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## Preserving *the collective*. Strategies, challenges and fatigue in coping with individualization and multiple belongings

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**Abstract.** The process of individualization and the proliferation of multiple memberships have long undermined the classical model of the “synthesis structures” in which the multiple styles of engagement of activists and militants used to be embedded. Even if they do not mark their demise or the tout court disappearance of collective identities, they do impose changes in order to make possible the creation of collective actors (in the most proper sense) capable of embracing an increasing heterogeneity of their members. Within this scenario, the article focuses on how activists who are not resigned to the fact that individualization is an inevitable process attempt to preserve a collective dimension as the core of their political engagement. The need to address loose participation and the presence of multiple affiliations without being able to rely on past solutions implies first bringing the collective into play not as taken for granted, but rather as the stake of strategies that have to be elaborated: not so much a means, but rather increasingly an end of political action. Besides exploring the strategies put in place to achieve this goal, the article focuses on the difficulty and the fatigue of handling this challenge. Such a fatigue will be defined in terms of «active disaffection», to signify as much the disillusionment that even at a young age seems to unify the trajectories of militancy, as the commitment to find alternative paths toward a goal that is considered imperative.

**Keywords:** collective action, individualization, multiple belongings, militancy, collective identity.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

It has now been more than four decades since the topic of individualization and fragmentation of collective action entered the scholarly and, at least partly, the public debate. Even though many of the studies have focused on how mobilizations and conflicts have transformed in response to the challenges posed by the restructuring of the social and political fabric, the idea that we are facing a crisis of collective action continues to remain in the background (Wagenaar 2019; Stout 2019; Husted *et al.* 2023). The purpose of this article is not to elaborate on the validity of such an assumption, often suspended between stereotypes and more careful analysis and surrounded by a halo of pessimism when not resignation. Yet, the challenges and transforma-

tions that this debate has brought to light provide a starting point from which our research question originates. Indeed, the goal of this article is to reflect on how those activists who are not resigned to the fact that individualization is an inevitable process attempt to preserve a collective dimension as the core of their political engagement. To do so, we chose as our object of analysis young activists and militants – operating in the contemporary leftwing political activism from below – for whom political activity plays a central role in daily life. Although with a variety of nuances, these actors are prone to regard “the collective” in its full and multifaceted meaning as an indispensable feature of political action, and thus as something that is first and foremost to be defended and pursued in the face of an adverse scenario.

Besides exploring the strategies put in place to achieve this goal, we chose to focus on the difficulty and the fatigue of handling this challenge without trusting the forms and tools of former political repertoires – more specifically the *synthesis strategies* that, in the past, maintained the different fronts and themes of political action within a single framework. The need to address loose participation and the presence of multiple affiliations without being able to rely on past solutions implies first bringing the collective into play not as taken for granted, but rather as the stake of strategies that have to be elaborated: not so much a means, but rather increasingly an end of political action. Moreover, different paths to the collective implies diverse kind of obstacles – and therefore fatigue – that militants must face also at the individual level. The category we will use to describe the attitude of purposeful detachment toward militancy fatigue, a detachment turned into a resource, is that of «active disaffection». By this expression, we want to signify as much the disillusionment and fatigue that even at a young age seems to unify the paths of militancy, as the commitment to find alternative courses toward a goal that is considered imperative.

The strategies that we will account for through interviewees’ words are very different and have often already been highlighted in previous research. Some follow the path of direct social action (Bosi and Zamponi 2015) and the “politicization of everyday life” (Zamponi and Bosi 2018; Roussos 2019). Others seek to reach the collective using a single-issue claim as a lens to understand and criticize social relations as a whole (Benford and Snow 2000). Some more try to rebuild an organizational structure far from the former models, by reinventing the solutions of grassroots neighborhood committees, self-organized unions, or even political autonomous coordination with a homogeneous ideological identity. Despite the differences, all of these solutions express

a clear awareness of the impossibility of thematizing collectivity as it was in the past: the breakdown of old *molar* social and political subjects is taken as a starting point that, however, does not prevent the development of a strong and global political perspective of social change. Similarly, as we have already mentioned, claims as the ones related to racialization or gender inequality are not formulated by the militants interviewed as identity politics, but as tools of a general questioning of social contradictions, from labor to housing policies. This kind of sensibility also leads, in some cases, to an explicit criticism of the leftwing positions that face these problems as cultural and moral issues.

