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Vol. 16, N. 32 • 2025

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Indice

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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*

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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 democ-

racy 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 counterpower. 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

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[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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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Digital Antagonisms: AI, Neoliberalism, and the Shaping of Global Power Dynamics

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Abstract. As artificial intelligence (AI) penetrates global society, its convergence with neoliberal ideologies continues to reconfigure power in profound and often troubling ways. Recent geopolitical shifts—including changing U.S. foreign policies, rising techno-nationalism, and contested debates over AI governance—have deepened these dynamics. This paper examines the evolving interplay between AI and neoliberalism, focusing on how these forces intersect to reshape global structures of power in the digital era. By analyzing AI's role in sustaining neoliberal rationalities, it explores how digital technologies influence political, economic, and cultural landscapes. Ultimately, the study questions whether AI merely reinforces systems of profit and control, or if it also opens spaces for democratic renewal and alternative futures.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, neoliberalism, global power, governance, techno-nationalism.

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence has become a defining feature of contemporary governance, mediating how global institutions organize power, allocate resources, and manage social life. Operating within the logic of neoliberalism – marked by deregulation, privatization, and faith in market efficiency – AI-driven systems increasingly optimize decision-making while deepening pre-existing inequalities. The convergence of AI and neoliberalism thus represents not only a technological but also an ideological transformation of modern governance.

1. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: DIGITAL BLISS OR PRIMROSE PATH?

As AI technologies spread across societies, they restructure social and economic life in ways both promising and perilous. Taiwanese expert Kai-Fu Lee notes that recent breakthroughs have made AI «poised to change our lives», driving cars, managing finances, and even replacing jobs-devel-

opments «full of both promise and potential peril» (Lee 2018: X).

American analyst Michael Kanaan similarly warns that AI will generate both compatible and conflicting applications – some consistent with democratic standards, others that may «shake the foundations of our societies and undermine our core ways of life» (Kanaan 2020: XIII–XIV).

Ray Kurzweil identifies deeper structural risks inherent in superintelligent systems, from misuse and outer misalignment to inner misalignment – scenarios where AI fulfills commands literally but disastrously, exposing humanity to existential dangers (Kurzweil 2024: 5, 278-279).

Building on these perspectives, Eliezer Yudkowsky and Nate Soares (2025) describe potential threats posed by artificial superintelligence capable of exceeding human control. Such warnings reflect a growing recognition that technological evolution must be matched by ethical and institutional foresight.

As I have argued elsewhere, solutions must address the «exponentially accumulating problems of rapidly globalizing humanity» (Alalykin-Izvekov 2025). For the philosopher of technology Andrew Feenberg, this requires democratizing technological design itself. He insists that «a good society should enlarge the personal freedom of its members while enabling them to participate effectively in a widening range of public activities», because «the design of technology is thus an ontological decision fraught with political consequences» (Feenberg 1991: 3). Excluding citizens from such decisions, he argues, reproduces inequality and alienation in the very fabric of modern life.

2. THE NEOLIBERAL AI PARADIGM

2.1. Historical Context

The integration of AI into neoliberal systems marks a fundamental transformation in governance, commerce, and social organization. Rooted in market efficiency and privatization, neoliberalism has adopted AI as a tool for optimizing production and management. Algorithmic governance – where decisions are increasingly delegated to automated systems – now defines the administrative logic of contemporary capitalism (Zuboff 2019).

While efficiency remains its core justification, such automation consolidates power in the hands of a few global corporations that dictate public policy through opaque algorithms. Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias describe this as data colonialism, arguing that «human life is quite literally being annexed to capital» through the capture and monetization of data (Couldry and Mejias 2019: XI).

Sandro Mezzadra and colleagues (2019) expand this critique, noting that contemporary capitalism reshapes politics through extractive operations – of labor, resources, data, and culture. Shoshana Zuboff situates AI at the center of this transformation, describing surveillance capitalism as a system that «claims dominion over human, societal, and political territories», «constituting a coup from above» that undermines popular sovereignty and threatens democratic consolidation (Zuboff 2019: 21).

This fusion of AI and neoliberalism emerged in the late twentieth century with the automation of markets and bureaucracy. In the twenty-first century, AI platforms expanded across finance, logistics, and digital surveillance – concentrating wealth and decision-making power. Governments, instead of constraining this trend, often adopted similar technologies to enhance efficiency, thereby internalizing market logics within public institutions.

The social cost of such systems is sharply revealed in Virginia Eubanks' account of «digital poverty management», where automated eligibility models and predictive algorithms stigmatize and surveil the poor. She finds that these systems «discourage [citizens] from claiming public resources» and expose their private lives «to government, commercial, and public scrutiny» (Eubanks 2018: 11). Efficiency, in this context, comes at the expense of equality and civic trust.

2.2. Market-Driven Efficiencies

Within the neoliberal AI paradigm, efficiency becomes both means and ideology. Corporations deploy AI across every operational layer – from risk management to logistics – to enhance profitability and predictive control (Pasquale 2020).

The financial sector epitomizes this process. High-frequency trading algorithms execute millions of transactions per second, generating immense profits while amplifying systemic volatility. As James Bridle observes, «our technologies are complicit in the greatest challenges we face today», for they empower «selfish elites and inhuman corporations within systems the public no longer understands» (Bridle 2018: 2-3).

Data-extraction economies exemplify how AI entrenches neoliberal norms. Technology giants such as Google, Meta, and Amazon transform behavioral data into capital, producing what Couldry and Mejias call «data colonialism» – the commodification of human experience itself. This process normalizes surveillance while reproducing global inequality.

2.3. Privatization of AI Research and Development

A defining characteristic of the neoliberal AI order is the dominance of private capital in research and innovation. Whereas early AI breakthroughs were largely funded by public agencies such as DARPA, today's ecosystem is shaped by powerful corporations that control both infrastructure and data.

This privatization has generated a regime of proprietary algorithms that largely evade democratic scrutiny. Concerns about transparency, accountability, and ethical oversight are frequently subordinated to the protection of intellectual property. Nevertheless, public institutions retain a crucial role: setting ethical frameworks, financing open research, and safeguarding the possibility that AI might serve collective – not purely commercial – interests.

3. GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS AND AI GOVERNANCE

3.1. Global Implications of AI as Strategic Technology

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming global power dynamics. In the 21st century, geopolitical competition increasingly revolves around technological supremacy. AI now sits at the intersection of national security, economic growth, and political governance. Its governance is therefore not just technical but strategic, shaping interstate relations, regulatory frameworks, and global stability.

Experts note, that AI will influence international relations in many ways – military planning, trade, strategic communications. AI is not inherently authoritarian nor inherently democratic. It can improve cooperation or exacerbate surveillance and tensions. Its proliferation accelerates existing trends rather than creating a radical shift. Scholars and states must understand AI's effects in their specific political, social, and economic contexts. AI will be central to future international relations, and preparation is essential. (Arsenault *et al.* 2024: 975)

John J. Mearsheimer emphasizes the limits of idealistic foreign policy. The scholar notes that liberal hegemony aims to spread liberal democracy and open economies worldwide. While morally and strategically appealing, great powers cannot fully pursue it without considering the balance of power. They may speak like liberals but act like realists. Policies ignoring realism often lead to regret (Mearsheimer 2018).

