle- to high-income in San Nullo). It should not come as a surprise, then, that a public park built between these two communities has not become a place for peaceful socialisation but 'nobody's land'.





**The historical map of the area (IGM, 1960, in black) overlaid with the 2012 topography map (in red). In plain red, public housing buildings. In green, the area where the OT Park is today**

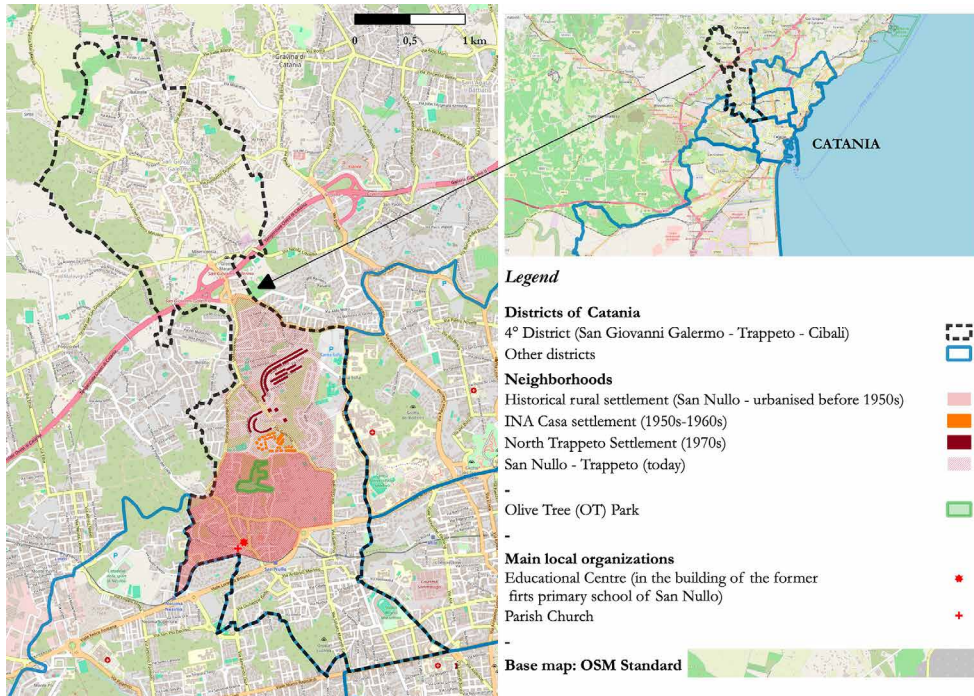
Source: Authors' elaboration based on IGM and regional data

Fig. 2

### **Methodological clarifications and premises**

In the following paragraphs, we tell the story of a commoning process related to the OT Park. Such a story is told for the purpose of arguing the relevance of the instituting-organisational framework presented in section 2. The case has been developed combining two different research approaches. On the one hand, is based on a case study methodology (Yin, 2009) conducted through archival research (the analysis of historical documents and the press), geodatasets' analysis, participant observation, interviews. On the other hand, it is also based

on the action research (AR) approach applied to urban planning (Saija, 2016), since we have been directly involved as engaged scholars in the course of most of the narrated events. The story is then a combination of analysis of data we have collected after the fact and of critical self-reflection over the very facts we have intentionally contributed to, as action-researchers. The story for us begun with an invitation to join a meeting, on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023, with representatives of neighbourhood organisations committed to the 'enhancement' of the OT Park. The invitation came from the head of a local NGO



## District and OT Park Vicinity Maps

Source: Authors' elaboration based on geodataset and OpenStreetMap  
 Fig. 3

running an after-school educational centre located in the former primary school building in the San Nullo village (the educational centre, from now on). Reasons for that invitation were rooted in the long-term collaboration between our research lab at the University of Catania and the educational centre. Between 2015 and 2017, Giusy Pappalardo (GP) was a co-instructor of two service-learning classes involving planning students, local kids, and their parents in the design and implementation of a resident-led community garden in the outdoors of the educational centre headquarters (Piazza et

al., 2018). By the end of this collaboration, participants had shared the general idea that community gardening could have been a good idea also for the neglected OT Park, located less than a km north of the educational centre. This idea arose, again, when Laura Saija (LS) proposed to the educational centre a collaboration with her 2021 Land use planning class working on a plan for the neighbourhood. During this collaboration, in particular, a dozen residents showed an interest in having community gardens located inside the boundary of the OT Park, based on the same mechanism the City of Catania had