Moreover, the different strategies of defense and reinvention of the collective generate practical problems, tensions, and “fractures” that have to be managed, such as the relation between newcomers and more experienced militants, the communication problems between different political backgrounds and belongings or the possible stresses resulting from the presence of different levels of commitment and effort. Besides that, there is a general consideration of time management and the stress of militant work.

This article is the result of a research conducted in 2022 on a spectrum of militant trajectories within the grass-roots social activism landscape in the city of Turin. The study is based on fifteen semi-structured interviews of young people aged from 20 to 32, involved in various forms of political action outside of political parties and large union structures, active in groups ranging from feminism to environmentalism and associationism in the educational sector. As stated before, this variety of claims and spheres of interventions is kept together by a cross-cutting commitment to managing the collective dimension in the face of a general pulverization of the classical political structures.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND. THE CHALLENGES OF INDIVIDUALIZATION AND MULTIPLE BELONGINGS

The profound transformations of collective action that have taken shape with the decline of the Fordist model and the boost of globalization have long been the subject of extensive scientific literature, as well as the changes in individual participation. This debate, which due to its extent cannot be fully reconstructed in these pages, highlighted the decline of traditional forms of political action and outlined a scenario distinguished by an increasing fragmentation. These changes are effectively summarized by Castells’ position, which by extremiz-

ing their features depicts social movements in the network society as «ephemeral, either retrenched in their inner worlds, or flaring up for just an instant around a media symbol» (1996: 3). Leaving aside the pessimistic perspective, which, as Della Porta (2005a) notes, tends to underestimate the new forms of opposition, conflict, and mobilization that globalization has triggered, such a portrayal has its roots in well-known and widely agreed processes of transformation of society and politics, first and foremost that of individualization.

For the purposes of this analysis, it is useful to recall two of the main dimensions of this polysemic concept. Indeed, on one hand, it can be framed in terms of “differentiation”, determined by the fragmentation of social classes and the proliferation of working and social positions, which makes it «increasingly difficult to add up citizen demands and call the total sum a ‘common’ interest because our needs are now more differentiated and tailor-made» (Micheletti 2002: 5).

On the other hand, the idea of individualization can be better described in terms of “responsibilization”. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) put it, we are facing an institutionalized imbalance between the (disembedded) individual and the global problems, in which the Western society «tells us to seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions» (*Ibidem*: XXII).

The outcomes of this profound change are far from the stereotype of the «me-first society» (*Ibidem*), but nevertheless imply a radical transformation to the way collective identities are built and collective action takes place. Even before that, a primary responsibility concerns the definition of individual identities, since as Melucci (1995) notes, the traditional coordinates of personal identity weaken, and «it becomes difficult to state with certainty that “I am X or Y”: the question “Who am I?” constantly presses for an answer» (*Ibidem*: 137). As a consequence of this indefiniteness:

*Individuals find themselves enmeshed by multiple bonds of belonging created by the proliferation of social positions, associative networks, and reference groups. They enter and leave these systems much more often and much more rapidly than they used to in the past. They become migrant animals in the labyrinths of the metropolis, travelers of the planet, nomads of the present. In reality or in the imagination, they participate in an infinity of worlds. And each of these worlds has a culture, a language and a set of roles and rules that one must adapt to whenever she migrates from one to another (ivi: 136)*

As we will see in the following sections, therefore, individuals are not only free to choose their identity and affiliations but they are actually obliged to do so. Moreo-

ver, as Lash (2002: ix) notes in his commentary on Beck: «individual must choose fast, must – as in a reflex – make quick decisions».

Coupled with the end of the «great narratives» (Lyotard 1984) and the rise of the so-called “post ideological approach” (Davies *et al.* 1999; Freedman 2005; Žižek 2000) – of which individualization is both cause and consequence – these restructuring processes give rise to a style of participation increasingly oriented towards non-hierarchical and non-bureaucratic, transient and less time-consuming models, characterized by weak memberships (Wuthnow 1998; Micheletti 2002). Such a change often causes a shift not only towards single-issue movements but towards the form of single-event mobilization (Alteri, Leccardi and Raffini 2017).

Through the effective label of «individualized collective action», Micheletti (2002) captures this transformation, noting that:

*Individual citizens do not seek a political home that takes care of their interests for them. Instead, they either use established political housing as a base to work with their own preferences and priorities or create their own political homes as a self-assertive responsibility taking response. An important difference between this logic and the traditional one is that individual citizens do not need to join and show loyalty toward interest articulating structures to become involved in politics and society, i.e., show commitment to causes and assume responsibility (Ibidem: 8)*

Such an approach makes it possible to combine individual and general interests, pursuing one’s political goals without giving up the virtues of a good citizen (Wahlen 2018; see also Micheletti 2003; Stolle and Micheletti 2013).

