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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. PROLEGOMENA FOR A SOCIOLOGY OF PRECARIOUS DWELLING. EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSTURE AND EMPIRICAL CONSTELLATIONS

The monographic issue, entitled *Precarious Dwelling. Everyday Practices, Caring Relations, and Meaning-Making Processes*, constitutes the outcome and the deepening of an articulated international research path launched within the framework of the Grande Progetto di Ateneo (Major University Project) of Sapienza University of Rome<sup>2</sup>. This investigation was specifically oriented toward the theoretical problematization and empirical observation of contemporary morphologies of housing marginality, with the aim of analyzing the intrinsic co-implication between the configurations of urban space, trajectories of poverty, and the dynamics of subjectivation processes.

The theme of precarious dwelling has been investigated through three fundamental analytical nodes: housing and the connected demand for a home, socio-settlement morphologies, and the qualitative and symbolic dimension of dwelling. The various essays making up this volume offer a critical reading of these transformations within the context of contemporary cities, which are dramatically marked by processes of social polarization, the financialization of the real estate market, and the neoliberal redefinition of urban policies. In this perspective, housing precarity is not interpreted exclusively as a condition of material deprivation linked to the possession of or access to adequate housing. On the contrary, it configures itself as a multidimensional and processual phenomenon that simultaneously invests the economic, relational, symbolic, and affective spheres of existence.

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<sup>2</sup> Specific reference is made to the research project *Theorizing Urban Space through Crossing Bodies: Homelessness in Rome (in Comparison with São Paulo)*, funded by Sapienza University of Rome under the “Grandi Progetti di Ateneo” (Major University Projects) 2023 grant scheme, and coordinated by Anna Maria Paola Toti as Principal Investigator. For an initial systematization of the research results, focused on the intersection between spatial stigma and vulnerability, see: P. Do, L. G. Fassari, G. Pompili, A. M. P. Toti, *Crossing Stigmatizing Spaces of Homelessness and Mental Distress*. in *Sicurezza e Scienze Sociali*, XII(3), 2024, pp. 43–59.

The focus of the research centers on the intersections between social inequality, structural urban violence, everyday relations, and spatial marginality. In doing so, the volume carefully avoids a purely victimizing reading of marginality, instead valorizing the dimensions of agency – the capacity for action – and the subjectivation pathways of social actors. The objective is to understand how subjects in conditions of vulnerability negotiate their daily presence in the city, build formal and informal support networks, and develop strategies of adaptation, resistance, and reappropriation. Urban space, indeed, does not constitute a mere neutral background for social action, but rather a conflictual, asymmetrical field of continuous negotiation where different forms of power, devices of visibility/invisibility, recognition, and stigma confront one another. The spatial configurations of the city reflect and, at the same time, contribute to reproducing social hierarchies and regimes of accessibility.

As a consequence, precarious dwelling becomes a privileged lens through which to observe not only the devices of exclusion and subjection, but also the practices of infra-political resistance and the forms of mutual care that emerge at the margins. The theoretical goal is to understand how intersectional inequalities, situated biographies, and “struggles for subjectivity” (McDonald 1999) contribute not only to inscribing themselves within urban space, but also to actively producing it, continuously redefining its boundaries, uses, and meanings. In this framework, the city is understood as a dynamic field of forces in which Foucaultian-style devices of surveillance and spatial regulation co-determine – and are in turn challenged by – the daily forms of resistance and tactics of reappropriation theorized by De Certeau (1980). In this light, precarious dwellings cease to be mere zones of social erasure and are reconfigured as heterotopias of resistance-spaces where the marginalized paradoxically leverage their exclusion to enact alternative modes of urban cohabitation. By analyzing these dynamics, the volume unpacks how the subaltern body operates simultaneously as the target of biopolitical containment and as the primary site of an insurgent spatial reclamation, thereby transforming survival into a collective political statement.