3.2. AI and Shifting Global Power Structures

The development and deployment of AI technologies are actively reshaping global hierarchies. AI expert David Shrier observes:

Already, AI has changed the course of global politics, and, for better or for worse, threatened US hegemony. It has introduced new uncertainty into financial markets. It has suddenly become a topic of conversation in boardrooms around the world. AI has the potential to reshape the geopolitical landscape. Now. A smaller nation like Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Singapore, or Israel can be on level footing with superpowers like the United States and China. It's the new nuclear age, but instead of splitting atoms, we're chasing electrons. (Shrier 2024: 1).

The U.S. and China lead in AI, but with distinct models. China uses state-led, centralized AI development, integrating civilian and military sectors. The U.S. relies on decentralized, market-driven innovation led by private firms. As experts warn, digital repression strengthens state control:

According to American political scientist Steven Feldstein, digital repression enhances states' abilities to carry out more traditional forms of repression. He observes that digital repression uses technology to surveil, coerce, or manipulate citizens. Its tools – surveillance, censorship, social manipulation, Internet shutdowns, targeted persecution – often overlap, extending the state's reach. (Feldstein 2021)

The EU, though lacking AI dominance, leads in norms and regulation via the AI Act (2024). India and Russia leverage AI to enhance domestic industries and military capacity. This diversification complicates global AI governance.

3.3. Competing Models of AI Governance

AI governance dilemma reflects broader ideological and geopolitical contestations. Three primary models have emerged on the international stage:
– *The Liberal-Democratic Model* (U.S., EU): Centers on ethical AI development, transparency, and multistakeholder governance. This model supports regulatory frameworks that mitigate risks while fostering innovation and protecting civil liberties.
– *The State-Controlled Model* (China, Russia): Prioritizes national security, surveillance capacity, and centralized AI development. This model often includes strict regulatory regimes governing data and AI deployment within sovereign digital infrastructures.

– *The Emerging Hybrid Model* (India, Brazil, ASEAN nations): Attempts to balance innovation with regulation, drawing selectively from both liberal-democratic and state-controlled paradigms. These hybrid systems are still in flux, often shaped by geopolitical pressures and domestic developmental needs.

The coexistence of these competing models has led to significant regulatory fragmentation, complicating efforts to establish global AI norms and shared governance frameworks.

3.4. AI, National Security, and Cyber Sovereignty

AI technologies are becoming increasingly integral to national security doctrines. From autonomous weapons and cyber warfare to AI-driven intelligence systems, these developments are reshaping the strategic calculus of modern militaries. Thus, AI increasingly drives military strategy.

Paul Scharre notes that AI transforms warfare, just as mechanization did in the 20th century. It enables smarter, faster machines for narrow tasks. Some uses – logistics, cyberdefense, medical support – are uncontroversial. Fully autonomous weapons, however, represent a paradigm shift. Once deployed, they operate beyond human control and are vulnerable to hacking, with potentially vast consequences (Scharre 2018).

Branka Panic and Paige Arthur explain that AI in drone swarms, facial recognition, and deepfakes raises military and human rights concerns. Investment in defense and AI grows rapidly, spanning situational awareness, autonomous weapons, and battlefield healthcare (Panic and Arthur 2024).

Michael Kanaan observes that while some AI applications align with Western values others may threaten core societal structures by infiltrating institutions undetected (Kanaan 2020).

And Ian Bremmer warns that future wars may use weapons far deadlier than tanks, planes, or atomic bombs, extending beyond traditional theaters (Bremmer 2022).

3.5. The Future of Global AI Governance

The future trajectory of AI governance remains unsettled, as diverse state and non-state actors contest its normative and institutional foundations. Key developments to monitor include:
– *Multilateral Initiatives:* Frameworks such as the OECD's AI Principles and ongoing United Nations discussions on AI ethics underscore attempts to create shared governance standards, though implementation remains uneven.
– *Regulatory Fragmentation:* Diverging AI regulations across geopolitical blocs risk undermining international cooperation and inhibiting technological innovation.
– *AI and Economic Hegemony:* AI's role in shaping future trade agreements, investment flows, and global value chains is likely to determine emergent economic hierarchies.

As AI continues to evolve, so too will the struggle over its governance – reflecting and reinforcing the broader realignments in global power.

4. ALGORITHMIC CONTROL AND DIGITAL INEQUALITY

4.1. AI and Structural Inequalities

The rapid proliferation of AI within contemporary socioeconomic systems has intensified existing inequalities, embedding systemic biases and deepening the digital divide. Algorithmic control – the delegation of critical decision-making to AI systems across domains such as governance, law enforcement, finance, and labor – has emerged as a key mechanism of neoliberal governance. This section explores how AI technologies contribute to the reproduction of social disparities, the expansion of surveillance regimes, and the entrenchment of economic precarity.

AI systems are increasingly deployed in decisions that affect vital aspects of human life, including employment screening, credit scoring, housing allocation, and welfare administration. However, these systems frequently replicate and amplify entrenched social biases. Search engine algorithms have been shown to reflect and reinforce racial and gender stereotypes, while algorithmic welfare assessments disproportionately penalize low-income individuals, exacerbating economic marginalization (Eubanks 2018).

The discriminatory implications of AI are especially pronounced in facial recognition technologies, which have consistently demonstrated higher error rates for individuals from non-white racial backgrounds (Benjamin 2019). These biases are not merely technical anomalies; they reflect deeper structural inequalities embedded in the data used to train AI systems. In this way, AI risks becoming a digital extension of historical injustice – an infrastructure of inequality masquerading as innovation.

4.2. Surveillance, Predictive Policing, and Labor Automation

Algorithmic control is prominent in surveillance and predictive policing. AI models trained on historical crime data assess risk and allocate policing resources, disproportionately targeting low-income and racialized communities (Pasquale 2020). Predictive policing often criminalizes poverty, reinforcing carceral logics and cycles of structural violence.

AI-driven automation also reshapes labor markets. Manufacturing, logistics, and retail increasingly rely on algorithms and robotics. Low-wage and precarious workers face job displacement and economic disenfranchisement. Ruha Benjamin coined the term *New Jim Code* to describe how supposedly neutral technologies reproduce race and class discrimination. She writes: «*Race after Technology* integrates science and technology studies (STS) and critical race studies to examine coded inequity. The power of the New Jim Code lies in its ability to introduce racist logics through hidden algorithmic design» (Benjamin 2019: 34).

While automation promises efficiency, the neoliberal focus on markets over social welfare leaves displaced workers with limited opportunities for reskilling or reintegration (Couldry and Mejias 2019).

