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# Community Experiences and Practices of Resistance in Neoliberal Rationality

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**Abstract.** This article critically examines communities as sites of resistance to neoliberal rationality. It analyses their transformative potential in reconfiguring social relations within contemporary democratic crises. The study conceptualises communities of resistance as collective entities engaged in defending and strengthening social structures against systemic threats, while advocating for the reduction of inequalities and the protection of common resources. Using interdisciplinary perspectives from critical sociology and media studies, the analysis transcends the reductionist view of neoliberalism as a mere economic paradigm and reconceptualises it as a comprehensive rationality that fundamentally alters both social organisation and subjective formation. Tracing the evolution from traditional community formations to communities of practice and finally to communities of resistance, the article examines how digital ecosystems have reconfigured participation through the logic of connective action. The study examines vulnerability as a potentially transformative resource, particularly in liminal urban spaces where resistance is manifested through participatory processes, resource redistribution systems and mutual aid networks. The conclusion emphasises the importance of social scientists adopting critical methodological approaches to contribute to the promotion of a more inclusive and supportive society.

**Keywords:** communication, community, inclusion, neoliberalism, practices of resistance.

## 1. POSSIBLE WORLDS, *INTERREGNUM* AND COMMUNITY

The first World Social Forum (WSF) was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001 under the motto: 'Another world is possible'. Since then, this idea can no longer be considered merely a simple social construct but rather an achievable personal and social experience that is complex and, above all, possible. The WSF is and was neither an event nor a succession of events. It is not an academic conference, nor a party or an international of parties. It is not a NGO, nor a social movement. It «presents itself as an agent of social change. The WSF rejects the concept of an historical subject and confers non priority on any specific social actor in this process of social change!» (San-

tos 2004: 6). The idea that an 'Another world is possible' recalls Ernst Bloch's (1986 [1959]) "objective possibility" which is reflected on the cognitive side as a new form of access to reality, something that is "Not-Yet-Conscious" but is "being-in-possibility". This emerges clearly in point 1 of the Charter of Principles[1]:

> *The WSF is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, [and the] free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed toward fruitful relationships among Humankind and between it and the Earth* (WSF 2001).

To better understand why this model has been brought to the reader's attention, reference is made to the work of the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos. He argues that the WSF achieves two epistemological operations, resulting in a shift in perspective that he refers to as the "sociology of absence" and "sociology of emergence" (Santos 2002). The first expands the domain of already available social experiences, while the latter expands the domain of possible social experiences. According to the Portuguese sociologist, these sociologies would allow for a critical identification of the conditions that destroy non-hegemonic and potentially counter-hegemonic social experiences. This would be achieved by creating social experiences that are resistant to space and time but capable of identifying and presenting credible new counter-hegemonic social experiences. The two sociologies are closely related. If there are more experiences are available in the world, there will be more experiences possible in the future to either improve any crisis conditions or the conditions of individuals beyond the presence or absence of a crisis.

From the first WSF onwards, it has become even more evident how the current society, in an optimistic view, appears to be in confident expectation of a good. This seems to characterise many populations or parts of populations that are excluded from the sustainable development of society due to the significant inequality gaps in their territories. This expectation (projection into the future) causes reality to escape the logic of the "*hic et nunc*" that is typical of neoliberalism and enter the logic of the possible ("Another world is possible"). It is a representation of a desirable new order in which both the individual and the collective become the fertile ground for the process of "*concientización*" [conscientization] (Freire 1979). This leads toward the overcoming of that *interregnum* Gramsci described when he stated that «the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear» (Gramsci 1999: 556). The same *interregnum* that, according to Tester, is being experienced in our contemporary society and that characterises and has characterised the various crises that dominate twenty-first century social life in the different geographical areas of the world: «Globalisation has meant the collapse of the reality principle of the Modern Era, and the present moment can be identified as one of an interregnum» (Tester 2009: 25). In the wake of Tester (Davis 2011), Baumann (2010) also reframes the original concept of *interregnum* by suggesting that the fabric of the social order based on territorial unity (state and nation) is breaking down. There is no new "sovereign" to fit the new globalized world.