## A picture of the activities at the Spring Festival

Source: Authors' archive, 2023

Fig. 4

applied in other neighbourhoods: the request was to convert abandoned portions of permeable public land into a series of gardens, each of one to be entrusted to a single household interested in growing food for private consumption only (Saija et al., 2024).

Based on these previous experiences, we welcomed the invitation to work with local organisations in pursuing the enhancement of the park. Our own motivations were:

- pushing for the implementation of what we had previously perceived as a residents' need, i.e., the enhancement of a neglected public park through a community gardens project (LS);
- developing further engaged research activities on the neighbourhood, with a specific focus on the role of collective oral history and mapping in a resident-led urban regeneration process like the upcoming OT Park process (GP).
- In addition to this, the leader of the educational centre asked for methodological sup-

port, based on her knowledge of our past experiences in process facilitation (Saija and Pappalardo, 2022). Therefore, we agreed to join the group by playing a methodological advising role to whoever would have taken up the role of group coordinator.

### **Story, part I: from a group to an organisation (Argyris)**

We joined the OT group for the March meeting, with representatives of the local Parish Church, the local catholic Scouts group, colleagues from the University of Catania, and 5 different non-profit associations including the educational centre, a local housing cooperative, and the local chapters of a renowned anti-mafia organisation and one large environmental NGO. We discovered that, based on previous individual conversations, participants had already decided to organise a first public event in the park which was eventually named Spring Festival, and the agenda for our meeting was dedicated to event-planning.

Specifically, the Spring Festival, held on March 26<sup>th</sup>, was a whole day at the park with games, music, activities for families, etc. Each Organisation focused on activities in line with what Argyris calls its own 'organisational routine': the educational centre organised plays and activities for its kids; scouts carried out hands-on outdoor activities; anti-mafia activists led a anti-mafia celebration, with kids' reading out loud the names of mafia victims; University researchers gave speeches on the park, each one related to his/her own expertise. We served on the basis of our 'participatory' expertise at the sign-in table, collecting contact info of participants (see Fig. 4). Twenty new residents showed an interest in being engaged in the process (mostly, parents interested in improving the park for spending time with their children, residents interested in sports, outdoor activities, and environmental education, and some teachers). The event was documented on social media, receiving a lot of likes and comments. It was also reported by the local newspaper as a successful commoning initiative (La Sicilia, 27.3.2023, VI).

The Spring Festival represented an important step in the OT process not only because it was the first open call for attention from a small group of committed citizens to the large public, but also because it set the tone of a highly collaborative relationship between the group and the local Administration. Despite the fact that several activists and participants had blamed

the City for pitfalls in park maintenance, surveillance, and design, the group chose to organise the Festival under the banner of the Presidency of the Catania City Council. It helped the fact that the newly appointed City Council President (the CC President, from now on) was an influential long-term San Nullo resident, parishioner, and politician, who proved to be very efficient in approving the mandatory formal requests for the use of public soil as well as authorising the use of public equipment for the event, including chairs and the stage for the speeches. As was later revealed, however, the involvement of the CC President in the process created some imbalances in the power dynamics within the group, since he facilitated the relations with the City but not without attempting to control such relations.