4.3. Economic Stratification Through Algorithmic Systems

AI deepens economic stratification. *Technological redlining*—the exclusion of marginalized groups from credit, jobs, and services – illustrates AI-induced inequality. Eubanks documents how financial AI systems deny loans to historically disadvantaged communities, perpetuating poverty. She notes:

> Though these new systems have the most destructive and deadly effect in low-income communities of color, they impact poor and working-class people across the color line. While welfare recipients, the unhoused, and poor families face the heaviest burdens of high-tech scrutiny, they aren't the only ones affected by the growth of automated decision-making. The widespread use of these systems impacts the quality of democracy for us all. (Eubanks 2018: 12)

Belgian philosopher of technology Mark Coeckelbergh references a «Kafkian» instance of an innocent Western citizen recently being arrested due to a faulty AI algorithm.

> There is now a new way in which all this can happen, indeed, has happened, even in a so-called "advanced" society: one that has to do with technology, in particular with artificial intelligence (AI). On a Thursday afternoon in January 2020, Robert Julian-Borchak Williams received a call in his office from the Detroit Police Department: he was asked to come to the police station to be arrested. Since he hadn't done anything wrong, he didn't go. An hour later he was arrested on his front lawn, in front of his wife and children, and, according to the New York Times: "The police wouldn't say why." [...] The New York Times journalist and the experts she consulted suspect that "his case may be the first known account of an American being wrongfully arrested based on a flawed match from a facial recognition algorithm. (Coeckelbergh 2022: 2)

The gig economy provides another salient example. Platforms such as Uber, Deliveroo, and Amazon Flex rely on opaque algorithmic systems to assign tasks, set wages, and evaluate performance. These systems often function with minimal transparency and little to none worker input. As a result, platform workers face unpredictable incomes, exploitative working conditions, and limited avenues for recourse (Couldry and Mejias 2019).

5. CULTURAL NARRATIVES AND AI

5.1. AI as a Neoliberal Tool for Cultural Reproduction

AI technologies have become central to the reproduction of neoliberal cultural paradigms. Through algorithmic content generation, recommendation systems, and predictive analytics, AI reinforces dominant ideologies and market-oriented values. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) argues, the data-driven economy depends on the commodification of human experience, transforming digital interactions into sources of behavioral surplus. This economic logic is inherently aligned with neoliberalism's commitment to privatization, deregulation, and the subordination of public discourse to corporate interests.

AI-generated content – from news articles and social media posts to entertainment media – is frequently shaped by the biases embedded in training data and algorithmic objectives. These technologies privilege certain narratives while marginalizing others, amplifying hegemonic perspectives aligned with existing power structures. As such, AI acts not merely as a technical system but as a cultural apparatus, reproducing neoliberal hegemony by filtering, ranking, and circulating content that serves the logic of commodification and control.

5.2. Influence of AI on Public Discourse and Democracy

AI's influence on public discourse is most visible in the realm of algorithmic curation, where recommendation engines and engagement-optimization algorithms determine what information reaches audiences. These systems, optimized for attention and profitability, have contributed to the rise of echo chambers and ideological silos, undermining the foundations of deliberative democracy. Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias (2019) describe this dynamic as a form of data colonialism, where human communication is restructured to serve extractive data regimes rather than civic engagement.

AI-facilitated manipulation of political narratives – particularly via disinformation campaigns, social bots, and algorithmically amplified propaganda – poses serious challenges to democratic institutions. Deepfake technologies, microtargeted messaging, and automated content generation have been used to influence elections, distort public perception, and erode trust in democratic processes (Pasquale 2020).

Personalization algorithms, by tailoring information flows to user behavior, reinforce pre-existing beliefs and minimize exposure to dissenting views. This results in a fragmented public sphere where consensus-building becomes increasingly difficult, and democratic participation is reduced to algorithmically curated individual experiences.

5.3. AI-Generated Media and Societal Perceptions

One of the most culturally disruptive consequences of AI is the emergence of synthetic media – deepfakes, AI-generated audio, and hyperrealistic imagery – that challenge traditional markers of authenticity. As James Bridle (2018) warns, we are entering a «new dark age», in which the distinction between truth and fabrication is increasingly opaque. This epistemic instability undermines public trust in media, scientific knowledge, and institutional authority.

The implications of AI-generated misinformation are far-reaching. False narratives spread through synthetic media have incited public unrest, manipulated financial markets, and fueled geopolitical tensions (Eubanks 2018). These developments raise critical questions about the governance of digital truth, the ethics of generative AI, and the future of communicative trust.

In response, scholars and policymakers advocate for regulatory interventions to ensure transparency in AI-generated content. Proposals include mandatory labeling of synthetic media, algorithmic audits, and the development of AI literacy programs aimed at equipping individuals with the skills to critically evaluate digital information (Benjamin 2019).

6. RESISTANCE AND DIGITAL ANTAGONISMS

6.1. Forms of Resistance

6.1.1. Hacktivism and Counter-Algorithms

Hacktivism constitutes a vital front in the struggle against algorithmic hegemony. Activist collectives such as Anonymous have long employed digital sabotage to expose abuses of power and disrupt state-corporate control over information flows (Bridle 2018). As AI systems increasingly mediate governance, finance, and surveillance, new forms of resistance have emerged in the form of counter-algorithms – technological interventions designed to evade, subvert, or reveal the inner workings of opaque AI infrastructures.

Adversarial attacks on facial recognition systems, for example, expose the vulnerabilities of surveillance technologies while highlighting their ethical risks. These interventions demonstrate that AI is not infallible; rather, it is structurally fragile and politically contested (Eubanks 2018). Such tactics foreground the political agency of those seeking to undermine AI's monopolization of power.

6.1.2. Grassroots Movements Challenging AI Hegemony

Grassroots resistance has become an essential site of contestation against the monopolization of AI by state and corporate actors. Digital rights organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) advocate for data transparency, user privacy, and algorithmic accountability, directly challenging the extractive logic of surveillance capitalism (Couldry and Mejias 2019).

Equally significant is the mobilization of labor in response to AI-driven workplace automation. Gig economy workers, often subjected to opaque algorithmic management systems, have organized strikes and legal campaigns demanding transparency and fair treatment. These collective actions reveal a growing political consciousness among digitally exploited populations (Pasquale 2020), signaling a broader pushback against algorithmic injustice.

6.2. AI Ethics and Alternative AI Frameworks

6.2.1. Open-Source AI Models for Ethical Development

American AI expert Meredith Broussard is making a case against *technochauvinism* – the belief that technology is always the solution. The author argues that it's just not true that social problems would inevitably

retreat before a digitally enabled Utopia. According to the thinker, digital innovation does not create utopia. In reality, technology has increased inequality, facilitated illegal activities, undermined the press, spread junk science, harassed people online, and concentrated power. Social problems persist; humans remain central. Technology should serve all humans, not a select few (Broussard 2018).

Ethical AI frameworks emphasize transparency, fairness, and explainability, aiming to challenge the «blackbox» nature of proprietary algorithms. These initiatives propose that algorithmic systems should be auditable and accountable to the public, rather than exclusively serving corporate or state interests.

In response to the concentration of AI development within a handful of powerful corporations, open-source AI models have emerged as a counter-hegemonic alternative. Initiatives originally motivated by principles of transparency and shared innovation – such as the early phases of OpenAI –demonstrate the potential for communal knowledge production in AI systems. Though many of these efforts have since been partially commercialized, they continue to inform debates about ethical AI governance.