Antonio Gramsci wrote hundreds of pages of political and historical analysis about new possible worlds, with the idea always being presented either directly or indirectly. He repeatedly recalled the words of the French playwright Rolland, "*Pessimismo dell'intelligenza, ottimismo della volontà*" [Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will] (Gramsci 1920) and how they referred to the possibility of changing the world. This was so much so that they became the programmatic slogan of a general strike in Turin and were first used in the magazine *Ordine Nuovo*[2] . The "pessimism of the intellect" means (for Gramsci) that desire alone does not help anyone and to act in the world we must look at it without illusions and above all as it is. The "optimism of the will" is, on the other hand, a kind of invocation of the human capacity to change the world simply because we put into practice the determination (will) to do so. He makes his idea clear in the following:

> *On daydreams and fantasies. They show lack of character and passivity. One imagines that something has happened to upset the mechanism of necessity. One's own initiative has become free. Everything is easy. One can do whatever*

[1] Approved and adopted in São Paulo, on April 9, 2001, by the organizations that make up the World Social Forum Organizing Committee, approved with modifications by the World Social Forum International Council on June 10, 2001. One of the changes concerned the final part of point 1 which in the original version was like this, «[…] plenary society centred on the human person».

[2] A magazine founded in Turin by Gramsci himself as a socialist culture weekly from May 1919 to December 1920 and represented the demands of the factory council movement and, more generally, the positions and orientations of Turin communists.

> *one wants, and one wants a whole series of things which at present one lacks. It is basically the present turned on its head which is projected into the future. Everything repressed is unleashed. On the contrary, it is necessary to direct one's attention violently toward the present as it is, if one wishes to transform it. Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will* (Gramsci 1999: 395, note 75).

The theoretical recomposition of a concept does not lead to its exhaustiveness but rather to the evolution of knowledge. This contribution will try to clarify some of the aspects and dynamics that appear particularly significant to embark on a path that can lay the foundations to open broader reflections on the concept of community. It will also consider the role that the community plays in everyday life with respect to social changes. These changes constitute the determination and will to act to which Gramsci referred and can lead towards an 'another possible world' that resists neoliberal rationality, which aims to make a profit by effectively annihilating human beings. The idea of "another possible world" also refers to Wright's (2010) "*real utopias*" which clarifies how self-fulfilling prophecies are powerful forces in history. Humans need real utopias (utopian ideals) anchored in their real potentialities. They are like Ralf Dahrendorf's "*realistic or effective*" hopes which constitute a practical type of hope, ready to be translated into reality since it:

> *motivates people to change their conditions, or their lives, in a variety of ways. It may be a stimulus for the individual to move, either geographically, or in the scales of social status. It may be a challenge for solitary action, in associations, trade unions, political groups, in order to gain shorter working hours for all members. It may be international action, the demand for more voting rights in the International Monetary Fund, or membership in OECD. […] Whether every change brought about under social conditions in which action is sparked off by realistic hope is progress, may be open to doubt; but if there is to be any progress at all, such hope is one of its ingredients* (Dahrendorf 1976: 14).

These are placed «in an intermediate dimension between the design of abstract perfect models and the achievement of small reforms potentially achievable in the immediate term» (Santambrogio 2022: 244). This revives a "sense of possibility" for social change in which the utopian dimension prefigures a different model of society, and the realistic one identifies the elements that make this model feasible even if only partially. The process is in the tension between dreams and practices. It is based on the idea that what is pragmatically possible cannot be fixed independently of our imagination and the social representations of society (Jedlowski 2010) which, in the "world society" will have to find, as Luciano Gallino (2016) argued, "publicly sustainable alternative forms of representation" to attempt to overcome the *interregnum*.

The path followed in this article starts from the idea that communities, in their multiformity, can be (with their experiences and practices) the lever for overcoming this *interregnum*. It reflects on the concept of community in the light of an idea of a 'possible world' that is based on improving the living conditions of individuals. This framework tries to highlight how communities are considered the impetus for the political action (*praxis*) of individuals for the collective good and social justice by starting from the simple question: *What can improve the living conditions of human beings and how can it be done?* The answer is simple though trivial: the centrality of human beings and the "sociocultural relationships and phenomena" that involve them, communities are based on shared values to design and improve social systems for human beings and not regard them as tools of social systems that do not meet or even understand their needs.