The volume places itself within a broad interdisciplinary debate spanning urban sociology, critical geography, poverty studies, and housing research, proposing a reflection on contemporary transformations in the relationships between space, power, and subjectivity. The text intends to map and problematize these mutations, deconstructing the links of interdependence that bind spatial and material dimensions to macro-political logics and to the symbolic structures of urban experience

(Soja, 1996; Harvey, 2006). Adopting an innovative epistemological posture, the research brings macro-political economy into dialogue with the micro-sociology of practices, taking care relations, everyday life, and meaning-making processes as dense observatories (thick descriptions). This integrated approach allows for overcoming the sterile dichotomy that has long divided sociological research on housing between the grand macro-analyses of political economy and radical micro-sociological and ethnographic drifts. It thus demonstrates how the macro-dynamics of global financialization and urban extractivism translate directly into the bodies and rooms of inhabitants, and how the latter’s daily responses are not mere passivity, but forms of insurgent citizenship capable of counter-acting upon structures.

To empirically anchor this theoretical framework, the volume articulates a constellation of situated case studies. The different investigation contexts gathered here do not operate as simple local illustrations of global dynamics; on the contrary, they bring to light significant analytical convergences and morphological constants in the interaction between collective action, biographical lived experience, and institutional responses, revealing the intrinsically biocapitalist nature of the contemporary city, where life itself is put to value and, simultaneously, resists. And it is precisely within this analytical perimeter that the opening essay of the issue is situated, entitled *Misery of Position and the Crisis of Possibility. New Forms of Poverty in Contemporary Democracies*. This contribution provides the theoretical-critical framework of the volume, proposing a radical reconceptualization of social vulnerability by applying Bourdieu’s (1993) categories of “misery of position” and “crisis of possibility”.

These concepts make it possible to highlight how contemporary inequalities are expressed not only through the unequal distribution of economic resources, but also through processes of progressive erosion of opportunities for social participation, access to rights, and the construction of meaningful biographical projects. The notion of “misery of position” describes a form of relational social suffering experienced by individuals who, while not living in conditions of extreme poverty, suffer the frustrations and tensions deriving from their asymmetrical or marginal placement within specific social contexts and fields. It is a distress generated by the mismatch between the subjective habitus and the objective structures of the field, which translates into a daily loss of control over one’s life trajectories, while simultaneously operating a radical deconstruction of the tendency to psychologize or privatize social malaise. What common sense perceives as personal failures, identity crises, or emotional vulnerabilities is reinterpreted

through Bourdieu's lens as an expression of structural violence. This reframing reveals the inherently political character of such lived experiences and demonstrates how seemingly personal experiences of dignity and self-worth are constituted by broader structural dynamics, systemic power relations, and institutional forms of domination.

This framework exposes the structural violence of late-capitalist urbanization, where housing is violently decoupled from its use-value as a place of shelter and care, to be aggressively subsumed as a financialized asset. The "crisis of possibility" is therefore not merely a psychological condition of hopelessness, but a systemic foreclosure of the future: an existential dispossession driven by real estate extractivism that strips vulnerable subjects of their right to stability, predictability, and ontological security.

The epistemological foundation of the Bourdieusian project lies in reconstructing the "space of points of view" through a rigorous relational perspective. The study brings together the narratives of social actors who, despite occupying the same physical spaces, are separated by significant social distances. In doing so, it reveals how spatial proximity may coexist with profound social divisions, generating tensions and misunderstandings rooted in unequal volumes and compositions of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, as well as in structurally divergent life trajectories. Ultimately, perception and understanding of the social world are fundamentally conditioned by one's position within it. Moving from a genealogical examination of the new morphologies of poverty traversing advanced democracies, the Author demonstrates how existential precarization has transcended the traditional boundaries of extreme material deprivation to become a pervasive device. It progressively invests social segments that are formally integrated within the socio-economic structure but subjected to processes of downgrading and a systematic compression of the capacity to plan for the future.

