Liminalities: Social Vulnerabilities Between Participatory Processes and Digital Space in the Neoliberal Era

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Abstract. This article explores the development directions of liminal spaces and cities as a whole within the broader framework of neoliberalism in the Italian metropolitan context. First, neoliberalism was defined and considered in the context of liminal spaces and urban development, according to the international literature perspective. Then, with specific reference to the Italian case, through semi-structured interviews, it was found that liminal spaces, despite facing marginalisation, translocalisation and defamiliarisation, acted as antagonists and nuclei of resistance to the encroaching framework of neoliberalism. The article also explores the role of digital ecosystems as tools for empowerment; it also emphasizes the role of liminal spaces in fostering communitarianism while resisting the change experienced and brought about by the surrounding urban spaces.

Keywords: neoliberalism, liminal spaces, digital ecosystems, urban spaces.

Scholarly discourse at the global level has extensively addressed the concept of the neoliberal city (Pinson and Morel Journel 2016), highlighting distinctive features in the context of the United States (Hackworth 2019) as well as in selected European case studies (Chevalier 2023). Earlier, the work of Henry Lefebvre (1999) highlighted the role of urban spaces as relational places, while David Harvey's analysis focused on the disruptive role of neoliberalism in the transformation of cities.

Understanding the directions of cities' development and their relationships with transformations in the public sphere is impossible unless viewed within the broader framework of neoliberalism. However, defining neoliberalism is necessary, since there remain, even in the academic literature, several ambiguities that often result from ideological differences. Particularly, we can identify different interpretative frameworks and at least two defining ambiguities.

1. THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF DEFINITIONS

The first ambiguity refers to an (increasingly narrow) area that considers neo-liberalism a sort of "invention" by those who would not have understood

that it is nothing more than an evolutionary direction of liberalism. In this case, a conceptual overlap between classical liberalism and contemporary neo-liberalism is produced, often in bad faith. However, this is a stretch, since neo-liberalism is based on conceptual assumptions and economic practices very different from those of classical liberalism. The second defining ambiguity interprets neo-liberalism as a set of monetary economic policies, based on austerity logics, substantial marketisation of public life and "commodification" of social relations. A third perspective – which turns out to be more convincing – is one that assumes neoliberalism as a global political rationality that inverts the logic of capital, making it the new normal of social organisation, «to the point of making it the form of subjectivity and the norm of existence» (Dardot and Laval 2019: 5). This new global rationality not only reproduces social inequalities, but above all feeds itself with the systemic crises that it itself produces, and whose only (apparent) way out is the paradoxical re-proposition of those same recipes that provoked the permanent state of crisis, since «neoliberalism reproduces itself as it is» (Pope Francis 2020: 168). The idea that neo-liberalism constitutes global political rationality is consistent with the perspective of those who consider it a social image. Indeed, neoliberal global rationality can decline as an imagination that arises as an outcome of the narrative forms of new social stratifications. It feeds a reservoir of narratives that have also become established because of communicative ecosystems in which the struggle for control of opinion has become a diriment.

The use of the concept of the "imaginary" to define neoliberalism is also useful in terms of its application to "spaces" and "territories". Manfred Steger, for example, defines social imaginaries as «macromappings of social and political space through which we perceive, judge and act in the world, this mode of deep understanding provides the more general parameters within which people imagine their communal existence» (Steger 2008: 6; see also Blokker 2022).

It is precisely within the horizon of the neoliberal imaginary that new buzzwords have emerged, mostly related to the value of governance and its application. The success of the concept of "governmentality" represents an important step in affirming the new global rationality of neoliberalism. The concept of governmentality has progressively replaced that of governance. It is perceived to be too closely linked to a medium- to long-term political project and, therefore, intrinsically dangerous because it was inevitably based on a kind of "democratic design". Governmentality has thus become rooted in values typical of business, such as competition, self-interest and the "need" for strong decentralisation,

understood as the possibility of individual empowerment and the substantial devolution of central state power to local units that are more easily controlled (if only because of their size). At this level, one notes the weight of depoliticisation processes located at the intersection of different variables and constitutes an important point of convergence between new technocratic paradigms and contemporary populism. This is an unexpected convergence, but one that is not surprising, especially considering the development of what has been termed "government populisms", especially in the context of right-wing or centre-right governments. Even the rhetoric on the "light state" has been contradicted by instances of the "neo-liberalisation of the state", which has become "heavy" again, provided that it benefits the few; Yves Sintomer (2010) had lucidly foreseen this, effectively pointing out that the light state is such, in reality, on the social and economic level, but not on the military level where, on the contrary, the increase in expenditure and "weight" has led to a true hypertrophy of the system. This political horizon includes hyper-securitarian drives, the demonisation of democratic conflict (Harvey 2005) and the substantial expulsion of vulnerable or fragile subjects from public life.

2. COMMUNITIES AND URBAN PRACTICES

The disintegration of the traditional community is probably a fact of post-industrial societies, where the process of individualisation and fragmentation of the experience of everyday life has been profound both in intensity and in its incorporation into collective imagination and memory.

However, communities have not disappeared but have undergone transformation and multiplication: the very idea of a community understood as a stable structure, continuous over time and with well-defined internal relations, has been replaced by more dynamic definitions. The differences between traditional communities and modern societies in sociological studies can be summarised in the dichotomies of stability/uncertainty, temporal continuity/discontinuity and stable internal relations/multiple relations. However, if we remain within this distinction, we lose sight of the transformations that have taken place in the last three decades, which have multiplied the types of possible communities, the places where communities can be made (onsite, digital, onsite and digital together), the density and quality of relationships and the differentiated temporality.

Spatiality has assumed centrality in people's social and media practices (Couldry 2004; Couldry and Hepp

2017; Couldry 2022), transforming the way of doing community towards greater flexibility and widespread molecularization on the one hand and towards unprecedented forms of social innovation and resistance on the other, at least in some respects. For example, some micro-community experiences also seem to have taken up the characteristics of the workers' mutualities of the late 19th century, but with a focus on ties with the territory rather than on ties born within the work context or summing up both aspects, as in the case of the collective linked to the experience of the GKN of Campi Bisenzio near Florence, which was born from work experience, has turned into a sort of modern Workers' Mutual Aid Society, capable of also moving into the sphere of training and cultural promotion in the territory.