## 2. COMMUNITY AND THE COMMON GOOD BETWEEN PRACTICES AND RESISTANCE

The community was the first form of social organization of human beings, later supplanted by society following the advent of the processes of industrialization, modernization and secularization. Nevertheless, it has been the subject of many social science scholars (Durkheim, Tönnies, to name a few) in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It returned to the scientific scene in the second half of the last century along certain directions (refer to the extensive literature for a more in-depth study). One thing is certain and common to the various approaches and disciplines that have studied community. It has always been an expression of the cultural value of the working classes, representing a "collective self" capable of mobilizing struggle and resistance for the realization of social and political utopias. The accentuated contradictions that arise during the stages of the development, economic growth and processes of institutional change that are the product of transformations of the financial and economic system of the Western world drive different groups and cultures to react. This appears to be generally due to their specific capacity to constitute resilient energies (Mangone and Zyuzev 2020; Mangone and Masullo 2021). Considering global society as very important, an analysis of the theories, experiences, and everyday individual life reevaluates the "community as a resource" as an appropriate form for organizing individu-

als. Community seems to be the pivotal element in reading social problems and defining the actions to be taken since it is grounded in the individual considered in their human and social ecology rather than in any of the individual roles they play within society.

Community, in this way, is also a collection of experiences and thoughts, of traditions and commitments, of participation and will. Community work means not only connecting the citizen with the formal and informal support networks they find in the area but also supporting and promoting all those community networks of solidarity and reciprocity (Mangone 2022) that spontaneously occur in a community. Community has not only not died out, but it still exists. In recent years, it has been discovered that modern society consists of a mixture of different forms of community. Modern society, partly due to the dynamics produced by the pandemic, seems to be characterized by a shift in proximate relationships. They are changing the way we live, leading to an integration of community and society models that reproduce and leave open the possibility of interactions between them (different ways of constructing the individual-society relationship and social relations of particular contexts).

Community is a catalyst for identity, culture, emancipation and struggle. It is transformed into the core of resistance against dominant models to build alternative visions. In this perspective, community encompasses both the political and ethnic (broadly and globally), the cultural, the religious, and the "sub-community". Like the concept of subculture, it is characterized by being limited to a smaller group than the community, by its foundation on differences in membership, and by the fact that it is constituted only through interactions among individuals who share purposes, thought, and patterns of behaviour. The community is an integrated system of a given population that has common uses and existential situations on which common decisions are made. The members of a community actively participate in the decision-making on the problems of the community because they are a part of it. The community is a real-life example of a natural context in which there is a democratic solidarity process that is based on the principle of participation and the construction of local public spaces. Communities in this sense are micro-examples of different ways of thinking and learning, as well as alternative ways of doing and acting. An invitation to return to the organization of a "social space" to work and care for each other, to the common good and conviviality.

The enhancement of community, therefore, goes in the direction of building a new form of organization to apply the fundamental principle of participatory democracy in the process of decision-making about the common good. Individuals who lack social ties are unable to act freely, unlike individuals who based on strong social ties (identification, belonging, and responsibility) can act in total freedom and make reasonable choices as well as make moral judgments. Cooperation among all individuals is very important for everyone's life. Everyone's responsibility to the community becomes not only the ground for claiming individual rights, but the 'place' within which a balancing of individual interests takes place to enhance collective interests, with the cohesion and integration of even the weakest members. This condition binds the individual, who occupies different positions, to their peers in a context of norms and culture that allows for recognition in the concept of the 'common good' that gives meaning to human action. While not opposed to liberalism and the centrality of the individual who is "rooted", "belonging" to the community and territory [*embedded*], this condition generates identity and is able to build networks of protection and sustainable development. The fulcrum of a community as a resource fit perfectly into this perspective. The community includes social engagement, respect for mutual rights and freedoms, while balancing civic needs and responsibilities, rebuilding satisfactory relationships between individuals. Finally, strengthening 'social capital' that presents an idea of development that is not only economic, but above all civil and free, based on the cooperation of all actors within a territory. It should be seen as an open space in which environmental and social networks find their closest interrelation, along the direction of sustainability of development and social protection initiatives, combining environmental, social and economic aspects. The community appears, therefore, to be the most appropriate form of social organization since it is attentive to the needs of individuals and inherently possesses the strength to face and overcome crises and emergencies.