This approach engages productively, on the one hand, with Saskia Sassen's (2014) analysis of processes of expulsion from economic and social systems, which redefine the very geography of inequality in global cities; on the other hand, it evokes Foucault's (2004) mechanisms of biopolitical governmentality, revealing how housing precarity becomes a technology of governance and a means of disciplining bodies and lives. This biographical fragmentation finds a fundamental anchor in Zygmunt Bauman's reflections on liquid modernity (2000; 2003), where the dissolution of social bonds and the institutionalization of uncertainty transform housing vulnerability into a tangible symptom of the condi-

tion of "waste" produced by late modernity. Within Bauman's framework, the excluded individual loses not only the home as a physical dwelling, but also the ontological grounding of legitimate citizenship itself, becoming confined to a suspended temporality devoid of guarantees, and to a deregulated space in which systemic risk is entirely privatized.

These dynamics of territorial and relational uprooting take the form of what Loïc Wacquant defines as "advanced marginality", a radically new regime of socio-spatial exclusion characterized by the retrenchment of the welfare state and the parallel expansion of the penal state. Within this framework, territories marked by housing precarity are subjected to processes of territorial stigmatization. According to Wacquant, segregation and the spatial confinement of urban outcasts no longer generate historical forms of collective solidarity, such as those associated with the Fordist ghetto; instead, they produce fragmented and isolated social spaces in which the stigma attached to place of residence becomes an insurmountable structural barrier, constraining and ultimately suffocating individuals' biographical trajectories.

This existential and segregative dimension joins historically and analytically with Gino Germani's (1976) sociological lesson on the processes of modernization and marginality: contemporary housing precarity can be re-read as an updated form of "asymmetrical integration" or "social deactivation", in which the urban transition does not translate into emancipation, but rather into a structural fracture between the objective assimilation to consumption or urban logics and the actual institutional and normative isolation of the marginalized subject, reproducing forms of alienation that undermine the very foundations of democratic cohesion. Faced with these excluding and expulsive drifts, the planning and analysis of space necessitate an epistemological paradigm shift that Leonie Sandercock (1997) has masterfully outlined in her theory of the cities of cosmopolitan destiny, postulating the transition toward inclusive and heteroglossic urban planning models capable of giving voice and dignity to those communities traditionally relegated to invisibility or considered "insurgent"; Sandercock's call to listen to ordinary stories and to valorize the memory and identity of the margins offers the indispensable theoretical legitimization to connect planning to spatial justice.

The experiences of housing precarity thus appear closely intertwined with broader forms of social, employment, and relational insecurity that invest the very capacity of individuals to imagine their future. The heuristic and original core of the volume resides, therefore, in the deconstruction of the daily dimension of pre-

carious dwelling, taken as the cornerstone for interpreting contemporary forms of marginality and resistance through the conceptual triad that gives the monographic issue its title.

The first axis, focused on “everyday practices”, highlights how, when faced with a hostile urban environment and institutional policies that oscillate between welfare abandonment and the criminalization of poverty, individuals must develop an intense activity of negotiation and micro-resistance, including the informal occupation of empty spaces, the functional adaptation of dilapidated or overcrowded housing, and the invention of survival tactics; these micro-actions configure a true politics of the everyday that constantly calls into question the legitimacy of the geometries of institutional power.

The second analytical pillar is constituted by “caring relations”, understood in the sense of affective social infrastructures and informal solidarity networks (family, neighborhood, or community bonds) which, operating as bottom-up social shock absorbers, attenuate the destructive effects of isolation and fragmentation imposed by urban neoliberalism, revealing the intrinsically relational character of vulnerability and transforming dependence into a collective resource.

Finally, the third axis explores “meaning-making processes”, namely the symbolic and cognitive dimension through which subjects interpret, justify, and subvert their condition of precarity, allowing social actors to deconstruct public stigma, build a sense of “home” and refuge within instability, and convert spaces of exclusion into places dense with biographical value, claim, and dignity.

In conclusion, the volume does not configure itself simply as an anthology of studies on housing distress, but as a true scientific manifesto for a critical sociology of urban space. Through the lens of precarious dwelling, the crucial nodes of contemporary political change are laid bare: the crisis of liberal democracy and its welfare inclusion systems, the subsumption of daily life by the logics of capital, and the pervasiveness of spatial control devices. However, the emphasis placed on ordinary practices, on care relations, and on meaning-making processes allows for tracing the existence of a widespread infrastructure of resistance, capable of producing disruptive material and symbolic effects within the folds of urban change. It is in these daily struggles that the boundaries of citizenship are redefined and alternative forms of sociality and management of the common goods are experimented with, launching a crucial theoretical and methodological challenge to contemporary sociology.