6.2.2. Community-Led Technological Innovation

Beyond institutional reform, resistance is increasingly expressed through community-led technological innovation. Federated and decentralized platforms such as Mastodon represent alternatives to centralized, profit-driven social media networks. These technologies embody principles of digital autonomy, allowing communities to determine their own governance protocols.

Parallel efforts promoting data sovereignty advocate for individual and collective ownership over digital footprints. By reclaiming control over personal and communal data, such initiatives resist the commodification of human experience under surveillance capitalism (Benjamin 2019). These developments reflect a broader ambition to restructure the technological ecosystem around participatory and equitable values.

6.3. Prospects for Democratizing AI

6.3.1. Policy Proposals for Equitable AI Governance

Policy frameworks aimed at regulating AI present both opportunities and limitations for democratizing technological systems. The European Union's AI Act is a landmark example of an attempt to impose constraints on high-risk AI applications, including those involved in biometric surveillance and social scoring (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019). It exemplifies a rights-based approach to AI governance that prioritizes human dignity and ethical accountability.

In contrast, the regulatory landscape in the United States remains fragmented. Tensions persist between advocates of industry self-regulation – grounded in neoliberal commitments to innovation –and proponents of stronger public oversight. As Shoshana Zuboff contends, this ambivalence reflects a deeper ideological struggle over whether technology should serve markets or democratic publics.

The scholar writes:

The decades of economic injustice and immense concentrations of wealth that we call the Gilded Age succeeded in teaching people how they did not want to live. The knowledge empowered them to bring the Gilded Age to an end, wielding the armaments of progressive legislation and the New Deal. Even now, when we recall the lordy "barons" of the late nineteenth century, we call them "robbers." Surely the Age of Surveillance Capitalism will meet the same fate as it teaches us how we do not want to live. It instructs us in the irreplaceable value of our greatest moral and political achievements by threatening to destroy them. It reminds us that shared trust is the only real protection from uncertainty. It demonstrates that power untamed by democracy can only lead to exile and despair (Zuboff 2019: 524)

6.3.2. Strategies for Inclusive Technological Development

Democratizing AI requires structural changes in how AI systems are designed, funded, and governed. Efforts to diversify participation in AI research and development – particularly by historically marginalized communities – are essential in addressing the biases embedded in current systems (Couldry and Mejias 2019). Representation not only improves system outcomes but also challenges epistemic hierarchies that privilege dominant perspectives.

Collaborative models of AI governance, inspired by principles of participatory democracy, are gaining traction. These approaches emphasize deliberation, co-creation, and community accountability, offering a vision of technology development rooted in collective agency rather than elite control (Bridle 2018). As digital antagonisms continue to unfold, such frameworks hold promise for reclaiming technological futures in the service of social justice.

7. CIVILIZATION, AI, AND DIGITAL ANTAGONISMS

AI technologies intersect with civilizational processes, influencing the long-term dynamics of societies. The integration of algorithmic governance into political economies accelerates the concentration of power, often privileging dominant civilizational narratives while marginalizing peripheral societies. AI-driven decision-making, surveillance infrastructures, and digital labor systems reinforce structural hierarchies and influence global civilizational trajectories.

Technological innovation does not occur in a vacuum but interacts with existing civilizational strengths, weaknesses, and cultural patterns. AI amplifies existing inequalities and reshapes the distribution of global influence, with implications for both institutional stability and social cohesion. Civilizational analysis underscores that the long-term consequences of AI are not only economic or political but also deeply cultural and structural.

These insights suggest that understanding AI's role in society requires attention to civilizational dynamics. By examining patterns of rise, crisis, and adaptation, scholars can better anticipate the societal impacts of AI and design governance frameworks that are sensitive to historical and cultural contexts.

8. CONCLUSIONS

a) Artificial Intelligence has been deeply integrated into neoliberal political economies, functioning both as a tool of optimization and a mechanism of control. Its design and deployment prioritize efficiency, surveillance, and profit over equity and human dignity, reinforcing the logic of market fundamentalism across global systems.

b) Far from being ideologically neutral, AI systems operationalize and intensify existing socio-economic hierarchies. From algorithmic policing to labor management, these technologies reproduce biases, stratify populations, and deepen systemic injustice – necessitating urgent ethical oversight and democratic intervention.

c) AI is not only an economic and political force but also a cultural apparatus that shapes public discourse through content curation and media manipulation. In doing so, it distorts democratic deliberation, marginalizes dissent, and embeds neoliberal ideologies within the epistemic fabric of everyday life.

d) The governance of AI is now central to geopolitical competition. As states vie for dominance in AI innovation and standard-setting, global power dynamics are being recalibrated. Diplomatic frameworks and international cooperation will determine whether AI development fosters collective security or entrenches global inequality.

e) AI is also a contested space. Hacktivism, grassroots mobilizations, and open-source movements challenge the hegemony of corporate and state actors. These acts of resistance underscore the political malleability of technological systems and point toward alternative futures grounded in social justice and collective agency.

f) Democratizing AI demands a fundamental reimagining of technological governance. This includes participatory design, representational inclusion, data sovereignty, and public accountability. As algorithmic systems increasingly mediate vital aspects of life, the challenge is not only technical but deeply political – requiring sustained engagement across civil society, policy, and academia to ensure AI serves democratic ends rather than neoliberal imperatives.

g) AI functions as both a catalyst and reflection of civilizational dynamics, reinforcing structural hierarchies while reshaping cultural, political, and economic trajectories. By interacting with historical patterns of societal rise, crisis, and adaptation, it amplifies dominant narratives and marginalizes peripheral societies, influencing long-term social resilience. Understanding AI through a civilizational lens highlights that its impacts extend beyond economics and politics to deeply cultural and structural domains, emphasizing the urgent need for governance frameworks that are historically informed, ethically grounded, and oriented toward equity, adaptation, and collective societal well-being.

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Resistance Communities. Processes of Participation, Symbolic Conflicts and Liminality

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Abstract. This paper examines resistance communities as critical actors in socio-political transformation within an increasingly digital society where social relationships shape collective action despite the atrophy of community norms. Investigating communities in liminal spaces facing economic, environmental, and cultural crises, we analyze how they challenge power structures through collective action and symbolic resistance. Our research examines the European Cerv Co-Green project across four countries and two grassroots associations in Rieti province defending mountain ecosystems. Through participant observation, workshops and interviews (2022-2024), we identify the forms of aggregate resistance, bonds of belonging, and differences between digital and non-digital approaches. We propose a conceptual model systematising the four activation spheres of resistance communities within the nexus identified in resistance studies concerning the interplay between the individual and collective dimensions, as well as constructive and destructive dissent. These spheres are: individual-value, communicative-relational, operational-strategic and socio-political-territorial. The model offers a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of liminal resistance experiences.