The transformations in the forms of individual participation briefly outlined so far have repercussions on the structure of collective actors, reinforcing and taking to a higher level many of the features that had already been highlighted in the extensive debate on the so-called New Social Movements.

Beyond the well-known attention to postmaterialist values (Inglehart 1990), or the combination of symbolic action in the cultural sphere and instrumental action in the political sphere (Cohen 1985; Buechler 1995), what seems to remain highly topical is the often fragile process of constructing collective identities and identifying group interests (which are no longer structurally determined) and the variety of temporary networks underlying every form of mobilization. Collective action, therefore, has «temporary character, may involve different actors, may move to different areas of the system» (Melucci 1982: 7).

However, as noted by Hamel and Maheu (2004: 265) the complexity of this new scenario marked, among many other things, by the boost of globalization and ICT, has made recent forms of collective action «more complex, more diverse, more fragmented than new social movements». Moreover, the issue of identity gained unprecedented importance. Therefore, social movements necessarily have to take into account the ethnic, cultural and gender instances of their members to survive (*Ibidem*).

Such an objective is made even more difficult by the spread of multiple belongings and multiple affiliations (Della Porta 2005b; Della Porta and Diani 2006; Diani 2009; Della Porta and Mattoni 2014).

This trait is not new either, and has seen its relevance grow with the rise of single-issue movements and the development of networks. In recent decades, however, it seems to have reached unprecedented dimensions, and at least partly new characteristics (Diani and Mische 2015). What is more relevant for the sake of this analysis is to distinguish this phenomenon from “mere” connections between different militant groups, or occasional participation in protest events. In Della Porta’s (2005b: 239) words: «this convergence is far from sporadic or merely tactical: more and more, activists are simultaneously members of various and heterogeneous associations and groups».

Membership is, of course, a much more intense relationship than participation, and therefore implies a greater commitment and calls into question the level of the identity of the militants. And it is exactly for this reason that multiple affiliations can be seen at the same time as a resource and a risk. On the one side, indeed, militants with more than one membership can facilitate networks, cooperation and innovation between groups (Diani 2009) by occupying the so-called “structural holes” (Burt 2004). On the other side, however, they are responsible for the growing heterogeneity within movements, raising the issue of the management of diversity (Reger 2002).

Dealing with the different identities that are included in collective actors can therefore be seen as one of the most relevant tasks for contemporary social movements (Gamson 1996), as well as one of the most significant consequences of the individualization and fragmentation process described above.

The feminist movement offers excellent insights into how solutions to these differences have been sought within collective actors. In particular, the concept of intersectionality has represented a valuable resource. Terriquez and colleagues (2018: 278), indeed, note that: «intersectionality can function as: (1) a diagnostic frame

to help activists make sense of their own multiply-marginalized identities; (2) a motivational frame to inspire action; and (3) a prognostic frame that guides how activists build inclusive organizations and bridge social movements».

In more general terms, the process of frame extension can be seen as a solution to the problem of pluralization of identities (Benford and Snow 2000). Expanding the goals of collective action, and more broadly the visions of social change, can indeed offer the possibility of incorporating different viewpoints, traditions of militancy and material conditions. However, this movement, which goes in the opposite direction to that of “specialization” and the pursuit of single issues, includes in itself all the contradictions that had led in the past to the overcoming of encompassing ideological cores.

Empirical research in this regard shows a kind of cyclical dynamic: while extension is at first a successful strategy for managing heterogeneity, it runs the risk over time of giving rise to new conflicts over ideological purity (*Ibidem*; see also McCallion and Maines 1999).

Beyond the definition of the movement’s ideological core and its general claims, the choice of repertoires of action can also be a resource for coping with internal heterogeneity and differentiation. As we will see in the next section, in the case of direct social action, the «focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself» (Bosi and Zamponi 2015: 369) fosters the cooperation with militants with different backgrounds (Giannini and Pirone 2019).

Whatever strategies are adopted to cope with them, or the repercussions in terms of the effectiveness of collective action, the consequences of the processes of fragmentation, individualization and multiple memberships also manifest themselves at the level of individual well-being. Managing diversity is indeed first and foremost an onerous and time-consuming task, which if disregarded can cause unease and disaffection among militants. If many researches on activist and militant burn-out in the past had highlighted the risk of overly strong ties and closed relations (Klatch 2004), more recent studies highlight how: «in organizations that bring people of different convictions together, relations can be strained by disagreements over substance or strategy. Conflicts of ego, or conflicts at all, are not always dealt with, and the way activists treat each other can be a source of exhaustion» (Cottin-Marx 2023: 160).