The various contributions making up the issue invite us, indeed, to overcome the historical fracture

between macro and micro-analysis in order to equip ourselves with a gaze capable of descending into the minutest folds of daily life without ever losing the compass of structural critique. The deep objective of this approach is not only to understand the biopolitical mechanisms and economic devices through which today’s metropolises actively produce exclusion, segregation, and marginality, but also to radically overturn the classical perspective. Marginality, in fact, ceases to be described as a mere place of passivity or victimhood to configure itself as a frontier space of radical possibility, from which it becomes possible to imagine and build different cities. In this view, the act of listening to “voices from the margins” and valorizing the subjective dimension of lived experience is not a simple methodological choice, but the prerequisite for tracing new spaces of opposition, awareness, and resistance.

It is precisely within these spaces that the expression “dwelling from below” becomes charged with a profound political meaning: to dwell no longer means merely to physically occupy a place or to find shelter, but to claim the right to the city through the re-signification of space. Re-signifying urban space means removing it from the logics of the commodity-city and real estate speculation to restore to it a use-value based on sociality, solidarity, and the community reappropriation of the commons. Through self-management, informal practices, and associationism, the places of exclusion are rewritten by the inhabitants themselves, transforming the urban void or the segregated neighborhood into a laboratory of active citizenship. This metamorphosis of places and their meanings paves the way for a true paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense (Kuhn 1962). Faced with the structural failures of neoliberal urban models, there emerges the need for an unprecedented alliance between theoretical research and action on the ground, capable of radically redefining the key concepts of coexistence: a social justice founded on spatial equity, a substantial citizenship based on concrete practices of belonging, and an open, inclusive community oriented toward the care of the shared interest.

In the final analysis, the transition toward the “cosmopolis” of rights and dignity outlined by Sandercock (1997) demands a sociology that is no longer merely descriptive or reportorial, but rather a sociology of emergencies. Dwelling from below means recognizing that vulnerable subjects are not the passive recipients of theoretical categories dropped from above, but the producers of a living critical theory. The scientific manifesto outlined here thus configures itself as an act of epistemological justice: restoring voice, conceptual depth, and political dignity to those practices which, in the very moment

they struggle for a shelter, challenge the existing urban order and radically interrogate the coordinates of the democracy to come.

## 2. PRECARIOUS DWELLING AS A SOCIAL CONDITION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

Over the last two decades, housing has progressively moved to the centre of public debate and sociological inquiry. Rising housing costs, the retrenchment of welfare systems, labour market flexibilisation, the financialisation of urban space, and the increasing instability of life trajectories have transformed access to housing into one of the most critical dimensions through which contemporary inequalities are produced, experienced and reproduced (Clapham 2005; Aalbers 2016; Madden and Marcuse 2016; Rolnik 2019; Moos 2019). Yet the housing question can no longer be reduced to the problem of providing shelter or ensuring access to a dwelling. Rather, it has become a privileged lens through which to observe broader transformations affecting social citizenship, urban governance, welfare regimes and everyday life.

The notion of *precarious dwelling* proposed in this Special Issue emerges precisely from the need to move beyond narrow understandings of housing deprivation. While homelessness, housing exclusion and residential insecurity remain crucial dimensions of contemporary marginality (FEANTSA 2005), precarious dwelling refers to a wider and more complex condition. It designates the growing uncertainty that characterises the relationship between individuals and the spaces they inhabit, the fragility of the social ties that make dwelling possible, and the instability of the symbolic frameworks through which people construct meanings of home, belonging and security (Somerville 1992; Padgett, Henwood and Tsemberis 2015).