It can be affirmed without too much margin for error that the community as a form of social organization can still be a protagonist even in a globalized society. It is precisely with it that certain circumstances come to be determined that can foster an adequate use and enhancement of the resources and peculiarities that the community expresses. The collective imaginary thus becomes an antidote against individualism and social fragmentation. The use of the community vision moves from the universal, to the national, to the local without any contradiction due to its inherent characteristics of the aggregation and coincidence of interests, that is, of a shared future. Whatever the level and meaning with which it operates, community defines the bond with oth-

ers by intervening in the forms of construction of the social, relying on the imaginary nodes that weave its symbolic force.

The social is not a mere sum of individualities but is collective inclusion and signification. It is community. Community is, therefore, belonging and, consequently, identity and respect for the other. We do not want to present yet another study on community as a concept *sic et simpliciter*. We want to propose a reinterpretation and at the same time a reconfiguration of the relationship between the community and the cultural, economic and political dimensions within the social space that is transformed into a real "agora". It is no longer only the space of denunciation and criticism, but that of a reorganization of society from below in which political action is exercised by the community. The realization of practices capable of affecting the construction of the democratic political-institutional design has given rise to a significant sphere of experiments that emphasize the importance of the growth of forms of participatory citizenship and organized activism in the public arena to institutionalize these practices to convert them into real policy tools. Thus, strengthening the legitimacy of the new participatory instances.

The focus will be on that form of community (on its experiences and practices) called *community of resistance* (Sivanandan 1990; van der Velden 2004; Aiken 2015; Everett 2022). It identifies those groups of individuals who seek to collectively define themselves in a changing and risky social space by engaging in the defence and strengthening of social relations and structures in response to a crisis, threat or unwanted change. Their goal may be the defence of rights as well as the reduction of inequalities and/or the protection and promotion of "common goods" and "common resources" through forms of partnership with public and government institutions (Ostrom 1990). The reference is to practices in an associated form (partnership or cooperation) with public institutions or supranational bodies that are aimed at advocating, promoting and shaping behaviour in a positive (pro) sense in relation to personal development, social cohesion, ecological balance, and human survival. The shift from community to *community of resistance* is a process currently taking place that has been accelerated by the web and social networks. The web space has always been interpreted as a space within which to build diversified forms of community. Some have become true places of resistance in which the members of a marginal group can build (or reconstruct) their own identity without being constrained by the dominant culture (de Vries 2002). Thus, determining a *mutual shaping* effect with the shift from the offline world (physical environment) to the online world (digital environment).

This passage is not a direct one. In between stands another form of community, the *community of practice*, often identified as forms of collective intelligence (Lévy 1997) that develop and share knowledge through a set of theoretical concepts that represent the frame of reference within which to move to trace its evolutions and transformations in the present and near future. These are usually social or professional groups characterized by spontaneity of aggregation and active participation, aimed at addressing the same problems and moved by the common search for solutions through the sharing of a wealth of knowledge, skills and resources. Participatory activity takes place within a common domain. The members of a community of practice are united by a certain field of knowledge, interest and activity, which is also the fertile ground for mutual learning. Another element is a shared repertoire of practices, routines, and intervention models for achieving the group's goals. Finally, the members develop a sense of shared identity that helps create a space in which collaboration and learning can germinate.

A relevant factor for the exercise of communities as praxis (political action aimed at changing conditions) are the relationships that individuals make explicit as the actors of socio-cultural phenomena. This is because in contemporary society some dynamics occur. On the one hand, the framework of the welfare state has suffered a severe attack from the neoliberal parable (Žižek 2020) putting all welfare systems to the test, even the most democratic, universalist and cutting-edge ones (the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic was a clear demonstration of this). On the other, the transition from the network society (Castells 1996) to the platform society (van Dijck, De Waal and Poell 2018) which has produced new (digital) "ecosystems" in which relationships are mediated by digital systems and algorithms (Fuchs 2020). There is an increasingly marked socio-political and ideological direction of the platforms that have transformed themselves into the infrastructural architecture that guides the governance of society and markets by defining the geopolitics of the ecosystems, while also conditioning public space.

## 3. NEOLIBERALISM, REPRESENTATION, AND COMMUNICATIVE ECOSYSTEMS: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Contemporary communicative ecosystems are complex and multidimensional environments in which the

emergence and development of platforms have helped to substantially transform not only communication but the entire structure of social relations. The crisis of liberal democracies (or perhaps, better, of democratic representation) appears to be characterized by a peculiar dialectical tension. While on the one hand, it manifests itself through processes of depoliticization, growth of neoliberal hegemony, and fragmentation of the public sphere that seem to be leading toward the affirmation of a dangerous single thought. On the other, it generates new forms of participation and resistance that redefine the traditional boundaries of political action.