Keywords: resistance, social participation, liminal spaces.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly digital society, social relationships and interactions significantly shape individuals' perspectives and forms of collective action. However, there is also a marked atrophy of implicit social and community norms, crushed on the strictly individual dimension. In this scenery resistance communities have emerged as critical actors for socio-political transformations. These communities arise in liminal spaces (Sorice and Volterrani 2023) facing economic, environmental, and cultural crises. They challenge dominant power structures through collective action, cultural production, and symbolic resistance, often blending digital and physical engagement

strategies. As «the failure of resistance ought to be differentiated from the failure to resist» (Chandra 2015: 565) and so from the relevance to study resistance, the following questions guided this study:

RQ.1. What forms of aggregate resistance do communities create? RQ.2. To what extent can this resistance structure bonds of belonging, processes of knowledge and symbolic rupture in the public sphere? RQ.3. What differences, challenges and opportunities emerge between the digital and non-digital practices among communities?

The paper focuses on two case studies (macro and micro) that are emblematic for analyzing complex forms of bottom-up resistance, both mediated by European projects and spontaneous:

a) the European Cerv Co-Green project, which involved liminal communities in Italy (Panebianco, Cosenza, Magione), Poland (Górno, Starachowice, Elbląg), Croatia (Drenova, Opatija, Njivice) and Greece (Karditsa) to activate and accompany the bottom-up ecological transition through the youths, b) the grassroots associations PosTribù and Balia dal collare in the province of Rieti (central Italy). Founded in 2009 and 2020, they both safeguard the water and mountain ecosystem. The former shows in its name the overcoming of the return to tribalism of individual interests in favour of social and environmental justice, the latter takes its name from the bird typical of the centuries-old beech forests of Terminillo mountain, which is threatened with extinction due to new anthropisation plans.

The structure of the contribution opens with a critical reconstruction of the neoliberal framework, problematising the individual and collective dimensions in the growing individualisation of society in relation to political ecology. It then outlines studies that highlight the relationship between community and social resistance action and educommunication. The qualitative methods adopted are then presented and include participant observation, workshops and interviews (period 2022-2024). The results propose the peculiarities and limitations emerging from the communities investigated, while in the discussion and conclusion we present a conceptual model that systematises the activation spheres of the resistance community and offers a more nuanced understanding of it, namely the individual-value, socio-political, operational-strategic and operational-relational spheres.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Questioning neoliberalism through social disintegration and political ecology

The contemporary social landscape is increasingly characterized by processes of individualization and the emergence of micro-identities that challenge traditional notions of social cohesion. Neoliberalism serves as the foundational context for these transformations, representing what Antonucci *et al.* (2024: 164) describe as the «substantial marketisation of public life and 'commodification' of social relations». This perspective conceives neoliberalism as a global political rationality (Dardot and Laval 2019) with profound implications for communicative processes, giving rise to what Dean (2019) terms communicative capitalism. The latter is the transformation that occurs in language when communicative processes merges with capitalism, becoming central to capital accumulation. The emptying of collective meanings in favour of their circulation in the media implies the crisis of the logic of the general, wherein civil, political, and democratic citizenship is being emptied of its original principles of equality and social inclusion (Reckwitz 2025 [2017]).

This singularization process extends beyond individuals to encompass objects, spaces, and even forms of social aggregation, creating what Reckwitz terms «singularized collectives» – neo-communities that coalesce around specific historical, geographical, or ethical uniqueness. These communities operate on a logic that attracts those similar to themselves while rejecting others, fundamentally challenging sociology's central research question regarding integration capacity in plural societal contexts. Unlike in classical modernity, where social groups were perimetered and institutionalized by politicizing particular pre-political social bases, in singularized collectives, identity politics functions as an antagonistic affirmation operating on the dual track of valorization and devalorization. The resulting differential nature emphasizes not just particularity but a non-dilutable uniqueness in relation to others, characterized by internal complexity and density involving ethical, aesthetic, and planning dimensions. The bonding rather than bridging nature of such groups presents a significant challenge to social integration (Reckwitz 2025 [2017]).

This perspective aligns with Kossowska *et al.*'s (2023) framework detailing how individual motivation and social influence processes interact with media use, giving rise to virtual loyalties (micro-identities) and the construction of parallel social realities lacking cohesion with the broader community. Importantly, the authors note that the Internet serves as a facilitating environ-

ment rather than the root cause of micro-identity emergence. Drawing on Durkheim's notion of disintegration, they describe the breakdown of social structures, values, norms, and institutions essential for community cohesion, leading to a prevalence of self-interest and loss of control and restraint, resulting in eroded trust, cooperation, and shared purpose (Kossowska *et al.* 2023). This perspective shifts attention away from technological determinism toward understanding the individual and psychological dynamics, as well as individual and collective resources, that shape polarization. Contrary to popular discourse about echo chambers and filter bubbles, also Bruns (2019) argues that we are experiencing polarization rather than fragmentation in the public sphere. He shows that filter bubbles and echo chambers are relatively minor effects primarily responding to human attitudes, emphasizing instead the importance of examining political demagoguery's transformation of public debate.

In this vein, Kossowka *et al.* (2023) explains how individuals and groups harbor a fundamental need to feel respected, recognized, and valued, making them highly sensitive to experiences of diminished significance stemming from relative deprivation, humiliation, rejection, unfair treatment, and loss of social standing. This framework provides crucial context for understanding Bruns' (2019) critique of echo chambers, especially considering the fundamental role of the public sphere as difference-friendly integration and integration-friendly differentiation based upon inclusive strategies towards those who are excluded (Della Porta 2022). As Della Porta (2022) argues, thanks to progressive social movements there are multiple (including subaltern) and counter public spheres that function as spaces of conflict but also of reciprocal recognition. Thus, social movements are constructing a European public sphere, which implies the relativization of national identity, a politics of recognition, critical and deliberative forms of culture, and inclusive conceptions of a European polity based on solidarity.

Although reconstructed in literature as deliberative, the digitalisation of collective processes of public awareness needs to be verified in terms of symbolic and substantive effectiveness, also taking into account the strong micro-identity fragmentation that inevitably has repercussions at the community level. This complex tension between neoliberalism, individual action and collectivity also calls into question the limits of anthropocentrism. In this regard, Bennett (2009) refers to a vibrant ecology of the world, considering ethics as a complex set of relationships between moral content, aesthetic-affective styles and public moods.

The author adopts a micropolitical perspective, according to which soft and psychocultural identity issues shape and reshape ethical sensibilities and social relations and are therefore themselves foundational and political, especially in neoliberal rationality. Bennett (2009: 8) argues that «there will be no greening of the economy, no redistribution of wealth, no application or extension of rights without human dispositions, moods and cultural sets favourable to these effects». A further advance in anthropocentric criticism is provided by Alaimo's eco-crip theory (2017), which proposes reflecting on the contiguity between the mind-body and its social and natural environments. Challenging traditional neoliberal conceptions that privilege individual responsibility over collective action and structural change.

This ecological perspective finds resonance in contemporary environmental communication scholarship. Hannouch and Milstein (2025: 5) emphasize that «communication is a powerful social force in mindset and paradigm shifts, including in the production of identities», with regenerative forms of environmental communication potentially expanding ecocentric identification even within predominantly anthropocentric contexts. They note how social media enables individuals to discover like-minded communities and engage in political action, viewing these platforms less as a tool and more as agential when it comes to social change.