The task, and the fatigue, of finding one’s way to collective action – which we will explore in the next sections – is therefore a crucial element for the understanding of the contemporary scenario.

### 3. IN SEARCH OF THE COLLECTIVE. STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME DISILLUSION AND DISAFFECTION

Within the general process of fragmentation of the leftwing political activism from below, the collective dimension of social and political action is still an unavoidable issue for highly committed militants. Within our selected sample of actors, for whom as we stated above political activity is a pivotal element of individual identity, the concept of “collective” takes on at least two different nuances. The first is that of countering: «individualism, the unbridled competition in which we find ourselves, this scope of values [...] it’s this thing that causes distortions like, let’s say, “I don’t use the facemask because the facemask infringes on my personal freedom, and I don’t vaccinate because if I don’t want to vaccinate that’s my business”» (Case 2).

The second nuance taken on by the concept of the collective, on the other hand, is more related to the need to identify a horizon for the transformation of society as a whole that transcends individual claims and specific interests, and which of course cannot be reached through individual virtuous behavior: «maybe it all starts from an external stimulus that makes you think about stuff that you maybe process on your own and you manage to... I don’t want to say “bring to a higher level of abstraction” but to connect to a broader plan, isn’t it? But if there is not this passage of understanding everything is difficult [...] that of self-referentiality in my opinion is a big problem» (Case 4). «It’s not that you can solve the problems of climate change by recycling waste in your house, you have to solve it by making decisions together about what economic system we want, and what energy system we want» (Case 5).

Hence the commitment not to relegate oneself in a unilateral and unique field of struggle («do not monotematize»): «I would like to try to do a lot more also so that I don’t monotematize myself. It’s something I’m trying to do, for example now there is the “Climate social camp” program, which is very nice. I also started to attend another association, to participate a little bit more [...] And of course the more “public” moments of the movements of the city» (Case 8).

These visions of the collective have difficulty in finding fulfillment in current forms of political action, not only in the institutional one. The search for a way to achieve them, therefore, is not only an unavoidable task but stems from a feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction, which seems to be a background pattern of every trajectory and biographical path of activists. In this respect, the set of experiences collected in our interviews shows how this «disaffection» – sometimes disillusion

– doesn’t turn into a refusal or an alternative to political engagement but is rather a trigger for changing and reshaping the forms of political action from below.

The issue of disaffection is indeed raised, by the activists interviewed, as a consequence of a burnout in a former political engagement; as the result of direct analysis of the limits, the self-referentiality or the heavy performing dimension of classical militancy (often linked to a gender-related division of roles); or lastly as the effect of a strategical vision of the present crisis of the radical leftwing politics as a whole. The first aspect, related to the exhaustion of personal psychological and motivational resources, along with the need to find less time-consuming and performance-intensive ways of engagement, is particularly explicit in some interviews: «this thing of always and constantly being available, and of the fact that it was impossible to back out once because you’ve got your own shit [...] this stuff of hyper-mega-responsibility of individual people and being hyper-performative really h24... I find it completely unsustainable. This stuff that there was a dimension in my eyes that was morbid [...] as an outsider was really exhausting» (Case 8). «In the end do you want people to understand you or do you want confirmation of yourself and how militant you are?» (Case 4).

In any case, this disaffection is dealt with outside of the conventional images of the single-issue engagement or away from a renouncement to general, collective and comprehensive political organization. Instead, such disaffection opens the room for the continuous fatigue of the reinvention and rebuilding of the collective as a challenge. The collective dimension is no longer taken for granted by the militants but is the object of a constant effort – if not the main effort – that may imply the redefinition of oneself as an activist:

*The point in my opinion is that the real intelligence is clearly to be able to be ductile enough to change even a little bit modes, theoretical references and analytical tools. Because anyway I think that, I think that the crisis in which we are of the traditional forms of militancy that there is in Italy if not even in Europe, however certainly in Italy, is due to the fact that, also let’s say, in addition to the issue of very harsh repression in our country, however also to an inability to radically question ourselves. And also this I think is one, should be one of the virtues of those who do political activity of this kind, so a constant questioning, a constant reworking of what the tools are and above all not being so afraid to abandon assumptions, theoretical pillars if you think that they actually no longer serve either to explain how the world works or to, let’s say, give you tools to act. Because it is clear that we are in a different phase from what there might have been 40 years ago, it is undeniable that in the last few years we have witnessed an*