Despite the initial success of the easy and appeasing formulas about the inherently progressive nature of digital networks, a different perception of social reality, supported by empirical research and the rediscovery of an approach based on critical and/or positional sociology, has made its way among many scholars. It is this rediscovery of the critical approach to media studies that has led to a substantial paradigm shift in the analysis of the phenomena of resistance and participation. The conceptualization of neoliberalism as a simple economic paradigm proves to be patently insufficient to understand the nature and scope of the transformations taking place. Neoliberalism, based on Dardot and Laval's (2017[2010]) analysis, should be understood as a "global reason" that fundamentally reverses the logic of capital, electing it as the normative principle of social organization and subjective formation. Neoliberalism can also be considered a kind of social imaginary, capable of redefining the interpretive map of subjects. The shift from governance to governmentality represents a crucial development in this neoliberal rationality. While governance implies democratic design and even long-term political projects, governmentality incorporates corporate values such as competition, self-interest and decentralization, facilitating both technocratic paradigms and contemporary populism, while creating unexpected convergences that systematically undermine democratic spaces.

The crisis of contemporary democratic representation cannot simply be interpreted as a decline in political interest, but rather as a profound transformation in the ways through which civic participation is articulated. As Sintomer (2011) pointed out in his analyses of participatory democracy, this crisis is fuelled by several structural factors: the fragmentation of the popular classes; the rise of a society characterized by the centrality of risk; the decline of traditional public bureaucracies; and the spread of hegemonic narratives that emphasize the ineffectiveness of formal institutions. The neoliberal penetration into democratic structures manifests itself through a series of converging strategies: The systematic depoliticization of social issues, the reduction of participation to anesthetized or predominantly proceduralized procedures, the expropriation of democratic conflict, the progressive commodification of all spheres of public life, and the fragmentation of the public sphere (traversed, moreover, by strong tensions toward the polarization and extremalization of social debate). In this framework, a particularly insidious form of social control emerges. What has been called "neoliberal paternalism", a mode of governance that, while rhetorically invoking participation, empties it of real meaning through proceduralization mechanisms that exclude conflict and limit citizen empowerment.

In this context of systemic crisis, social movements represent the first organized form of resistance to the silencing of protest, developing informal networks and promoting innovative forms of widespread solidarity. Rucht's (2023) multidimensional analysis, which is particularly effective in its ability to categorize, identifies four crucial analytical variables of their functioning: organization based on flexible and adaptive structures; the system of interactions that constitutes fundamental pre-conditions in the logics of political conflict; the symbolic dimension that enables presentation as a recognizable collective identity; and the ideological narrative that results in specific ways of collective storytelling of political goals. To these traditional dimensions, we can add the communication component that not only represents an organizational tool but also substantially redefines the cultural procedures through which forms of participatory democracy and territorial mobilization are triggered. Communication thus becomes a strategic tool of empowerment, fostering the development of new forms of horizontal leadership, along with the emergence of proactive political action that effectively welds pre-political vocation and civic engagement.

Active citizenship, on the other hand, emerges as an articulated response to the forms of cultural incorporation of neoliberalism. Following Giovanni Moro's (2013) working definition, it can be conceptualized as "a citizenship practice that consists of a multiplicity of organizational forms and collective actions aimed at implementing rights, caring for common goods and/or supporting subjects in weakened conditions". This citizenship is characterized by the significant diversification of organizational forms operating in cross-cutting fields of social action, often deliberately distant from traditional party politics. The "technologies" of active citizenship include tools of direct action (charters of rights, listening facilities), resource mobilization procedures, innovative forms of public interlocution, and creative modes of institutional activation (from lobbying to legal action to

direct management of services). This active citizenship occupies an extremely strategic interstitial space within civil society, characterized by informality and self-organization, which allows for the development of forms of participation that escape both the spaces of traditional political representation and the conventional areas of the third sector.