From this perspective, dwelling cannot be understood as a static condition. Following a long sociological tradition, dwelling appears instead as a process: a situated and relational practice through which individuals negotiate their position within society, organise everyday life, establish social relationships and construct biographical continuity (Somerville 1992; Clapham 2005; Palvarini 2010). To dwell means not simply to occupy a physical space, but to transform a space into a meaningful place through routines, attachments, memories, expectations and social interactions. Consequently, housing insecurity extends well beyond the absence of a roof or legal tenure; it concerns the erosion of those material, relational and symbolic conditions that allow

individuals to inhabit the world with a minimum degree of stability and predictability.

This special issue starts from the assumption that precarious dwelling constitutes one of the most revealing manifestations of contemporary processes of social transformation. Economic restructuring, labour precarisation, welfare retrenchment, demographic changes and intensified mobility have progressively weakened the institutional arrangements that traditionally provided individuals with relatively stable life trajectories (Dovis and Saraceno 2011). The transition from industrial to post-industrial societies has generated new forms of uncertainty that increasingly affect housing pathways, transforming residential stability from a relatively widespread condition into an unevenly distributed resource (Clapham 2002).

The global financial crisis of 2008 represented a turning point in this process. In many countries, housing markets became central mechanisms through which inequalities were produced and accumulated. Housing increasingly ceased to function primarily as a social good and became a financial asset, subject to speculative logics and market volatility. Simultaneously, urban transformations associated with tourism, gentrification and real-estate investment have contributed to the displacement of vulnerable populations and the emergence of new forms of residential exclusion (Smith 1996; Harvey 2008; Cocola-Gant 2016). More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic further exposed the centrality of housing inequalities. During lockdowns and restrictions, domestic space became simultaneously a place of work, education, care and isolation, revealing the unequal distribution of housing resources and the differentiated capacities to cope with crisis.

These transformations have stimulated an extensive body of literature on housing precarity, homelessness, residential insecurity and housing pathways (Clapham 2005; Bramley and Fitzpatrick 2018; Pleace and Hermans 2020). Nevertheless, much of this scholarship remains fragmented across disciplinary fields and often focuses either on structural dynamics or on individual experiences. One of the ambitions of this Special Issue is precisely to reconnect these dimensions by analysing precarious dwelling as a phenomenon located at the intersection between macro-social transformations, meso-level institutional arrangements and micro-level everyday practices.

The concept of precarious dwelling adopted in this issue embraces a broad analytical scope. It includes conditions traditionally associated with housing deprivation, such as homelessness, housing exclusion and severe marginality, but also forms of insecurity experienced by

individuals who formally possess a dwelling while lacking stable access to the social and economic resources necessary to sustain it (DeLuca and Rosen 2022). In this sense, precarious dwelling should not be understood as a residual condition affecting a limited segment of the population. Rather, it increasingly represents a continuum of vulnerability traversing contemporary societies.

Such a perspective resonates with wider sociological debates on precarity. Since the late twentieth century, scholars have described how uncertainty has progressively become institutionalised within labour markets, welfare arrangements and life courses (Castel 2003; Dovis and Saraceno 2011). Precarity has ceased to be an exceptional condition and has instead become a structural feature of contemporary capitalism. Housing trajectories are deeply embedded within these broader dynamics. Residential instability, insecure tenures, unaffordable rents, overcrowding and forced mobility increasingly affect individuals whose biographies are marked by fragmented employment careers, unstable family arrangements and weakened social protections (Clapham 2005; Arundel 2017).

The contributions collected in this Special Issue show how individuals develop everyday strategies, relational networks and symbolic resources that enable them to navigate precarious housing conditions (Meo 2008; Appadurai 2004; Krumer-Nevo 2008). Dwelling therefore emerges not only as a site of vulnerability but also as a terrain of agency, negotiation and meaning-making.

The articles collected in this Special Issue explore these dimensions from different empirical and theoretical perspectives, offering a multifaceted understanding of precarious dwelling and its implications for contemporary societies.