*epochal sequence, so it reshuffles the cards on the table ... and in the face of this of revolutions they have to, precisely, precisely question themselves by arriving completely naked. So without having too many preconceptions and searching.* (Case 12)

This effort follows several lines of development that bring to solutions that are often impure and intertwined, and that entail different kinds of fatigue and labor related to the search for the collective. Such fatigues are discharged both on individuals and on the collective structure. On one hand, the single militant has to combine the various political claims and levels of intervention. On the other hand, the collective structures need to give a general frame to these various forms of engagement and to adapt themselves to this fragile balance of scopes and sensibilities.

The first way to face the disaffection from classical activism and search for the collective dimension is based on the idea of «politicization of everyday life» (Roussos 2019) and on the model of “direct social action” (Bosi and Zamponi 2015). Activists apply an ethical approach to the trajectories of social aggregation and work that aims to keep a strong connection with the political claims of social activism. Aside from the idea of directly transforming the social and answering people’s needs, great relevance is attributed to the idea of promoting a logic of “subtraction” (Naegler 2018) according to which the resistant potential is found in the creation of alternatives outside the dominant power of the market and the state (*Ibidem*).

In this range of solutions, within our sample we can observe, for instance, the path related to a football club and the reality of auto-organized sport from below (sport popolare), the experience of engagement in a small «third sector» group, grounded in a popular neighborhood of Turin, but also the case of a popular committee involved in several social struggles, or in alternative agriculture and trade. In all these cases, we can see a strong feeling of estrangement from the modes of intervention and languages of the conventional leftwing groups. In some cases, such an estrangement simply consists in the search for more effective and inclusive models of communication, and involvement of less politicized actors:

*the starting assumption was just that, almost the majority of people all came from political paths that had become outwardly incomprehensible, unintelligible and so it was based on the assumption of ... you have to, if we want to have a broad discourse you can't oppose it like: I'll explain what you have to do, I, come with me... no! That is, with people you have to talk to them though, I mean, you can't put yourself on a higher step because maybe... Not because*

*you are the entrepreneur of the day but because you are a militant.* (Case 4)

In others, it becomes the attempt to modulate a political intervention choosing a field of action that allows getting rid of the rigid spectrum of political identities and labels spread in leftwing social movements. For instance, on a city scale:

*So also this mix between various realities has always been interesting and maybe also little understood by all the other realities that have... they never understood who we were with, what side we were on, then in this city either you're a or you're b or you're c, they always have to categorize you. We ... I think they always had a hard time categorizing us.* (Case 3)

Liberation from too narrow identities – whether self-imposed or externally attributed – thus becomes the opposite of an exit strategy, in Hirschman’s (1970) sense, from the collective dimension. Rather, it is seen as a precondition to overcome the fragmentation that such strong categories imply.

The second solution to the issue of collective organization in a context of individualization of social action is the attempt to reach the generality while starting from the point of view of what is currently called «single issue» battles and revendications. In this case the fields of antiracism or feminism, for instance, are not perceived as a particular and minority struggle, such as in the ideology of «identity politics», that supposes an opposition between the political conflicts about race, gender, or nationality and the old frame of class struggles, but as a lens to access the social relations of power as a whole. We can see – within the interviews – both in the analysis of an activist engaged in a building occupied by migrant families (Case 6) and in the statements of the militants of the feminist network «Non una di meno» (Case 7 and 8), the conviction that isolating the contradictions of gender inequality and «racialization» from the totality of social issues such as housing problems, work, and exploitation, drives to a depowering of these battles and a capture of them in a liberal frame.