The first group meeting after the festival focused on self-evaluation and planning for further steps. The overall perception of the event was very positive, to such an extent that all participants seemed interested in future activities replicating the same format. All but us. Asked to provide methodological advice on how to move forward with the process, we found ourselves lacking crucial and necessary information: having missed the initial individual conversations and in the absence of any written document or even a common name for the group, we were not sure about the group's shared purpose. Here, we felt the importance of mobilising Argyris' lessons as a way of helping the group to

Who	Excerpts of authors' ethnographic notes showing different premises and motivation of the individuals involved in the commoning process	Proposed activities reflecting the different theories-in-use mobilized by the different individual actors
The leader of the Educational Centre	"Offering another space for the children, the mothers and the fathers that attend the centre that we run, to experiment with practical healthy activities, positive relations, community ties in the Park"	Activities with children and parents that use to be engaged in the NGO's work, to be conducted also at the Park (outdoor learning, summer camps, gardening, hands-on activities).
The chief-scout	"Taking care of a place as a way to take care of a small portion of the Earth: a symbolic act"	Hands-on activities with the group of boys and girls scouts (building street furniture, clean up).
The priest	"Promoting the neighbourhood and a sense of belonging through the activities done in the Park"	Worship activities (e.g., Via Crucis), catechism groups; religious events.
Resident 1	"Having a safe, open air, green space where I can spend meaningful time with my wife and my child, close to my home"	Other festivals, hands-on activities, clean-up, bricolage, workshops, sport training, gardening.
Resident 2	"Making the Park flourish again through practical collaboration among people who want to commit themselves to the same goal"	
Resident 3 (also, member of an association of environmental guides)	"Showing how beautiful and unique the Park is from a geological and botanical standpoint. This neighbourhood, San Nullo, is a historical settlement that deserves to be valued for its history"	Organization of guided tours inside the Park and in the surroundings. Request of expanding the boundaries of the Park, environmental protection and cultural valorisation.
Resident of another District of Catania, walk leader for the program "1 km of health2, promoted by the Local Health Authority	"Walking in this Park, like in other Parks in Catania, to promote a healthy lifestyle and practices of active ageing"	Walks with elderly, sport training; organisation of other festivals, hands-on activities, clean-up.
CC President	"Doing something for San Nullo, not necessarily at the Park"	Creating ties with the City Council and the administrators.
University researchers, beyond the authors	"Doing something for the territory where the University operates"	Codesign activities of the playground, landscaping of the Park, branding of the Coalition, such as the logo, the social media, etc. (architecture researchers);
	"Showing the uniqueness of the geomorphological features of the Park"	
	"Showing the uniqueness of the arboreal species, the Mediterranean scrub, and the living beings that inhabit the Park, more than humans"	Walks to discover the rocks and the plants of the Park (geology researchers + floriculturist researchers).
The authors (engaged-researchers)	"We would like to use the opportunity of the Park as way to engage directly with residents to empower them"	Door-knocking, gardening and collective memory maps as vehicles of engagement.

# A summary of some individuals' motivations and proposed actions that derive from different theories-in-use

Source: authors' ethnographic notes

Tab. 1

'get organised'. What we were witnessing was not a problem of group size or of lack of incentives – as Olson would suggest. Rather, it was a problem of clearly identifying the commonalities among individuals. We had heard about the need to 'do something for the park', but our perception was that 'something' meant different things for different people. Using Argyris' terminology, the group was not an organisation yet, in the sense that it did not have a clear and shared organisational map to be used in order to verify the alignment between participants' motivations as well as the collective future course of action. We shared that observation with the group, and everybody agreed on having an internal workshop aimed at clarifying the relationship between individual motivations (individual cognitive maps and theories-in-use) and the shared purpose, to be used for the choice of a name and the development of a shared 'road map' (organisational map) for the following 8-9 months. The workshop, which consisted of 2 meetings between April and May 2023, allowed participants to become aware of the inevitable differences between individual motivations (explained in detail in Tab. 1) but also their convergence toward the park.

The main outcome of the workshop was participants' shared idea that the transformation of OT Park from a neglected and dangerous space into a vibrant, safe community space was not a goal in itself but rather a means to advance: kids' education for the staff of the education-

al centre; cohesion amongst parishioners for Church representatives; environmental education and research for environmental scholars and activists. We declared our interest as planners, to see the 'regeneration' of the Park as an occasion to empower local residents, especially the most distressed inhabitants of the North Trappeto Public Housing complex, as a strategy toward their direct mobilisation and organization for the enhancement of the neighbourhood.