Urban spaces are not only those where contemporary community experiences can be traced, but also those where it is possible to trace a higher relational density among the members that make it up, or to which they say and feel they belong. The feeling of belonging to a community puts the question of emotions at the centre, which becomes relevant for many experiences born and consolidated within digital spaces (Papacharissi 2014). On the other hand, on critical positions regarding the role of digital worlds as emotional and communal spaces, Sherry Turkle (2016; 2019) highlights the pitfalls and problems of isolation associated with digital media practices. Regardless of the positions regarding the role played by digital, emotional and value-based belonging is a further element that changes how community is made today, adding a dimension of complexity that, although present in the past, today takes on unexpected centrality. Regarding relational issues, Andorlini *et al.*, (2019: 9-16), referring to experiences of social innovation, speak of places with high relational intensity, in which a captured value is produced, capable of producing the difference between territories according to relational density. This value, moreover, is closely connected to the concept of "capital bridging" (Putnam 2000; Woolcock 2001), which, precisely, builds bridging links between people.

Building on the recent reflections of Stephansen and Trerè (2020: 3-22), the concept of social practice was conceived in an attempt to overcome the dualism between structure and *agency*, determinism and voluntariness (Shove *et al.* 2012: 3) and challenges prevailing ways of thinking about subjectivity and sociality. Practice Theory encompasses a variety of approaches. Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) habitus theory and Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, which in different ways attempted to reconcile the structure/agency dualism in social theory, are commonly regarded as "first genera-

tion" theories of practice. The turn of the 21st century saw the emergence of a "second generation" of practice theorists who sought to systematise and extend practice theory by refining definitions and elaborating on the relationship between practices, social order and social change (Schatzki 1996; Schatzki *et al.* 2001; Reckwitz 2002; Spaargaren *et al.* 2016).

Although there is no universally agreed upon definition of practices, most social practice theorists agree that they encompass a combination of activities and shared material and cultural objects.

In a more elaborate definition, Reckwitz describes a practice as:

> a type of routinised behaviour that consists of several, interconnected elements: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things and their use, basic knowledge in the form of understanding know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge (2002: 249).

Similarly, Shove *et al.* (2012) developed an understanding of practices that consists of three main elements: materials (objects, technologies and tangible physical entities), competencies (skills, know-how and technique) and meanings (symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations). A practice, therefore, is conceived as a block whose existence depends on the existence of these elements and specific interconnections (Reckwitz 2002: 249-50). Taking social practices as a starting point allows for open-ended questions about what people do about media and how these media-related practices combine and intersect with other social practices, thus facilitating an analysis of the broader social processes in which media practices are part (Couldry 2004, 2012).

In our reasoning, social and medial practices are deeply intertwined and constitute the "core" of social ties that can be traced within territorial communities, where different social ties operate, usually based on four variables (transactions, attachment, interdependencies and constraints), as in Taljia Blokland's (2017) theorisation.

3. URBAN AND COMMUNITY LIMINALITY

The research work we present focuses on "liminal spaces", defined as spaces characterised by both (1) processes of refiguration (Knoublach and Löw 2017) due to poly-contextualisation, deep mediatisation (Hepp 2020) and translocalisation (Hepp 2015), as well as by (2) processes of marginalisation, vulnerabilisation (Castel 1995; Brown *et al.* 2017), gentrification (Sennet 2018) and defamiliarisation (Blokland 2017; Blokland *et al.* 2022). A "liminal space" lies "on the border of two dominant

spaces, not fully part of either" (Dale and Burrell 2008). Spaces such as these are not easily defined in terms of use and are not clearly "owned" by a particular party. This is in direct contrast to dominant spaces that are defined by main uses, which have clear boundaries and where practices within them are intertwined with social expectations, routines and norms. These are spaces in transition where individual and collective identities remain fluid or anchored to the even deviant specificities of the territories; they belong to such spaces that they become familiar and are taken for granted in the landscape of everyday life (Blockland 2017: 54-60). We assume that when communities inhabit liminal spaces and consider them vital and meaningful in their everyday lives, they cease to be ambiguous spaces and become transitional dwelling places that give meaning to the activities, languages and instances that develop there (Casey 1993).

Liminal communities are refigured spaces undergoing profound transformation owing to both endogenous and exogenous phenomena, where the first major change concerns figuration. To analyse the process of the construction of social reality, Elias (1990) introduced the term "figuration" as a conceptual tool to grasp the complex problems of interdependence that the coexistence of large numbers of humans generates and how these problems are solved. Elias argues that social change is always partly a change at the figuration level. Following Elias, the fundamental idea is to understand the enduring social formations of human beings as figurations constituted by the interdependencies and interactions of the individuals involved. They can be characterised by a certain «balance of power» (Elias 1990: 131), i.e. by power relations constituted by the interdependencies themselves. The boundaries of each figuration are defined by the shared meaning that the individuals involved produce through interrelated social practices, which is also the basis of their mutual orientation. Liminal communities are understood as figurations of figurations (as several figurations coexist within them) in a transition. In addition to traditional figurations such as families, formal and informal interest groups, social conformations living in complete illegality (e.g. organised crime) or on the borders of legality (e.g. precarious undeclared and piecework work), social actors in civil society with organizational and management peculiarities, precarious small-scale crafts and entrepreneurial paths and formations constitute liminal communities.

Regardless of the value connotations we assign to the figures, they all experience external pressures for change and multiple internal pressures to find a new balance in the social practices of everyday life.

The second aspect that characterizes the process of the re-figuration of liminal communities, poly-contextualisation, refers precisely to the multiplication of contexts and frames to which people simultaneously react, sometimes creating overlaps, sometimes conflict, or even mutual indifference.

The presence of very different cultures and subcultures within the same social space is one of the most important concepts of co-contextualisation, as it has been fuelled in the last 30 years in Western countries by numerically significant migration processes (Ambrosini 2020). However, this is not the only cause because, for example, one should not underestimate both the emergence of sub-cultures linked to local specificities that have become rooted and radicalised. This is seen in the case of the presence of organised crime in some contexts in Southern Italy, and as Reckwitz (2020; 2021) points out, the growth and search for multiple singularities that have developed in almost all new social classes. Therefore, liminal communities cannot be enclosed in a place with well-defined boundaries; however, their singular and unique nature also allows Reckwitz's conceptual categories to be used to interpret the processes of change and evolution.

Another relevant aspect is social capital. Many liminal communities have a high intensity of social relations, but are more segregated than other communities, even spatially contiguous ones.