Following the opening essay, *Misery of Position and the Crisis of Possibility. New Forms of Poverty in Contemporary Democracies* by Anna Maria Paola Toti, this reflection is further developed by Maria Alessandra Molè in *Dwelling as a Wicked Problem: Housing, Inequality and Precarious Life Trajectories*. Drawing upon housing studies, urban sociology and qualitative research conducted in Rome, the article conceptualises dwelling as a wicked problem characterised by multidimensional interdependencies that escape linear policy solutions (Rittel and Webber 1973; Gallent 2019). Housing emerges as a crucial social infrastructure whose growing commodification generates new forms of vulnerability and inequality (Madden and Marcuse 2016; Rolnik 2019).

The historical roots of these processes are explored by Vincenzo Romania and Tommaso Bertazzo in *From Ferrarotti's Baraccati to Roma Camps. The Long Wave of*

*Housing Marginality*, the authors reveal how residential segregation and marginality are historically produced and institutionally reproduced through long-term mechanisms of exclusion, drawing in particular on Ferrarotti's studies of Roman shanty towns and on debates on Roma camps, segregation and institutional marginality (Ferrarotti 1970; 1974; Picker 2017; Sigona 2015).

The following contributions shift attention towards housing interventions and inclusion strategies. In *Collaborative Housing Strategies: The Case of "Widespread Reception" by Caritas Diocesana in Rome*, Carmelo Bruni and Matteo Finco analyse innovative forms of collaborative accommodation that seek to counter housing exclusion through community-based practices and relational support networks. Their contribution is situated within debates on homelessness, welfare mix and territorial responses to housing exclusion (FEANTSA 2005; Saraceno *et al.* 2020).

The focus then moves to the everyday experience of precarious dwelling. In *Dwelling Among the Ruins*, Paolo Do examines how people experiencing homelessness transform archaeological ruins into provisional yet relatively durable spaces of habitation. Through an original ethnographic perspective, the article shows how continuity and stability are actively produced through situated spatial and temporal practices, even under conditions of extreme uncertainty. The contribution dialogues with urban ethnography and the sociology of space, while drawing attention to the temporal organisation of survival and the situated production of dwelling (Ferrarotti 1970; DeSilvey 2017; Duneier 2016).

Similarly, Giuseppina Tumminelli's *The Right to a Home: Housing Strategies and Social Inclusion of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors and Youth Foreigners* highlights the central role of housing in the transition to adulthood among migrant youth. Drawing on the literature on unaccompanied foreign minors and the "triple transition" to adulthood, migration and trauma, the article shows how access to stable accommodation represents a crucial condition for autonomy, citizenship and social integration (UNICEF and Médecins du Monde 2018).

Questions of intervention, care and professional responsibility are addressed by Andrea Gollini in *«Two Heads Are Better Than One but They Must Be Good Ones»: Ethical and Methodological Challenges of Social Work With «people Living on the Street»*. The article explores the dilemmas faced by social workers operating in contexts of severe marginality, highlighting the tensions between care, autonomy and social justice. Interpreted through Relational Social Work and the Poverty-Aware Paradigm, the contribution shows how helping practices must negotiate the boundaries between support

and control, protection and freedom, accompaniment and substitution (Folgheraiter 1998; 2011; Krumer-Nevo 2016).

Finally, Maria Chiara Pedroni's *Legal Aid at the Margins: Realising Rights for People Experiencing Homelessness in Italy* concludes the collection by focusing on access to justice and the practical realisation of rights. The article demonstrates how citizenship and housing rights are not simply formal entitlements but social processes that depend upon everyday practices of mediation, advocacy and institutional recognition. In doing so, it contributes to debates on access to justice, non-take-up, administrative barriers and the role of intermediary actors in fragmented welfare systems (Halvorsen Rønning and Hammerslev 2018).

Taken together, these contributions show that precarious dwelling cannot be reduced to a housing problem alone. Rather, it constitutes a privileged lens through which to observe broader transformations affecting inequality, citizenship, care, social exclusion and everyday life. By connecting structural processes with lived experiences, historical trajectories with contemporary challenges, and vulnerability with agency, the Special Issue highlights the centrality of dwelling for understanding the contradictions and possibilities of contemporary societies.

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