The workshop resulted in:

- a new name for the group – the OT collaborative – and a logo, as well as social media pages and a shared contact list;
- a written document with a shared purpose and a road map of 'public events in the park'. The road map was conceived as an incremental process of practical initiatives to be carried out in the park, combining various activities – e.g., outdoor activities for the elderly, programs for kids, participatory urban design and oral history – aimed at the production of: residents' increasing presence in the park and in the OT collaborative meetings; the finalisation of a DIY project for the construction of an improved playground for kids; a new final design for the park, including a new site for resident-led gardens, to be submitted for the approval by the local Administration by January 2024;
- a slight increase in the number of residents participating in the groups' meetings. Participation increased from 1 resident in the first

meeting after the Spring festival to an average of 5 in the subsequent meetings before the Summer Festival.

### **Story part II: pitfalls of the commoning process through Esposito's lens**

Thanks to the alignment of the organisational map with the individual cognitive maps and theories-in-use, the group hosting the Spring Festival had become an organisation. However, its steering group was still made mostly not by residents but by representatives of pre-existing organisations – the church, the educational center, the scouts, the University, etc.. During the April-May workshop, we had explicitly asked to comment on the role of local residents in the process, with everybody pointing out the necessity of having a larger engagement of residents not only as 'participants' but as part of the decision-making process. This goal, which is at the roots of what Esposito defines as "instituting organisations", was a shared one, but has faced significant challenges.

This became clear after the Spring Festival, when the OT Collaborative decided to host a Summer Festival, on June 30<sup>th</sup>. Together with the replication of most of the activities already proposed in the Spring, the event hosted:

- a walk in the park with residents potentially interested in community gardening as well as an gardens' expert from City Hall; the purpose was to collectively discuss the potential location of gardens inside the park as well as

the bureaucratic steps to follow to have the City supporting the project. The walk was also meant as a strategy to increase the number of residents participating in the process. It was prepared through a meeting organised in the educational centre with about 30 residents who had shown an interest in gardening in the 2021 participatory process;

- a participatory exercise combining oral history and mapping to foster residents' engagement in thinking about historic values embedded in the park and the neighbourhood, as a first step toward collective thinking about the future.

Both these activities (Fig. 5) led to important and somehow unexpected outcomes, that can be considered critical is we apply Esposito's lens, related to decreasing inclusivity and representativeness.

The mapping exercise raised a lot of enthusiasm but revealed more than just people's perceptions of historic assets in the local built environment. While no residents from North Trappeto participated in the activity, many San Nullo long-term residents expressed their feeling 'the native' compared with their public housing 'neighbours,' as expressed by an elder: "We have always been here in San Nullo, we are not like them". They also expressed an overall mistrust in North Trappeto's residents' social habits and ability to care for a common space (in the words of younger San Nullo resident "they're not like us, they're different from us, we don't need to



## A picture of the Summer Festival

Authors' archive, 2023

Fig. 5

engage them to take care of the park”).

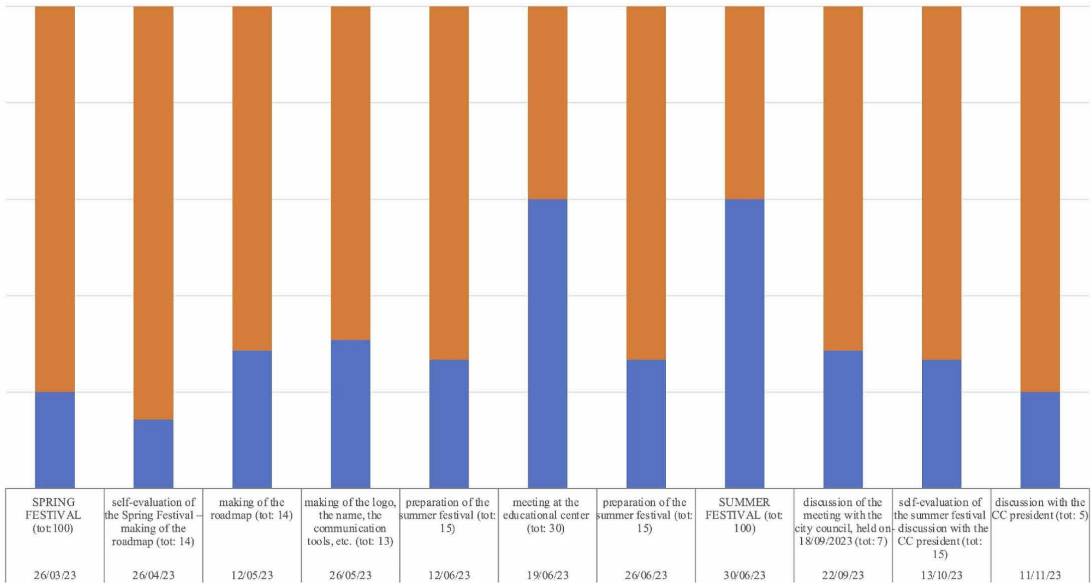
Despite the conversations about inclusivity which had occurred during the development of the roadmap (organizational map), the participatory exercise taking place during the 2023 Summer Fest showed many OT collaborative members' reluctance in engaging the North Trappeto residents, perceived as 'different' and unnecessary for the purpose of 'taking care of the park'.