Rather than *bonding* or *bridging* social capital (Putnam 2000), it becomes more important to speak of segregated and privatised social capital (Blokland and Rae 2008: 23-39). In some cases, this type of social capital becomes a resource for liminal communities. For instance, when it is crucial to connect social practices to transform them into resistance practices. However, in other cases, this type of social capital is a brake on the potential development that could result from connections and confrontations/clashes with other communities (liminal or otherwise). That is, one can observe completely different actions, ties and social practices in geographically neighbouring spaces without having any kind of contact or relationship that can be classified as social capital. This tendency is typical of the processes of neo-liberalisation of society, which tend to weaken or break social cohesion. It is precisely on the dimension of social cohesion that the theme of universal vulnerability is grafted: «For theorists who adopt a 'universal' approach, vulnerability is a fundamental feature of the human condition, biologically imperative and permanent, but also linked to the personal, economic, social and cultural circumstances within which individuals
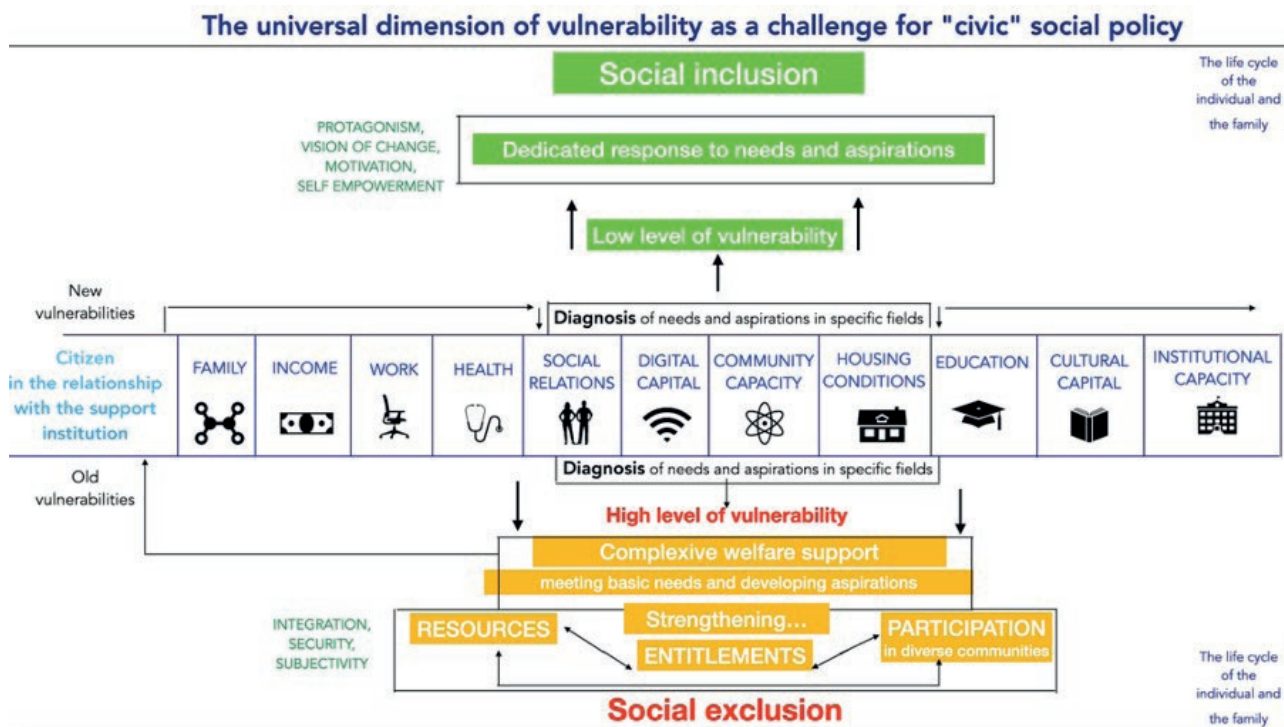
Figure 1. Universal vulnerability. *Source:* Karwacki and Volterrani 2024.

find themselves at different points in their lives» (Brown *et al.* 2017: 505).

Martha Fineman (2016: 13-23) elaborates on the idea of vulnerability by highlighting its universality as well as its dependence on relationships with other humans and on relationships with the communities to which they belong in terms of available goods (physical, relational, social, ecological, environmental and existential), both individually and collectively. In the latter case, transformation into common goods makes it possible to imagine a different response and reactivity concerning vulnerability because there is a mutualistic and collective element that sustains the individual. Within liminal communities, the vulnerability processes are relevant to all spheres of life. Social vulnerability (Castel 1995) is the path of impoverishment of a potential subject who can pass through life from the area of integration (insertion in a stable employment circuit and availability of solid relational support, especially family support) to the area of disenfranchisement faced by individuals in conditions of extreme poverty, characterised by processes of decay and self-abandonment, inability to control physical space, profound rupture of social ties and loss of the ability to convert goods into life opportunities. This transition occurs through microfractures in the participants' experiences, both at the work and relational lev-

els, generating situations of precariousness and fragility. This area of social vulnerability is strongly connected to the processes of widening inequalities typical of neoliberal rationality.

In Figure 1, the theme of vulnerability has been made more complex and articulated by adding participatory processes and resources in a broad sense and rights, as well as the question of the relationships between needs and aspirations (Appaduraj 2004) and the detailed articulation of the spheres of life where old and new vulnerabilities can arise, such as digital vulnerability, but also the ability to be in the community and to relate to institutions.

In the diagram, the life cycles of individuals and families are not embedded in abstract contexts; instead, they are rooted within the communities to which they belong, where individual spheres of life interact with each other and, above all, with others and the available social and digital spaces. This aspect is particularly relevant to better understand the dynamics of liminal communities that involve both individuals and collective actors (the figure mentioned earlier), especially since the widespread processes of vulnerability add up to other characteristics, causing a stratification of marginality and vulnerability that is often difficult to understand and address. However, the need to start with needs

and aspirations, and possible processes of participation to build a more detailed analysis of liminal communities and possible *educommunication* paths (Barbas 2020) that allow empowerment and potential conscientization (Freire 1970) for individuals or groups of spheres of life. This is to avoid, as is often the case, imagining policies and actions in liminal communities that tend to be exclusively restorative in nature and/or in reaction to specific events, and not following an approach that starts precisely from the processes of vulnerability.

Media ecosystems play a particularly important role in changing the spaces and perceptions of liminal communities. It is not new that "electronic" media have played a role in the change of space and its perception (Meyrowitz 1993), but what has happened with the spread of digital media has radicalised the change to the extent that some authors speak of profound mediatization (Couldry and Hepp 2017; Hepp 2020). Regarding the change in space in relation to liminal communities, it is interesting to highlight two aspects: the expansion of translocal relations and the role played by commercial and non-commercial digital platforms. It is precisely translocal relationships that people can build through the use of digital media that have increased exponentially (Hepp 2015: 223). Despite this, local community building through face-to-face contact continues to be central in building a sense of belonging. However, what is important as a function of our research is that local community-building processes and corresponding communities are also mediated in the sense that their articulation of a shared sense of belonging occurs through media.