Ruiu *et al.* (2024) further complicate this picture capturing the interplay between structure and agency in shaping climate perception. This stems from a conceptualization of political and economic development based on *Ecological Modernization Theory* (EMT), which optimistically attributes the ability to address environmental issues to neoliberal institutions and modernization processes. However, the neoliberal dismantling of structural certainties embedded in a risk-stratified system where individuals are simultaneously perpetrators and victims (Ruiu *et al.* 2024). They identify a blaming/empowering paradox, rooted in a constructivist conceptualization of climate change vulnerable to interpretation. Such relativism can become instrumental in maintaining the status quo and serving certain economic interests (Ruiu *et al.* 2024). The relationship between the strong individualisation of society and the possibility of forming communities capable of social change through individual and collective agency will be explored in more detail in the next section.

2.2. A challenging mixture: resistance, community and educommunication

The concept of resistance is fluid and multifaceted, encompassing everyday practices, cultural upheavals and direct action (Scott 1990). A key theoretical perspec-

tive is that of «everyday resistance» (Lilja 2022), which highlights the subtle forms of opposition that emerge every day. Rather than engaging in large-scale protests or clashes with the state, many communities – which we can define as communities of resistance – operate through alternative narratives, micro-political actions and countercultural expressions, a prime example being the Palestinian people as is widely acknowledged in literature and digital communication (de Certeau 1984, Bayat 2013), up to and including current, daily, and atrocious testimonies of citizens on Instagram as a form of denunciation. Lilja (2022: 207) further elaborates on this perspective by observing that «resistance takes place in asymmetrical contexts and can be parasitic on power and/or feed it and undermine it at the same time». In this perspective, resistance actively engages with power through a dynamic combination of avoidance strategies, breaking patterns of resistance and building alternative subjectivities, narratives and communities.

This conception challenges simplistic dichotomies between power and resistance, pointing instead to their complex interrelation and mutual constitution. Chandra (2015) offers complementary insights by framing resistance as negotiation rather than denial of social power, which encompasses ambiguous or ambivalent acts in everyday life. This nuanced approach recognises that resistance itself can be to some extent empowered, but not completely, and this allows social change to occur at least in part from below. This perspective is in line with another crucial concept in resistance studies: liminality. It was initially introduced in anthropological studies to describe transitional phases in which identities and structures are renegotiated. In resistance communities, liminality manifests itself both through the marginalisation of specific groups occupying spaces of exclusion and through their ability to construct new forms of belonging and alternative imaginaries (Turner 1969, Thomassen 2014).

In a recent theoretical proposal, Mikael *et al.* (2023) problematise resistance in the context of neoliberal capitalism, emphasising that resistance must be understood contextually, as it changes with the economic, political and cultural topographies of power over time. They identify a relative silence in the literature regarding the various forms of activity that lie between individually and collectively organised resistance activities. These include individual resistance – which is neither hidden nor avoided and therefore does not fit neatly into the conventional conception of everyday resistance – and broader movements of dissent that tend to go unnoticed and avoid attention, such as those that «appear hidden online and are not easily detectable by observers as

they would be in spectacular mass mobilisation events» (Mikael *et al.* 2023: 62).

The researchers' approach shifts the focus from resistance against something to resistance that is productive of new lifestyles, institutions and so on. They suggest that resistance manifests itself through practices that produce and structure subjectivities, ways of life, desires and bodies, destabilising, displacing or replacing such production. These practices of resistance sometimes take digital forms, such as digital commons and open-source initiatives. Resistance thus emerges «in the collective/individual nexus and at the intersection of constructive/destructive dissent», with practices understood as «(1) a combination of avoidance, breaking, or constructive; (2) different resistance strategies that change/evolve over time; and (3) one resistance strategy enabling another» (Mikael *et al.* 2023: 74).

Symbolic conflicts are central to these dynamics of resistance. Many resistances communities struggle for meaning, using cultural symbols, digital media and performative actions to challenge dominant discourses. Media and communication technologies play a key role in these struggles, shaping both the internal organisation of resistance communities and their external visibility. The rise of digital activism and decentralised networks has further complicated traditional notions of power and agency in digital cultures (Couldry 2012, Bonini and Treré 2024). It is precisely at this intersection of communication, resistance and community formation that educommunication emerges as a powerful vehicle for community building beyond traditional social movements. Educommunication is a philosophy and practice informed by the work of Freire in the field of popular education (Freire 1985, 2022 [1970]).

Barbas and Treré (2022) were the first to highlight its fruitfulness in relation to the interpretation of social movements, due to the epistemological development it brings and its transdisciplinary nature, which establishes relationships of continuity between communicative and educational processes in a global, dynamic and interdependent way. Conceptualised as the communicative dimension of education and the educational dimension of communication, educommunication adopts a transformative approach as «a form of socio-critical pedagogy that conceives media both as educational agents and as means and tools for learning to participate in social and political processes» (Barbas and Treré 2022: 4). In this perspective, educommunication is committed to empowering citizens through the use of media and promoting long-term cultural and social transformations. The epistemology of educommunication goes beyond formal social movements to embrace various forms of resistance

aimed at expanding spaces for political participation and developing practices of radical democracy.

This conceptualisation of educommunication as a community-building process is in line with and expands Mikael *et al.*'s (2023) notion of resistance as productive of new lifestyles and institutions. By integrating communicative and educational processes, educommunication creates spaces where resistance practices can generate alternative subjectivities and communities outside traditional institutional frameworks. These communities can emerge not only as reactions to dominant power structures, but as creative laboratories for new social arrangements and political imaginaries. In this way, educommunication acts as a bridge between individual resistance practices and collective transformation, enabling the development of communities capable of sustaining resistance over time and cultivating the capacities necessary to imagine and realise alternative futures.

3. AIMS AND METHODS

This study uses a qualitative methodological approach with the aim of identifying the dynamics through which resistance communities are formed, organised and sustained over time involving digital and non-digital processes. Highlighting the limits and opportunities of hybrid participatory actions (Antonucci *et al.*, 2024), symbolic and cultural conflicts in territorial liminalities and digital ecosystems (Sorice and Volterrani 2023), the study adopts an agerarchical stance inspired by edu-communication and action research. This theoretical direction recognises collaboration between researchers and community actors, seen as co-researchers, as the key to long-term knowledge mobilisation

processes (Battisti and Volterrani 2025). Since exploring contextual ideas and critical issues allows for the recognition of individual perspectives, which contribute to critical knowledge, ethnographic research was conducted in the physical and digital spaces. The two case studies analyzed are macro and micro complex forms of bottom-up resistance, concerning the comparative international perspective of the European Cerv Co-Green project and the italian grassroots associations PosTribù and Balia dal collare. The first involved supporting the ecological transition of young people in five European countries, with parallel public and participatory discussions with associations and institutional representatives from the territories. As the European project included scheduled meetings, we list the main ones in the following Table 1.