In addition, the walk aimed to discuss the community gardens' project had a very low turn-out of residents, since only 2 showed up, none of

whom from North Trappeto, while attracting significant attention from local administrators. As such, after the festival (Sept 18th, 2023), the OT Collaborative was asked by the Office of the Mayor to join the city's periodic meeting with civic organisations interested in environmental stewardship. The meeting with the Mayor and city officials revealed the administrators' desire to increase the number of public green areas officially entrusted to civic organizations willing to care for them, as part of a broader strategy to address their lack of resources for park maintenance. This prospect became, then, the focus



ratio between residents and other participants during meetings/public events



**A graph showing the ratio between the number of residents involved (blue) and other participants (orange) during the different meetings and public events (festivals). The number of total participants per meeting/event is given in brackets**

Source: Authors' elaboration based on meeting reports  
Fig. 6

of the October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023 meeting, which proved to be a debate on the possibility of converting the OT Collaborative into an NGO able to apply for the formal 'adoption' of the park. The most enthusiastic voice about this possibility was the CC President, who talked for about 3 / 4 of the meeting time, assuring his full support to the initiative.

On that occasion, we, the authors, had the opportunity to only say a few sentences, warning about the enormous 'cons' vs. very few 'pros' of this prospect. In particular, we explained that the original idea of community gardens re-

lied on the adoption of small portions of public land by individual households, while the overall enhancement of the park was conceived as the outcome of a collaboration between residents and administrators, who had to remain in charge of maintenance and surveillance. We did not have the time to share our concern about the decrease of participation of neighbourhood residents in the OT collaborative meetings (see Fig. 6).

A following attempt to discuss these matters forward, during a November 2023 meeting, failed due to the lack of participation (just the

two of us together with the CC President, the priest and the two scouts' chieftains). No other attempts to meet have been successful by the time this paper has been completed.

Toward the end of this process, we've had the opportunity to only share our critical observations – both about the lack of inclusivity toward North Trappeto residents and the power imbalances related to the behaviour of the CC President – though face-to-face conversations with individual members of the OT collaborative.

We would have welcomed the opportunity to continue this work, also based on the observation that one year is not enough for deep collective learning around some of the ambitious goals we had on the plate. However, we have just registered an overall lack of commitment by former activists for reasons that we have tried to understand and comment in the final section.

### **Concluding remarks**

The story of the OT Collaborative reflects most of what scholars have said about urban commoning in the literature. The state of perennial neglect of a public neighbourhood park in the northern outskirts of the city of Catania is an issue affecting many public parks and spaces all around Italy and beyond (Sreetheran and Van Den Bosch, 2014; Carmona, 2015; Arvanitidis and Papagiannitsis, 2020; Mitrašinović and Mehta, 2021). It talks about the crisis of the role of our public institutions (Vitale, 2013) embedded in many social-democratic European constitu-