Hepp (2015: 208-10) helps us distinguish (Figure 2) *mediatised communities* and *mediatising communities in* order to better understand the processes between what has taken place in home communities and subjectively chosen communities on the one hand, and between static communities and communities under construction. Local processes that also include the media refer to mediatised communities (family, groups of friends and liminal communities), whereas translocal processes are characteristic of mediatising, or newly established communities.

In liminal communities, both types of mediatization are co-present with potential processes of both profound territorialisation and profound de-territorialisation. The processes of territorialisation are those that characterise a community's rootedness in a specific territory, while those of de-territorialisation are those that break the link between "nature" (the territory) and the community's culture (Canclini 2000). In the first case, the depth of the relationship with the territory in liminal communities makes one imagine a closure towards those who do not
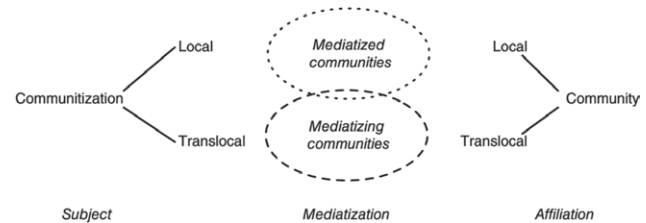

Figure 2. The mediatisation of local and translocal communities. *Source*: Hepp (2015: 209).

belong to the community itself, with the sharing of even "perverse" cultures of daily life of an illegal nature.

In the second case, paradoxically, as a mirror, other cultures are adopted, some of which come from migration processes, many of which belong to the digital popular culture of social media.

This hybridisation is not only characteristic of liminal communities, but it is here that the contradictions, conflicts and shifts in meaning between subgroups, even temporary subcultures, and micro-interests between the legal and the illegal emerge the most. In this context, the effects of the platform society (van Dijck *et al.* 2019) make users feel most powerful because they intervene

in strong and territorially rooted identity processes by modifying their characteristics and peculiarities in unexpected directions.

For example, the use of social media in liminal communities sometimes does not go in the direction that platforms imagine for all other contexts of intensifying relationships. Rather, it is used to maintain social ties that only take meaning in the everyday lives of liminal communities.

On the other hand, the media ecosystems of liminal communities are flattened at the level of commerce and, thus, consumption, greatly limiting opportunities for the growth of public and collective spaces. There are, of course, attempts at emancipation from commercial platforms that allow for autonomy and singularity in the media ecosystems of liminal communities (as in the case of platform cooperativism experiences). However, this clashes with the more general problem of growing digital inequalities that interact with existing economic, cultural and social ones.

4. HYBRID PARTICIPATION

Along with the dynamics of democratic participation traditionally defined in international textbooks, we also considered hybrid participation processes involving online perspectives (as indicated in Figure 3).
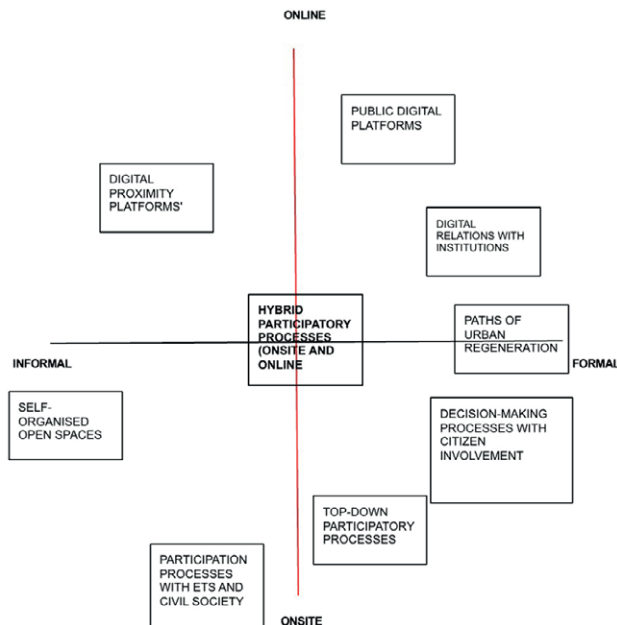
Figure 3. The dimensions of hybrid participatory processes.

The first dimension lies on a continuum at the extremes of on-site and online participation. This does not mean that we will have onsite participatory processes in a certain amount and online ones in the remaining amount. However, hybridisation with a different configuration in each context also takes on singularity characteristics (Reckwitz 2020). For example, it is imaginable to activate a participatory process on how a public space should be managed for the younger generations, to continue discussions on social media with those who could not be present, and then to return to the territory with a higher number of participants and a greater awareness of the necessary actions to be taken. There is a continuity between on-site and digital that is now established in life experiences, even among non-digital natives (Boccia Artieri *et al.* 2017). The second dimension of hybrid participatory processes lies on the continuum between formality and informality. Examples of the first are participatory processes that can be imagined and constructed within urban regeneration paths within a public institutional framework. They often have the characteristics of a top-down process, with the sole purpose of building consensus on choices that have already been made without giving people a chance for real and effective participation (Sorice 2021). Examples of the second aspect, on the other hand, are the participatory processes that arise spontaneously based on different stimuli (a specific problem linked to the environment, an exceptional event, a change in the social context, etc.) and which see

the use of tools that allow the opportunity to participate to be given to people who want it. We must still point out that in hybrid participation processes, the issue of digital inequalities does not disappear but is, at least partially, mitigated by the opportunity to be able to participate on-site without losing the thread that connects the entire participatory process for those with little digital capital (Ruiu and Ragnedda 2020). What we would like to emphasise is that there are no "perfect" participatory processes, but rather paths that intersect the processes of refiguration of liminal communities, developing spaces and contexts sometimes of development, often of resistance (even to the mobilising logic of populisms) and innovation.