The second concerns the spontaneous and organized initiative of two small environmental associations focused on protecting the natural ecosystem of the area of Rieti. The study involved participating in public demonstrations, observing interactions during activist meetings, and participating in online discussions on encrypted messaging platforms. The two-year ethnographic and participant observation approach (2022-2024) aimed to capture the everyday practices of resistance and the performative aspects of collective action for both the Co-Green project and the two organisations PosTribù and Balia dal collare (Balsiger and Lambelet 2014, Costa 2024). Specifically, the perception of struggles, the management of internal disagreements and strategies for future actions were explored in terms of symbolic resistance, also through the integration of informal in-depth interviews with key members, including activists, organisers and community participants. Ethically, the authors adhered to the code of conduct of the University of Rome Tor Vergata, ensuring transparency, anonymity and

Table 1. Co-Green Project main events.

Date	Type	Participants by Gender and Country	TOT
Sep. 23-24, '24	HR	**F**: IT: 2, GR: 0, HR: 24, PL: 2 **M**: IT: 1, GR: 2, HR: 7, PL: 0	38
Nov. 29, '24	Online	PL: 32, IT: 29, HR: 21, GR: 22	104
Jan. '23 – Nov. '24	Multi-location	**F**: IT: 95, GR: 76, HR: 55, PL: 256 **M**: IT: 60, GR: 44, HR: 33, PL: 75 **Non-binary**: 9	703
Sep. – Oct. '24	Multi-location	**F**: PL: 60, IT: 37, HR: 18, GR: 16 **M**: PL: 17, IT: 24, HR: 5, GR: 4 **Non-binary**: 2	183
Nov. 24, '24	Online	PL: 103, IT: 80, HR: 35, GR: 35	253
May-June '24	Multi-location	**F**: IT: 76, GR: 81, HR: 57, PL: 72 **M**: IT: 49, GR: 34, HR: 15, PL: 37	421

Source: Authors' elaboration.

unwritten informed consent to interviewees to rigorously follow a situated and therefore flexible ethics with respect to the socio-cultural context of the research (Zayed 2021).

The interviews explored individual motivations and perceptions of the effectiveness of various resistance strategies, the role of digital media, and the challenges of maintaining long-term commitment. The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically and inductively together with field notes to identify recurring patterns in the dynamics of resistance (Morris 2015, Barbas and Treré 2022). Systematisation was achieved by triangulating the analysis with the content of messaging apps (e.g. WhatsApp) used and online publications, blogs and alternative media sources produced by resistance communities. By integrating these methodological approaches, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of resistance communities, highlighting their participatory processes, challenges and resistance strategies, as outlined in the next section.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Co-Green project

It reveals distinct patterns of environmental engagement across the four participating countries (Poland, Italy, Croatia, and Greece), while also highlighting crosscutting themes that transcend national contexts. This section presents a comprehensive analysis of eco-community engagement approaches and structural factors influencing green transition efforts.

4.1.1. Network development and social capital

Networks emerged as foundational for sustainable environmental action across all participating countries, serving as platforms for knowledge exchange and collaborative action. In Poland, networks integrated economic actors with municipal institutions and volunteer organizations, embedding sustainability within local economic systems. Croatian network development focused on energy democracy, connecting energy stakeholders with citizens through round tables. The formalization of these connections through the *Green Network of Primorje-Gorski Kotar County* (ZMPGŽ) represents a significant institutional outcome. This Croatian approach emphasized energy communities as enabling citizens, entrepreneurs and the public sector to invest in renewable energy projects and take active roles in the energy market, positioning community networks as alternatives to commercial energy companies.

Italian communities prioritized «neighborhood solidarity networks» as essential for increasing mutual support and sense of belonging, linking environmental sustainability with social cohesion. In Magione specifically, stakeholders with economic dependencies on Lake Trasimeno demonstrated high engagement levels, illustrating the intersection between environmental concerns and economic interests. In Greece, network development was framed within Municipal Authorities-Civil Society interaction, highlighting the importance of institutional-citizen collaboration. These networks, both locally and internationally, continued fostering collaboration beyond the project's timeline, encouraging ongoing dialogue among community members, stakeholders, and institutions.

4.1.2 Environmental priorities

Each country demonstrated distinctive priorities shaped by local geography, immediate environmental threats, and climate change impacts. Italian communities, particularly Magione, focused on Lake Trasimeno's ecosystem preservation, addressing climate change effects (drought) and microplastic pollution. They implemented cleanup operations that simultaneously served multiple functions: environmental education, community cohesion, citizen science, and sustainable waste management. Croatian communities emphasized coastal protection and climate resilience, developing practical adaptation measures for climate impacts, especially urban heat management through heat shelter development, white-painting of dark surfaces, and infrastructure planning for heat waves. Croatian initiatives also prioritized food sovereignty through preservation of autochthonous plant varieties, school Mediterranean garden development, and harvesting from abandoned fruit trees for social kitchens.

Greek communities concentrated on climate disaster prevention, particularly flood protection following two floods in three years. Polish activities focused on waste management, environmental education, and green space development, including canal-side green belt development, community gardens, and herb garden initiatives. Furthermore, Polish and Greek initiatives tended toward practical interventions with immediate results, while Italian communities developed comprehensive conceptual visions discussing regenerative and circular economy, bio-architecture, and urban forestry. Croatian communities balanced practical action with systemic approaches, implementing immediate measures while developing roadmaps for energy community development that included simplified registration processes, financial support systems, and municipal leadership in renewable energy development.

4.1.3 Intergenerational collaboration and Demographic engagement

A consistent pattern emerged regarding gender participation, with female participants substantially outnumbering male participants across all four countries. Age distribution showed participation primarily from seniors and youth, with notable absence of working-age adults. Multiple countries emphasized intergenerational collaboration as both strategy and outcome. Polish communities prioritized intergenerational integration through creative storytelling for environmental education, like the *Starachowice Eco-fables* competition connecting seniors and children. Croatian communities emphasized youth engagement, noting that «youth needs to restore trust through interactive, intragenerational, experiential activities that give them a sense of true influence». Italian communities in Cosenza demonstrated inclusive participation across age groups through community-building approaches including public gatherings and community art installations.

4.1.4 Participation barriers

Greek analysis identified barriers including information gaps about environmental organizations, lack of awareness about events, time constraints, and skepticism about effectiveness of participatory processes. Geographic challenges were identified in Polish communities, where the community is spread over a large area lacking public transport. The Greek evaluation noted scarcity of active citizen initiatives to apply pressure on local government as a significant barrier, while observing that most NGOs are not actively utilizing participatory processes.

4.1.5 Institutional dynamics

The importance of *green activists* as community catalysts consistently emerged. In Polish communities, these individuals activate the community and act as links between institutions and the community. Croatian communities emphasized professional youth workers in facilitating meaningful participation. Multiple countries identified institutional barriers to environmental progress. Croatian communities were particularly explicit, citing intensive dependence on fossil fuels and specific projects like marinas for megayachts in Porto Baroš and floating LNG terminal in Omišlja. In Greece, evaluations noted that the university has not been as open to collaborating with the local community as would be beneficial,

while observing insufficient backing to support local actions and long-term projects from the municipality. A common challenge was integrating discrete environmental activities into coherent initiatives. Poland specifically called for continuity, for linking activities together, noting that municipalities have a series of disconnected activities.