tions, i.e., lacking the resources and/or the political will to be guardians of urban commons for the benefit of all. The urge of civil society to organise against such a state of neglect recalls a widespread phenomenon that scholars have labelled as 'commoning'; (De Angelis, 2017; Dardot and Laval, 2014 Stavrides, 2019; Varvarousis, 2020) whose positive aspects – people's genuine urge to volunteer in caring for an urban common, in collaboration with others (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; Barbagallo et al., 2019; Care Collective, 2020) – can all be found in the first phase of the OT Collaborative experience. However, the rapid fall of such a process can easily be connected with most of the critiques raised by the scholarly literature on urban commons. In its brief lifespan it risked – more or less wittingly – to exclude the most distressed urban residents (Jeffrey et al. 2012) as well as to buy into the ongoing 'adopt a park' campaign by the City of Catania, which hides an intentional withdrawal from management responsibilities over the public park system (Quintana and Campbell, 2019; Partelow et al. 2023).

According to the presented 'instituting-organisational' framework (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Argyris, 1995; Esposito, 2020; 2021; Li Destri Nicosia and Saija, 2023), we have argued that a commoning process should be evaluated also on the basis of people's ability to give birth to an instituting organisation, i.e., an organisation characterised by an evolving scope – as it is embedded into organisational maps – that

is kept aligned with individual maps and theories-in-use (organizational consistency) and is able to pursue collective actions that are not only representative of individual instances but also, and most importantly, enlarge the circle of inclusivity.

We have shown that this case can help advance our discussion on whether or not certain strategies or tools can support these processes in being and remaining overtime both inclusive and consistent. As participants in the process, we have raised those issues of inclusivity and organizational consistency since the aftermath of the Spring Festival, finding out that all commoners were ready to acknowledge their importance and acted consequently. Organizational consistency (Argyris) was addressed through the open acknowledgement of mutual differences and convergences as well as the development of a written roadmap. Inclusivity (Esposito) was pursued – even if not fully addressed – through specific efforts to engage more residents in the steering group meetings and in public events.

What made these strategies limited? We have witnessed that here ‘organisational’ matters had a much larger role than individuals’ motivation and incentives, as in the literature following Olson’s (1965) legacy. Keeping the contact list and the organisational structures up-to-date, writing and sharing the meetings’ minutes, distributing flyers, managing social media pages, and writing and submitting formal requests

to the City for events and activities are only a few of the key tasks that guarantee the organisation’s both inclusivity and consistency. They all require a ‘relatively’ significant amount of attention, time, and expertise, which ‘relatively’ refers to the amount that can be provided by residents of a distressed neighbourhood or staff of very busy and understaffed NGOs. From what we have observed, issues of consistency and inclusivity are not intrinsic problems of a spontaneous civic organisation but more a consequence of the organisational fragility of such an organisation.

Esposito presents, as former examples of instituting organisations, XX-century mass political parties or workers’ unions: not exactly cases of ‘spontaneous’ and volunteer-based committees or collaboratives, but rather highly structured organisations with an expert staff committed to specific tasks aimed at both consistency and inclusivity. Although the literature on commons has shown other possibilities beyond such structures, we think that the question of organisational capacity remains open.

In the OT Collaborative, individual motivations were aligned with the common goal of ‘caring for a public space, with others’ (Care Collective, 2020). This is necessary, but not sufficient, to sustain work done without staff or resources other than individuals’ volunteered time. Should this mean that we should take into consideration the possibility that, at least nowadays, spontaneous commoning is mostly, with

rare exceptions, intrinsically too fragile? We believe that a serious answer to such a question should imply a targeted line of research on the subject: one that focuses more on the dimension of maintaining the internal consistency of organisations (Argyris) with the need to widen the circle of inclusivity, while being able to have an impact on public institutions – making them more accountable – and the normative dimension (Esposito).

Assuming that the challenges are always going to be along the lines of organisational consistency and inclusivity, are there any strategies, tools, types of expertise that planners, or others, can put in place to support commoning processes from an instituting-organisational perspective? In sum, our interpretation of our own story generates an explicit plea for the scholarly community to consider a line of research aimed at explicitly addressing, both theoretically and empirically, this question as an urgent and important matter.

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