5. THE RESEARCH

5.1. *The context*

Italian metropolitan cities constitute a platform for interesting subjects to study to understand the nature and orientation of urban transformation, especially in peripheral and liminal areas. With more than 8,000 municipalities, Italy has a limited number of large cities, understood as integrated and complex urban contexts, seats of economic and institutional services, inhabited by socially diversified communities and served by metropolitan-level infrastructure (transport, waste cycle, energy and water resources). In 2010, to provide some of these large cities with an administrative statute aimed at promoting integration with peri-urban and regional territories, the Metropolitan Cities Law was passed, indicating the 14 cities that could benefit from this new statute and outlining the competences related to the integration of local services. The reform was approved by Law 56 of 2014 and introduced metropolitan cities as new second-tier administrative entities (made up of capital municipalities, Tier I cities, which are closer to the major urban centre, and Tier II cities, which are more remote), overcoming the system of provincial authorities and defining the number of large cities, throughout Italy, considered "metropolitan cities". At the same time, the Law 56/2014 reform redefined the competences and functions of metropolitan cities, assigning them integrated responsibilities in key areas, such as urban planning, transport, environment and economic development. In a recent contribution by ISTAT (2023), the main characteristics of metropolitan cities that make these urban contexts special observatories of Italy's large cities were considered based on physical-structural, economic, socio-demographic, cultural and local public service indicators. The multi-thematic

analysis of ISTAT 2023 first of all highlights the "original" Metropolitan Cities, designated in the 2014 reform: "territorial bodies of vast areas" that replaced the provinces in 10 urban areas of the Regions with ordinary statutes: Rome, Turin, Milan, Venice, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Bari, Naples and Reggio Calabria. The corpus of metropolitan cities also includes four additional large metropolitan areas located in regions with special statutes: Palermo, Catania, Messina and Cagliari. The large urban areas examined have been central in discussions about spatial renewal and transformation. This focus is highlighted by limited national efforts, notably the 2016 National Suburbs Plan and a substantial urban redevelopment and safety program for metropolitan suburbs, initiated by the 2016 Budget Law. In 2017, 2.6 billion euros were distributed to 120 urban projects. Despite these efforts, many urban areas remained neglected, leading to the development of local-level regeneration policies. In this environment, grassroots movements led by social actors, including social cooperatives and civic groups, have emerged to promote social, artistic, and cultural rejuvenation. Our study examines how non-neoliberal, community-based initiatives contribute to urban transformation in marginalized areas, driving social innovation beyond just physical rejuvenation. In a context where neoliberal strategies dominate and large-scale spatial regeneration is usually left to urban regimes actors, non-profits, social entrepreneurs, and citizen-led initiatives using participatory approaches are increasingly focused on social, cultural, and artistic renewal, particularly in areas typically ignored in major urban redevelopment projects. Our research involved extensive case studies across 14 Italian metropolitan areas, identifying groups that collaborate with local communities for comprehensive social and spatial change. This led to 14 in-depth interviews with leaders in social innovation in these areas. Each interview, tailored to a specific city, explored the project's beginnings, partnerships with various sectors, disruptions from the Covid-19 pandemic, current challenges, and prospects.

5.2. Material and methods

The divergence in the 14 regeneration approaches adopted by the interviewees contributed to outlining a broad panorama of strategies and methodologies concerning the specific challenges and opportunities encountered in each case study. From a methodological perspective, we proposed leveraging the characteristics of the qualitative analysis model, which appears to be the most suitable reference for innovative experiences of spatial and social regeneration in liminal contexts.

According to the well-established perspective of Wessel (1996: 41) a phenomenological approach was adopted, focusing on the directly lived experience of the realities involved in regeneration projects in liminal contexts, reading and noting their subjectivity as fundamental for understanding the development of these regenerative actions, seeking, eidetically, to identify the essences or fundamental structures of the experiences, both through the subjectivity of the interviewees and through the subjective reading of the interviewers. The basic vision derived from the assumption of this perspective is that the social actors involved in these urban regeneration projects in the liminal segments of the city are, on one hand, interpreters of the social reality in which they are organically inserted and, on the other, contribute to socially constructing its development through their actions. Thus, through an analysis that holds as the object of the research the forms of action and social interaction of the subjects active in these projects, we move within the context of an inductive, cumulative and progressive search for meaning through the different forms that the regenerative practices, as individuals and as parts of an articulated complex, suggest to the researcher, who confronts them with an open, flexible and dialoguing approach. The identification of the instrument of the semi-structured interview, built around open heuristic dimensions rather than coded questions, was a direct consequence. During the course of the interviews, the identified tool allowed us to reserve the necessary margins of flexibility to consider all the different experiences of urban regeneration in selective liminal contexts, while simultaneously guaranteeing the opportunity for in-depth analysis of the interviewees' responses.

The ability to combine flexibility and adaptability to very diverse subjects, contexts and experiences, with the in-depth study necessary for an "understanding" sociology (Sbalchiero 2018; 2021) of the innovative phenomena analysed offered the interviewers the opportunity to access to a more significant extent the local contexts and cultures in which the experiences of urban regeneration in liminality were being carried out, gathering details, practices and experiences otherwise elusive with other survey techniques. The survey technique involved administering in-depth interviews in a structured outline with the same questions and prompts to all interviewees in the 14 metropolitan cities. The experiences and actors involved in this analysis are summarised in Table 1.

This background phase was followed by field research with contact between the identified realities and the realisation of interviews. On the text approved by the interviewees, textual analyses were conducted using

Table 1. The interviewees for the fieldwork.