*and understand that anti-racism is not THE battle, as also it seems to me that some and some are wrong from this point of view, because one cannot make an anti-racist collective that deals only with racism, anti-racism is a lens that one has to equip oneself with in every sphere of life, whether it is work, whether it is housing, whether it is precisely gender conflicts rather than school ... [. ...] Sure, because what's the point of going in front of the region to say “you guys made racist laws” because people who don't have five years of residence in the same municipality can't*

*access services, or because the «Lega Nord» says what it says...it serves little purpose, maybe it serves white people because then they feel good about their conscience, black people serve no purpose. In the sense that doing anti-racist battles means not getting screwed over by your landlord who takes advantage of you, it means doing... ask for non-discriminatory access to health care as well as access to social services. (Case 6)*

*It always seemed to be a bit of the thing, the side issue, the issue that was not important, the issue that was not urgent, that was distracting, that took away energy, that was always treated as an issue in itself and never as, precisely, as a lens, a perspective to be adopted to look then at all the paths in which we were and that we were going through. (Case 7)*

According to this approach, the so-called «single issue» claims become the ground of a strong and general sphere of collective organization that can meet other specific issues and be intertwined with them in a new form of coordination. This is the case of the relationship and encounter between the activists of «Non una di meno» and the ones of «Fridays for future» (Case 5) and other environmentalist networks.

A third modulation of this «active disaffection» within the youth militancy in the radical left is the one related to the definition of new forms of synthesis structures, different from the political party, the traditional labor union or even the old types of social movement coordination. In these political paths – connected to anarchist or Marxist positions – the core of the engagement is the idea of an active minority capable of giving to the spontaneous social struggles a radical and «revolutionary» perspective on the capitalist system. According with this position, the collective feature of the action is not only useful but also necessary for it to be called political. Indeed, the possibility of forcing social struggles to the limits beyond which they can give rise to a more general critique of social relations is seen as the fruit of this collective elaboration and organization.

*There I always had this kind of interest, and so in this sense, my non-political approach (because in the end there was no political content) was simply me taking good and participating in the square moments. (Case 2)*

*Yes. Exactly. I believe that if I look back at my past experience there are a lot of things that I would have liked to have done differently, I still believe that if I did them, if we did them because then I was always within collective paths where the reasoning was always collective and collectivized, we did them in a certain way and that reasoning at the time also had their own dignity. Above all I recognize constancy which I think that is also a great revolutionary vir-*

*tue, and then consistency concerning some principles and some attempts at theorizing. (Case 12)*

In these experiences, that in the range of the interviews are represented by militants of political collectives and grassroots trade unions, the work of organization consists overall in preserving a link between the social intervention in broader realities of conflict – with the ability to communicate, enlarge the participation of non-militant subjects and avoiding the ideological and elitist closure – and on the other hand the militant minority. This aspect is particularly evident in the trajectories linked to labor struggles, which often see a dual organizational and assembly level, with different solutions to combine the two domains. From this perspective, the role of militants can be that of stimulus and strategic direction concerning broader claim mobilizations (Case 9), of legal and union support for common claims (Case 11), or of autonomous political contribution to existing social struggles (Case 12).

*Actually let's say that precisely, we divide a little bit between our own assembly where anyway we organize and bring up ideas, ours of comrade riders, however then the main thing is to also include colleagues and female colleagues. So at the same time we also have the extended assemblies, we can call them, then I don't like to call them that, but the assemblies also with other colleagues and female colleagues. Actually very often a lot of ideas also come from them, I mean for example when we blocked Glovo market for several days a few months ago. (Case 9)*

#### 4. EVERYDAY FATIGUES. MANAGING DIVERSITY AND HETEROGENEOUS COLLECTIVES

As we saw in the previous section, the search for the collective in a fragmented and individualized scenario requires, first and foremost, a continuous effort to elaborate and rethink the forms of aggregation and construction of political subjectivities. This effort is accompanied, at a more practical level, by a wide variety of “everyday fatigues” that emerge in the implementation phase of the strategies outlined so far, and which are a consequence of the diversification of militancy patterns and multiple memberships. Indeed, the heterogeneity of participants, both in terms of goals and styles of militancy, remains a challenge to manage. Two opposing styles emerge in this regard, although they share the continuous effort to find a balance between the individual and collective dimensions. Some of the groups analyzed split the two levels explicitly, to find a balance between them: «so maybe someone comes along saying “guys, there's this initiative here... let's go do it”, and we say that's fine

if you do it on a personal level, but the committee level it's a completely different stuff» (Case 3).

On the contrary, other militant experiences opt for stronger control over their members, based on the idea that defending the collective means finding the spaces of freedom within groups and assemblies, and not moving between different realities: «I found big spaces of freedom in my militancy, even though... how can I say... our way of doing politics is very “disciplined”. But still, I found this also as a stimulus, the idea of overcoming individualism in favor of a more collective life» (Case 6).

However, as studies of militant burnout have shown (Klatch 2004), this kind of closure and exclusive belonging may be seen as too burdensome a demand. The perception of this “traditional” fatigue is favored by the comparison with a scenario where it is no longer considered the “natural” form of participation and even more so for those who do not belong to the historical cores of the movements.