## 4. COMMUNITIES OF RESISTANCE, CONNECTIVE LOGIC, AND VULNERABILITY AS A TRANSFORMATIVE RESOURCE

The emergence of digital ecosystems has fostered the development of entirely new modes of political action based on what Bennett and Segerberg (2013), more than a dozen years ago, theorized as "connective logic". This logic is characterized by the personalization of communication in protest networks and the strategic centrality of digital platforms as autonomous organizational hubs. There are three ideal types of medial political action that emerge from this analysis: organizationally mediated collective action; organizationally enabled connective action; and people-directly enabled connective action. They show how different communicative ecosystems become spaces of conflict between power and counter-power. They also require the elaboration of new strategies of critical and solidarity-based communication, especially in the context of an increasing fragmentation of the public sphere.

The role of digital ecosystems in the transformation of urban spaces and community perceptions presents dynamics of considerable complexity. As Andreas Hepp has lucidly shown in his studies on deep mediatization, digital media have created unprecedented changes in the ways of inhabiting and re-signifying urban space, radically transforming the ways through which communities form and reproduce. The theoretical distinction between mediatized and mediatizing communities helps illuminate the complex relationships between digital tools and community formation. While the former represent local processes that critically incorporate media (families, groups of friends, territorial communities), the latter characterize trans-local processes typical of emergent formations. Within liminal spaces, for example, both types coexist creatively, facilitating the growth of the potential for intensive territorialization and simultaneous de-territorialization.

Liminal spaces, in this framework, represent a particularly significant area of analysis to understand contemporary forms of urban resistance. Characterized by their threshold existence between dominant urban frameworks, these spaces embody multiple processes of transformation through the simultaneous dynamics of refiguration and marginalization. Unlike dominant spaces, which are clearly defined in their functions and meanings, liminal areas systematically resist categorization, existing in states of continuous transition where individual and collective identities remain constitutively fluid. These spaces experience complex processes of refiguration through polycontextualization, deep mediatization and translocalization, but also dynamics of marginalization that include vulnerabilization, gentrification and defamiliarization. It is in this constant tension that the transformative potential of liminal spaces is generated. The communities of resistance that inhabit and signify these spaces operate as the active antagonists to the logics of neoliberal transformation through various strategic mechanisms. In the case of gentrification, for example, several strategies/tactics manifest themselves: a) promotion of cooperative and non-speculative forms of housing; b) preservation of public and community gathering spaces; c) activation of artistic and cultural practices rooted in the territory; and d) reaction of solidarity networks between historical and new residents.

Figurational transformation, which echoes in part Elias' concept of figuration, sees different social formations coexisting and interacting within transitional contexts: traditional family structures, formal and informal interest groups; civil society actors with unique organizational characteristics; precarious artisanal and entrepreneurial formations; as well as formations that consciously operate in an a-legal dimension (Morlino 2011). Polycontextualization, a phenomenon that involves the multiplication of contexts and interpretive frames, creates simultaneous challenges and opportunities for resistance. The presence of different cultures and subcultures within the same social space generates creative overlaps, productive conflicts and forms of mutual indifference that can both strengthen community ties and create strategically usable internal divisions.

The concept of universal vulnerability, as elaborated by Martha Fineman (2016), provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of subjects in liminal spaces. Vulnerability is not only configured as a condition of weakness to be overcome, but as a dynamic relational state that can be transformed into a strategic resource for collective action and social innovation. Empirical research conducted in some Italian metropolitan areas (Antonucci, Sorice and Volterrani 2024) reveals how vulnerability is articulated through multiple dimensions that include participatory processes and resource availability, formal and substantive rights frameworks, the complex relationship between immediate needs and

long-term aspirations, and the different spheres of life in which vulnerabilities concretely manifest themselves. This multidimensional framework clearly shows how vulnerabilities systematically intersect across social, economic, environmental, and existential domains. They generate complex layers of marginalization that require necessarily nuanced and contextualized approaches to empowerment.

Empowerment[3] through resistance practices is developed through "bottom-up" participatory processes[4] that emphasize genuinely collective decision-making logics, solidaristic mechanisms of resource sharing, complex networks of mutual aid as well as the development of effectively community-driven projects. These practices differ markedly from standardized institutional approaches in their emphasis on authenticity, durability, and mutuality of participatory processes. The collective response to vulnerability unfolds along several axes of action: a) transformation of individual goods into commons; b) creation of networks of mutual support and protection; c) multilevel approach that considers needs and aspirations; and d) potential for conscientization and empowerment through edu-communication pathways (Freire 1970). In this scenario, hybrid participation models, which creatively integrate online engagement and physical presence, create new possibilities for inclusion by addressing growing digital inequalities, while firmly maintaining the rootedness of community action in physical spaces. This hybrid approach facilitates expanded forms of community engagement, rebalances differential levels of digital capital, creates multiple entry points for participation, and effectively preserves the continuity of participatory processes over time.