City	Name	Organisation	Intervention	Website
Rome	Trees in the suburbs	Voluntary organisation	Planting and community fostering of trees in the Roman suburbs	https://alberiinperiferia.it/
Milan	The City Around Community points	Special banking foundation project	Establishment of multi-functional community points	https://lacittaintorno.fondazionecariplo.it/
Turin	I live in Barriera/Aurora	Network for the promotion of social and cultural activities of associations	Networking social and intercultural practices in the Aurora and Barriera di Milano areas	http://www.vivoin.it/
Florence	Blade	Social enterprise	Temporary and meanwhile use of spaces for Manifattura Tabacchi – innovation hub in Rifredi	https://agenzialama.eu/
Naples	Gridas	Non-profit cultural association	Implementation of community activities on an artistic and environmental basis in Scampia	https://www.felicepignataro.org/gridas
Reggio Calabria	Macramé	Consortium of social cooperatives	Local community development pathway in the Pellaro, Arghillà, Modena-Ciccarello districts	http://www.consorziomacrame.it/
Bologna	Dumbo	Multifunctional Urban District	Path of recovery and re-dedication of temporary social functions to an abandoned railway complex	https://dumbospace.it/
Genoa	Fourth Planet	Voluntary organisation and public-non-profit coordination	Introduction of musical, artistic and cultural events in the former psychiatric hospital in Genoa Quarto. Introduction of a health home in the complex. Pathways of socio-medical integration in the field of mental health	https://www.facebook.com/people/Quarto-Pianeta/100069720229944/
Venice	Neighbourhood Gatekeeper Project Community Outpost	Special project of CESV CAVV, Centro Servizi Volontariato di Venezia	Creation of help and assistance spaces for vulnerable people in difficult urban contexts	https://www.csvvenezia.it/progetti/brbrportinerie-di-quartiere-avamposto-di-comunitabr_9.html
Bari	Domingo Park	Social promotion association	Regeneration of a green space with urban garden and cultural association space	https://www.facebook.com/apsparcodomingo/?locale=it_IT
Messina	Messina Community Foundation	CapaCity Project	Urban regeneration in the south-eastern part of Messina and creating new housing and social opportunities	https://fdcmessina.org/riqualificazione-urbana/capacity/
Palermo	New La Zisa Workshops	Hub for local development, training and environmental sustainability	work and training space with equipment, workshop rooms to experiment with new techniques, co-design and co-produce new artefacts together with other craftsmen.	https://www.nuoveofficinezisa.com/
Catania	Librino platform Librino Social Network	Social network and programme platform for regeneration	Art and art education interventions in schools for the regeneration of urban space	https://www.ioamolibrino.it/
Cagliari	Urban Centre Project The Salt Gallery	Special project of non-profit organisation	Open-air gallery in a place of transition between urban space and nature park	https://www.urbancenter.eu/progetto/galleria-del-sale/

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Figure 4. The word cloud of the interview text corpus. *Source*: Authors' own elaboration.

	GENOA	CAGLIARI	REGGIO CALABRIA	ROME	VENICE	FLORENCE	NAPLES	MILAN	BONONIA	MESSINA	TURIN	CATANIA	PALERMO	BARI
activity	12	5	3	16	11	28	30	41	21	5	30	10	7	15
community	7	2	61	5	7	10	5	37	2	10	24	0	0	2
project	9	19	0	7	13	22	10	18	10	33	17	3	1	9
social	16	6	12	12	8	21	20	14	6	10	8	0	7	1
neighborhood	2	0	6	5	16	12	15	24	10	0	17	7	0	1
people	7	1	6	10	12	4	3	7	10	27	6	11	3	6
area	11	7	8	4	4	16	10	10	11	6	12	5	0	8
city	17	14	4	2	4	16	1	29	6	3	9	5	1	1
reality	6	2	7	3	5	9	9	13	12	6	19	8	4	3
state	14	3	11	4	3	12	4	19	11	9	2	0	2	11
space	14	10	2	0	0	15	3	12	23	0	0	3	6	8
territory	2	3	20	5	5	10	20	7	0	3	10	3	1	1
context	11	7	9	3	3	12	7	17	4	3	7	5	1	0
work	3	2	14	2	2	13	15	2	4	10	9	5	4	2
municipality	9	3	3	1	3	2	4	19	10	9	4	6	6	6

Figure 5. Heatmap of keyword frequency by interview. *Source*: Authors' own elaboration.

computer tools with the use of NLP (Natural Language processing) and LDA (Latent Dirichl location) models. Operationally, Python libraries such as the Natural Language Tool Kit (NLTK), NetworkX, Plotly, WordCloud, Gensim and Scikit-learn were used on the entire corpus of the fourteen interviews to find elements of convergence between the different experiences of urban regeneration. In order to enable this first section of automatic analysis of the corpus of interviews, a series of operational steps were carried out to prepare and "clean" the textual data. Subsequently, tokenisation, a process of segmentation of textual units, was carried out by subdividing the text into homogeneous blocks of answers to the same questions asked during the interviews.

5.3. Results

The words with the highest relative frequency were activity, project and community, testifying to the fact that the selected urban regeneration cases were able to combine a marked operational tendency with the dimension of social involvement and participation in the actions. Marked operational tendency is the idea that multiple activities can be carried out and that the regenerative project dimension is a priority. The emphasis on the social and community dimension is further underlined by the presence, among the terms of secondary frequency in the wordcloud, of the word "people", positioned close to terms such as "state" and "party". This observation, which emerges from the analysis of the textual data, suggests notable attention of the interviewees towards the community and its human components, which can be traced back to the fundamental concept of active engagement of the local community in the transformation process of the liminal areas subject to intervention. The interviews revealed that this openness towards the community dimension and the active inclusion of people are decisive factors in ensuring that regeneration processes are in line
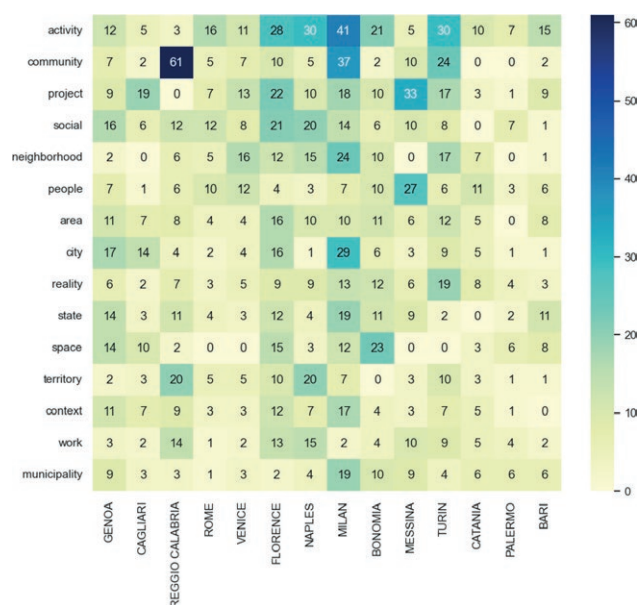
with the needs and aspirations of local contexts while simultaneously helping to promote social inclusion within these regenerative dynamics.

The second elaboration on the corpus of interviews concerned the analysis of the frequency of keywords within each interview using a "heatmap", a graphic representation of the textual data in which the individual values contained in a matrix (based on most frequent terms on the one hand and location of the city in which the interviews were conducted on the other) are represented with colours of different intensity. This is an effective visual mode for visualising complex and interrelated data and identifying patterns, correlations and trends. In the specific case of the textual analysis of the interviews, the heatmap is useful for highlighting the frequency of the same words in the different regeneration contexts in which the interviews were conducted and for highlighting, on the other hand, those experiences and practices which, due to differences in the language used, seem to diverge more than the former. A heatmap of the textual corpus of the interviews on urban regeneration in the 14 metropolitan cities considered is shown in Figure 5.