This does not mean that collective action spaces that, on the contrary, accept a greater degree of fluidity in defining membership and a greater heterogeneity of members are free from stress factors, albeit of a different nature. In fact, it is precisely the diversity and presence of different political backgrounds and affiliations that can lead to greater competitiveness within contexts characterized by shifting balances and hierarchies, which can eventually turn into self-referentiality:

*I always perceived the one within the “mixed spaces” that I went through it as a form of militancy that had a very strong performance dimension, that required an ability to stand, to place oneself in the assembly spaces and then also in the square spaces in a certain way. [...] it happened that maybe someone couldn't hold their own and maybe burst into tears in the assembly... at which point you lost any kind of credibility and political authority, you were stigmatized a little bit as the hysterical lunatic who was going off the rails. (Case 7)*

Beyond the competitive dimension of open spaces of militancy, multiple memberships require individuals to have – or strive to build – great capacities to reshape codes, languages and roles. This is because, as Della Porta (2005b) noted, a plurality of affiliations is not synonymous with freeriding or “cherry picking” but implies real belonging to each of the collectivities of which one is part. Therefore, it requires managing multiple political identities without “mixing them up” too much. This appears necessary, as the following excerpt shows, in order not to jeopardize individual membership. Slipping from the condition of (albeit non-exclusive) member of a group to that of “guest”, representative of other realities, is indeed a real risk, whose con-

sequences can affect the effectiveness of collective action, in addition to the reputation of individuals:

*There are definitely people who can manage this heterogeneity in participation in other collectives. And so you can manage it well and not mix things up too much. Instead, there are those who have more difficulty in managing this task, so they for instance do a committee stuff, but they come in to “speak for others” and that definitely creates stuff ... non-positive stuff! (Case 3)*

This element is particularly interesting, and results in the construction of a kind of negotiated political identity (Faas 2016), in which individuals try to balance their own needs for loose membership with those of groups that, by contrast, need a certain degree of uniformity and recognizability. As a result of this plural and multifaceted membership, several cleavages emerge within the groups, which require to be taken care of. The first is that between activists with previous militant experience and the newcomers, which exists also within newly formed groups. Indeed, the presence of a solid political background carries the risk that the voice of the latter will go unheard due to a lack of practical skills:

*Yes, there were complications, especially in the beginning, ... let's say that the main issue was precisely that there are guys who are at the first experience yet and guys who instead have been doing it for a long time. Because in the assemblies you would see who was throwing out of an idea and who instead already had a clear discourse, and it was easier for them to pass that line there and so that was tiring at the beginning, [...] Some objectively drifted a little bit away, but most of them fit. (Case 5)*

Preserving the voice of those entering politics for the first time is considered important not only as a matter of internal justice but also to defend the contribution this inexperience makes to the collective by breaking established balances and helping to overcome tensions. As one of the interviewees notes, “in the end [due to their presence] you get along very well in those assemblies” (Case 7).

A second and closely related fracture line, which manifests itself especially in cases of direct social action, is that between those who place a strong political value on the experiences and those, on the other hand, who experience them as moments of aggregation or as services. The challenge is the task of disseminating political content, in a broad meaning, without imposing these claims on people who are concerned only with specific activities of the respective associations, and avoiding an overly political connotation of the spaces that may somehow be discouraging:



*There was a struggle to interface then to people outside of these bubbles, outside of these, these dynamics, right? That was kind of always the problem. Not really interfacing with the ordinary people in the city, with the people. (Case 8)*

*But precisely, though, the more we are, the harder it is to get the concept of where you are, what reality you're in, across to everybody. But it's also not too necessary, I mean it's right that each person is XXX for their own reasons, it's right that they understand where they are, however... If it used to be an association of 20 people and now we are 200, you can't keep the same format (Case 1)*

*For someone who is not used to political activist backgrounds and doesn't know the space, even the simple fact of being in a social center space can be a deterrent, somehow. Even the possibility of meeting some young dissident people, in unformal clothes and space, with a couch, many activities carried out in the corridor and on other floors can be problematic for the expected atmosphere. (Case 14)*

Lastly, the defense of the collective dimension in its broadest sense, that is, including an idea of a general transformation of society (see section 2), requires the work of “educating” and “directing” those who participate moved by a specific and limited interest:

*and so it becomes easier to involve them... however, it is difficult to explain the fact that yes, we don't want project XX [of urban redevelopment], I take it as an example, however, the problem is not project XX, it is in general the management of public money. Families for now care about that area. That is, so we are always there, that is on what people really care about. That is, when they then go and touch their garden at that point maybe they get active. But even there they are a little bit to be addressed. (Case 3)*

Whatever the cleavages to be overcome, the search for the collective in an individualized scenario marked by multiple memberships thus requires patient work to connect, construct common languages, and amalgamate repertoires of action:

*there are other groups involved that then by the way are very close to us, and then there are a whole series of new people also outside of the militancy circles, which is a very very nice thing, but of course we all have different ways of being even in the assembly, of running things, so sometimes, it is difficult. (Case 8)*

*There is also space for a wide range of perspectives, very different from what you would have by staying in your privileged comfort zone. This, however, needs a systematic discussion about the language through which you interface these people, in the way you interface communication, practices, etc. that not necessarily are demanded in the moment in which everything is a political project shared*

*with people sharing the same lexicon, the same principles and the same retail. (Case 15)*

## 5. CONCLUSION. STILL LOOKING FOR A HOME

The trajectories of militancy analyzed throughout the article show how the absence of a collective dimension that can be taken for granted entails a surplus of effort both at the level of elaborating new forms of action and at the level of management practices. Far from being able to focus only on the goals of political action, militants face a constant reflection and reinvention of their practices, which sometimes can turn from a means to an end in itself. This is why in the development of the article, we stress on the experience of fatigue that is entwined in the reality of political militancy today. The main feature that emerges from the interviews is a kind of political behavior that reacts to the cumulation of stress and fatigues related to political engagement in a way that is different and alternative both to the retreat into private life and to the shared experience of «militant burnout» (Cottin-Marx 2023). In the set of political and biographic trajectories observed through the interviews, emerges a form of «disaffection» toward the militant habits and an awareness of the general crisis of the form of political activity that doesn't culminate in a passive attitude or in the choice of a free-rider approach. Rather, it is possible to see a punctual thematization of the decline of former political identities and methods (Case 12) and, besides that, even a strategical analysis about the stress and the personal sacrifices that a certain way of activism brings (Cases 7 and 8).

This strategical attitude aims to overcome and reshape the militant forms without abandoning the militant membership itself; in the paths related to the feminist sphere, in particular, there is a conscious willingness to include the elements of personal discomfort and private overload of militant commitments as part of the collective political reflection to be addressed methodically and not left on the sidelines:

*And precisely, there was no room to be political and to be militant in any other way than, precisely, conforming to that model, which was a model that was also very much based on the ability to speak out in public, to do political analysis in a certain way, to talk about certain and certain issues, because (even there) if you tried to talk about even maybe your personal discomforts.... Now, you see, feminism to me has allowed me to recognize the politicity of even personal discomforts, that is, the slogan “the personal is political” is something that has changed my life, that I recognize that in those spaces there for example has always been a great lack, the possibility of being able to politicize*

*our personal experiences, even our personal discomforts, that is, even our discomforts related to how we did politics.*  
(Case 7)

More explicitly, the common trait between the strategies chosen to face the crisis of political militancy – is that the pulverization of identities and «political homes» is recognized but not accepted as something unchangeable. Far from Micheletti's model of individualized collective action, these militants do search for a political home. Indeed, all the aforementioned strategies are partial and experimental solutions to rebuild or renovating political such homes, even if multiple and not all-inclusive. Indeed, in the words of the militants interviewed, a skepticism toward the post-modern idea of activism, limited to parceled and temporary causes, is very evident. The element of responsabilization highlighted by the studies on individualization reaches here a higher level: those who do not resign to fragmentation find themselves having to find solutions not only for themselves but also for those who seem to have abdicated a reflection on “the collective”. Hence a disaffection that plays out on two different levels, since it is not only directed at the old forms of participation but also at the limitations of current ones.

As a consequence of this reasoning, the stances expressed in this article blur the boundary between the former political repertoires – and with the organizational structures that these repertoires brought with them – and a form of political action that is supposed to be limited to a specific, local and particular situation. Militants themselves seem to incorporate a vision of the relevance of the collective borrowed from past experiences but cast in completely changed contexts. All these stances aim to overtake their isolated field of intervention to reach a broader level and to realize forms of general coordination that allow effective and stronger political action. These trajectories show a way to rethink and change the pattern of a political home – together with its strategical tools – rather than abandon the idea of a political home in itself and embrace the current dispersion of activist campaigns.

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