An analysis of documented experiences in Italian (but not only) metropolitan contexts suggests the concrete emergence of an alternative to neoliberal urban regeneration, characterized by genuinely community-centred approaches that systematically prioritize social regeneration over mere spatial transformation. These approaches are distinguished by an emphasis on relational intensity and density, the integration of multiple stakeholder perspectives, and the strategic recognition of local knowledge and expertise. The incorporation of cultural and artistic practices within resistance strategies simultaneously serves as a mechanism of opposition to neoliberal logics and a concrete tool for community empowerment. Art, for example, emerges as a privileged medium for the critical reappropriation of public space. Cultural production becomes a fundamental mechanism of community identity formation. Performances and forms of artistic expression are configured as genuine political actions. Creative practices are translated into tangible forms of social innovation. Many communities of resistance organically integrate environmental concerns into their daily practices through concrete urban gardening initiatives, sustainable resource management projects, the participatory creation and maintenance of public green spaces, and environmental education programs that link sustainability and social justice. They move, in other words, in the logic of "rebelling by doing".

## 5. THE NEW CHALLENGES

Resistance communities inevitably experience internal contradictions that require constant and deliberate management. The difficult balancing act between openness to the outside world and maintaining internal community coherence, the democratic management of often divergent aspirations and needs among members, the need to continually negotiate issues of leadership and hierarchy, and the challenging task of dealing with power dynamics that reproduce even within the most egalitarian communities. The long-term sustainability of these resilient practices remains an open challenge, made complex by structurally limited resources and funding, the often over-reliance on volunteer labour, constant institutional pressures toward formalization, and delicate generational transitions in leadership.

The numerous experiences in different (and not easily comparable) areas of the planet highlight the possibility of alternative futures, even within the constraints of neoliberal hegemony, particularly when communities actively and consciously engage in the creation of meaningful spaces for collective action and social transformation. This means projecting the activity of social researchers into the role of guides towards positive changes in society: researchers "are ordinary human beings who have dedicated their lives to create knowledge" (Valsiner 2017: 23). They are themselves part of the socio-cultural phenomena they study, therefore, the resulting knowledge they produce is configured in a dual modality. On the one hand, they formulate scientific answers to real problems without providing the

[3] The concept of "empowerment" is traditionally linked to that of "agency" and often to a deterministic idea of the social actor as a function of "objectified" advantages and benefits. This use of the concept of empowerment has been appropriately pinned on by criticism from feminist theories and theorizing from "colonial studies". Here we use the concept of empowerment as a political possibility of "taking the floor" by subjects.

[4] We use the expression "bottom-up" recognizing its considerable ambiguity as well as potential scientistic bias. Here, however, we use it in the simplifying sense that refers to dialogic and cooperative forms of participation

solution, but by proposing possible paths to take to improve the need in question. On the other, they allow for the development of a "critical and active citizen" very close to the ideal type of the "well-informed citizen" by Schütz (1946). Revisited in light of today's society (Mangone 2014), it seems to hope for the affirmation of a modern citizenship that is no longer configured only as a right, but also as a duty. For which the constitution of a socially approved and shared knowledge becomes a priority. It is to be developed through a reflexivity that is neither subjective nor structural but correlated to the order of reality of the social relationship, and which acts as an essential guide for social cohesion and solidarity. As social researchers, therefore, we have a responsibility to adopt a critical paradigm in the analysis of these phenomena. Starting with a substantial renewal of the theoretical and methodological tools of the social sciences, capable of capturing the complexity of emerging forms of political participation and development of alternative imaginaries to the dominant one. In this perspective, the uses of mixed methods should be framed, incorporating within them also creative methods (Giorgi, Pizzolati and Vacchelli 2021). This means, among other things, that the task of researchers cannot be limited to describing and interpreting the phenomena of resistance but should actively contribute to the construction of those spaces of possibility that can give meaning to a project of democratic and inclusive social transformation.

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