Further analysis was conducted by developing a graph configuration of the recurring words in the different metropolitan contexts considered in the interviews. A graphical representation of the interviews is shown in Figure 6.

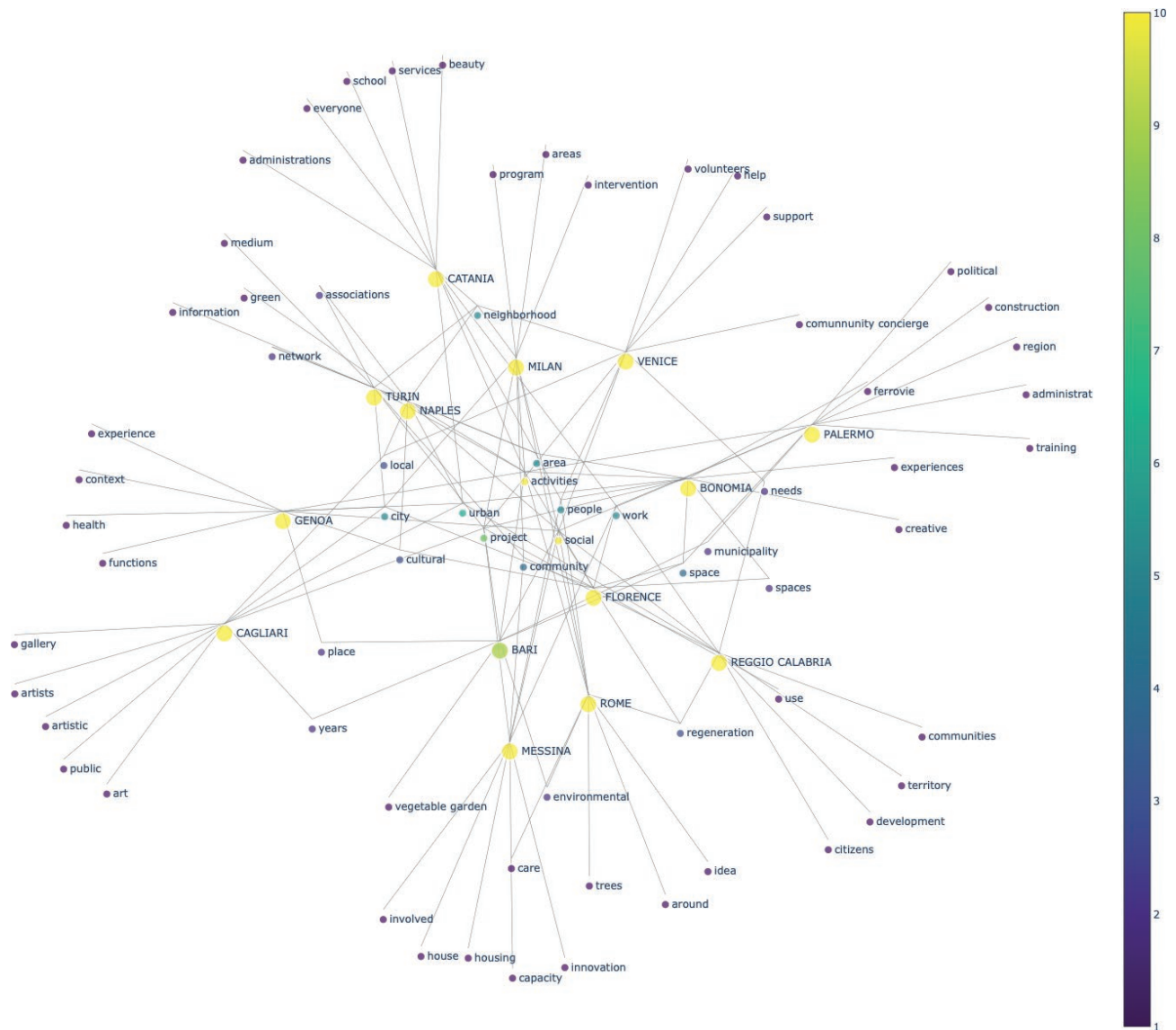Conceptually, a graph representation visualises a network of connections between different keywords and

Figure 6. Graph representation of the relationships between words used in the interviews and urban regeneration experiences in the 14 metropolitan cities. *Source:* Authors' own elaboration.

Italian cities, creating a distribution over networks. Each node or point on the graph represents a keyword, and its size and colour reflect the frequency of the word within the textual corpus of the interviews. The links depicted by the lines between the nodes represent the co-occurrence of keywords in the same interviews, attempting to delineate a conceptual relationship between them. From the representation constructed from the interviews, it can be observed that the cities of Milan, Venice and Genoa are highlighted with larger and darker nodes, showing that common themes are discussed with a particularly high frequency or importance in the interviews

relating to these cities. Lemmas such as "project", "community" and "citizens" show significant nodes with each other and with other words, manifesting multiple connections with different metropolitan contexts. This element not only indicates that these are central concepts in the interviews analysed but also provides cues to a complex network of relationships between the keywords that emerged from the analysis. This interrelationship between headwords and the underlying concepts that emerged during the interviews reflects the multidimensional nature of the approach to urban regeneration in the liminal areas considered. For example, the term
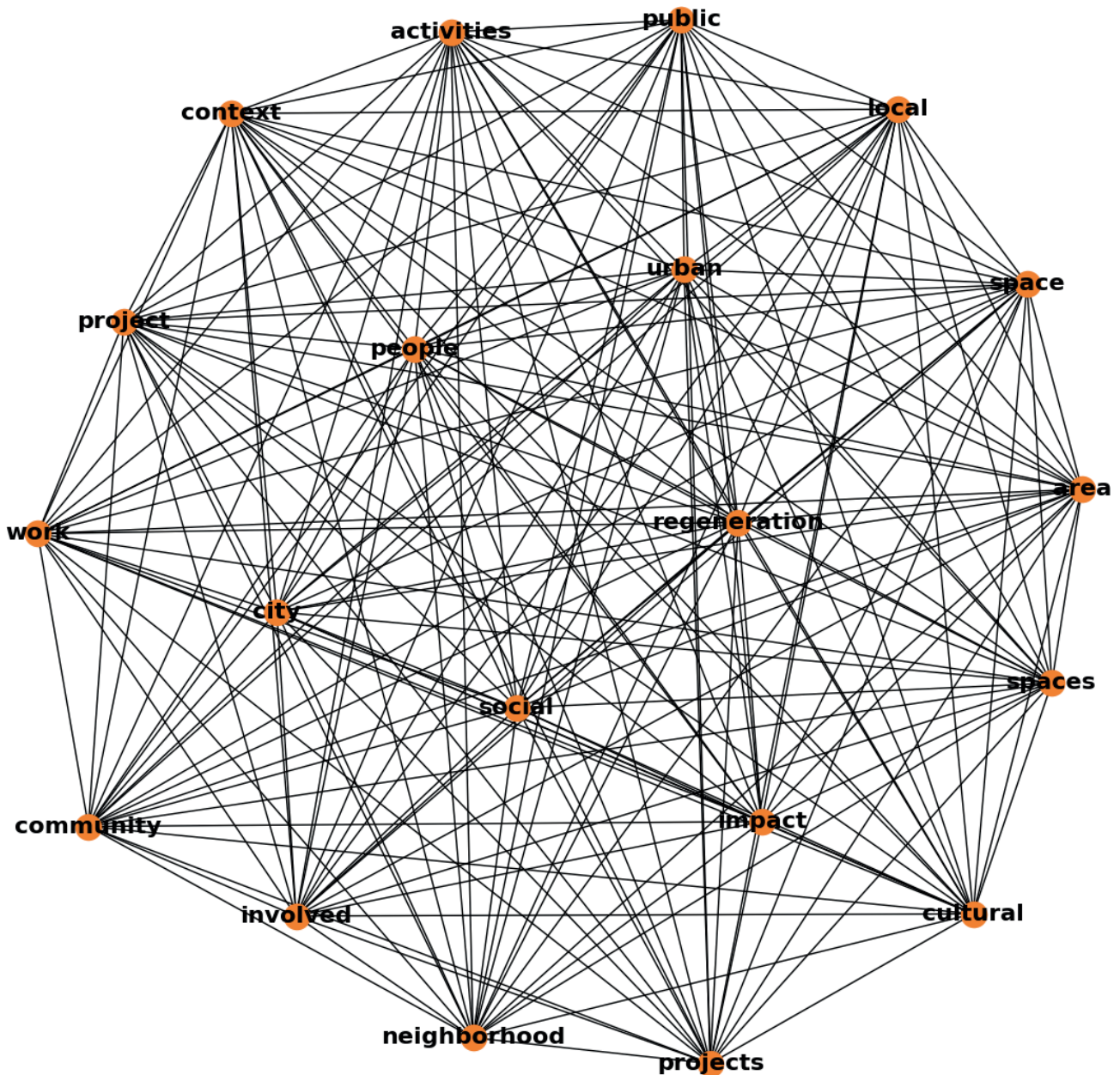
Figure 7. Representation of the semantic network of interviews. *Source:* Author's own elaboration.

"citizens" co-occurs with several other lemmas in the graph, which stimulates reflection on the emphasis on the active role of citizens in the urban regeneration processes discussed.

A final type of analysis was conducted to create a graphic visualisation of a semantic network – an association graph – to represent the interconnections between lemmas and the underlying concepts found within the lexical corpus of the 14 interviews. The points or nodes represent the individual lexical units that emerged most frequently in the interview corpus, whereas the connections or arcs describe the interrelationships between the different lexical nodes. The semantic network of the interviews is shown in Figure 7.

The analysis of the interview text corpus reveals three pivotal elements: the communal aspect, the projective nature of interventions, and the imperative for genuine participatory engagement with citizens. From an academic standpoint, these elements underscore the dominance of community engagement, active citizen-

ship, and participatory planning. These intersect with the needs of community contexts, aligning with the viewpoint of non-profit actors who advocate for the primacy of social regeneration over spatial regeneration, particularly in areas overlooked by neoliberal urban regeneration strategies.

The frequency and co-occurrence of specific lemmas within the corpus substantiate that regeneration in liminal contexts is only truly impactful and transformative when it is pursued collectively. This requires the facilitation of bottom-up participation, spearheaded by social innovation agents, and enhanced through hybrid communication methods.

These identified dimensions distinctly characterize social and cultural regeneration in peripheral spaces, laying the foundation for an alternative regeneration model. The emerging model is distinctly community-focused, participatory, and oriented towards the cultural and social dimensions, presenting a stark contrast to the spatial regeneration model prevalent in neoliberal urban settings. This alternative approach advocates for a social and cultural paradigm of regeneration, diverging from the conventional neoliberal urban framework, while at the same time presenting patterns of reference for other international experiences of urban regeneration of liminal spaces.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Even in liminal contexts, although permeated by elements of resistance, transition and experimentation, it is impossible not to notice the presence of a framework typical of a neoliberal city. Although such spaces are often left to their failure to design regenerative interventions, the drive towards maximising value extraction from urban spaces and communities asserts itself as the prevailing norm. Acknowledging that a substantial segment of the public discourse on urban regeneration in the Italian context fits fully into this neoliberal paradigm also implies revealing the dimension of power over space and urban communities implicit in this model.

Liminal spaces and communities, as highlighted in the literature on the subject, are identified not only as peripheral contexts but also as areas in rapid transition, facing dramatic phenomena of marginalisation, experiencing dynamics of translocalisation and defamilisation, alongside a profound mediatization of communicative processes. However, such spaces and communities, precisely by virtue of this condition of being about to undergo imminent change, are distinguished by divergent modes of action, organisation and public represen-

tation and are configured as nuclei of resistance to the dominant logic of neoliberal transformation.

These liminal spaces, at the threshold of an as-yet-undefined change, host heterogeneous urban communities operating in the interstitial spaces of a social and relational regeneration that stands as a potential antagonist to neoliberal regeneration. This counter to dominant urban neoliberalism is cultivated through bottom-up participatory practices that are authentically meaningful, durable, mutualistic and not standardised, as is the case with standardised tools that are adopted by local institutions, often episodically. Communities of experimentation and resistance to liminality and their participatory practices experience this innovative function through the direct recovery of abandoned spaces, with their transformation into places of sharing, art, environment, culture and care. In acting out these transformation practices, the protagonists of liminal regeneration give rise to unprecedented experiences of social, environmental, cultural and artistic experimentation, always with strong relational anchorage.

At the same time, collective action constitutes a sort of strategic "asset", according to a logic of unpaid commitment and sharing with the liminal community that is authentically antagonistic to both the neoliberal model and the modes of engagement of contemporary populisms, which are much more connected to neoliberal logics than one might imagine. In the perspective of these collective subjects, social and relational regeneration founds a "communitarian" element of tenacious and active resistance in those places and communities that, according to neoliberal logic, should change in accordance with the rest of the urban space or be abandoned to their fate.

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