4.1.6 Energy Transition Approaches

Croatia uniquely highlighted tensions between local development and external economic interests, noting strong consensus on fostering sustainable development independent of foreign capital and emphasizing local resilience over foreign capital. This reflected concerns about maintaining local autonomy in environmental decision-making. Energy transition emerged as significant, particularly in Croatian and Italian communities. Croatian communities focused explicitly on energy democracy and accessibility, addressing renewable energy sources, specifically energy poverty. Their roadmap emphasized simplified registration processes for energy communities, financial support systems, energy-sharing capabilities, and municipal leadership in renewable energy development, positioning energy communities as actors in the fight against energy poverty.

The Croatian consortium approach stands out for its institutional formalization through the Green Network of Primorje-Gorski Kotar County, which created a structured partnership between citizens, public institutions, and energy stakeholders. This mechanism established governance procedures that balanced grassroots participation with institutional support, creating a sustainable framework for ongoing collaboration beyond the project timeframe. By formally connecting municipal authorities with community initiatives, the consortium model facilitated both policy influence and resource allocation, demonstrating how institutional engagement can amplify rather than constrain community-led environmental action. Italian communities addressed community energy transition through initiatives involving citizens in renewable energy production and discussed projects for energy self-sufficiency, emphasizing citizen agency in energy production rather than energy poverty as a social issue.

4.2. PosTribù and Balia dal Collare

These organizations, active in the province of Rieti, demonstrate distinctive characteristics in their approach to community engagement and social transformation. These local initiatives exemplify the powerful relation-

ship between educommunication processes and resistance practices, showcasing how educational communication strategies can be effectively deployed to challenge dominant paradigms and foster community resilience. Through their work, these organizations have developed context-specific methodologies that merge pedagogical innovation with territorial activism, creating spaces where learning becomes an act of resistance and where communication serves as a tool for reclaiming community identity and autonomy in response to the individualizing forces of contemporary society.

4.2.1. Resisance activators

PosTribù and Balia dal Collare represent remarkable examples of territorial agency activators within the Rieti province, deliberately engaging in proactive resistance by drawing public attention to critical local needs. Despite operating as small groups of committed individuals, these organizations have demonstrated similar approaches in their battles against environmentally detrimental projects and policies, embodying a form of grassroots resistance that challenges institutional power dynamics. PosTribù (2025) achieved a historic victory against biomass plants in the Rieti area through coordinated public mobilization including demonstrations, sit-ins, and awareness campaigns featuring expert discussions on the environmental impacts of such facilities on local ecosystems. Their signature-gathering campaigns ultimately succeeded in halting political action that initially favored these installations. This triumph stands in stark contrast to the ongoing struggle regarding the Farfa River, concerning water concessions disputes between municipalities and the regional government dating back to 1996. In this case, mobilization efforts failed to persuade local municipalities to pursue legal action against Azienda Comunale Energia e Ambiente (ACEA) for environmental damages, despite the corporation's activities nearly depleting the river's springs and causing severe water supply shortages throughout the Sabine territory. This battle faced significant opposition from economic interests that manipulate the information system – notably, the leading local newspaper (Il Messaggero) consistently refused to publish or investigate the situation, as directly experienced by one of this paper's authors who previously collaborated with the news outlet. This media blackout effectively prevented the development of public awareness regarding this critical environmental issue.

Balia dal Collare, appealing to a younger demographic and maintaining a more active presence on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, has been waging its own battle against TSM 2, the ski

modernization plan for Mount Terminillo. While legal proceedings remain ongoing, the organization has leveraged a powerful strategy by reclaiming historical civic usage rights over the territories in question. These rights establish these lands as municipal public property and heritage that cannot be legally sold, transferred, or expropriated (Caroselli and Ciuffetti 2021). This legal approach has significantly hindered development efforts and represents an innovative fusion of historical legal frameworks with contemporary environmental activism. Both organizations exemplify how small but determined groups can effectively challenge powerful economic and political interests through strategic communication, legal ingenuity, and persistent community engagement. Their work demonstrates that resistance is not merely reactive but can be constructively proactive, creating alternative pathways for territorial development while safeguarding environmental resources and community rights.

By activating local agency through multifaceted approaches combining legal strategies, public demonstrations, expert knowledge mobilization, and strategic media engagement, these organizations have managed to transform seemingly inevitable development trajectories into contested spaces where community voices can meaningfully influence outcomes. Their experiences highlight the essential role of independent civic organizations in maintaining democratic checks on development processes, particularly in regions where economic interests might otherwise dominate decision-making processes at the expense of environmental sustainability and community wellbeing.

4.2.2 Community connectors through practices

The distinctive approach of PosTribù and Balia dal Collare lies in their ability to build networks among existing communities across the territory, connecting smaller, scattered associations that already safeguard areas from sustainability and eco-solidarity tourism perspectives. What guides these organizations is personal integrity – persevering even when circumstances appear hopeless, pursuing greater intentions despite limited personal time commitments, maintaining strategic discretion when necessary to protect collective achievements during legal proceedings, and balancing emotional and personal resources with intelligence. The long-term challenge remains significant, with a missing generation of participants and a profound crisis in volunteerism and civic engagement. As one member reflects, «It's as if the great search for self, for finding meaning in one's identity and the intimate desire to discover new values, has caused people to lose sight of others – who we are and

what we can do and demand as a collective, which is always an active part of the surrounding environment in which we live.»

The networking capabilities of both associations enable them to bring an intersectional dimension to their battles and projects. Specifically, PosTribù worked to launch *PosTerremoto*, a project that achieved self-sustainability following the initial emergency of the Amatrice earthquake, connecting farmers across 70 different fractions who came to know each other well enough to exist and resist in depopulated territories. Other initiatives include solidarity purchasing groups, recycling days, and gift markets that offer circumstantial but cyclical opportunities to experience community practices and activation. Additionally, their territorial presence extends to managing free spaces serving citizens as places for meetings, study or prayer in the absence of a mosque in Rieti. Despite limited resources, their strength lies in creating projects that enable territories to move forward autonomously. This connective approach transforms isolated resistance efforts into a cohesive movement, weaving together diverse threads of local expertise and commitment into a resilient fabric of community engagement that can withstand external pressures while nurturing internal solidarity.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our research findings illuminate how resistance communities operate as interpretive communities (Fish 1980) through their collective practices (RQ1). These communities demonstrate constructive resistance by drawing attention to the symbolic value of ecological struggles, demanding rights, and reframing the effectiveness of grassroots civic activation. Their approach is characterized by participatory knowledge production, where communities engage in edu-communication initiatives that empower marginalized groups through collective learning processes (Freire 1970). This co-construction of knowledge becomes particularly vital in contexts where formal institutions fail to address community needs, fostering a sense of agency and collective identity while negotiating the emotional burden of activism. In the spirit of educommunication, they form interpretive resistance communities that disseminate shared meanings to enhance public consciousness, creating spaces where diverse citizens can collaboratively engage in civic discourse.

The liminality of these communities is situated in their renegotiation of spaces and the public aggregation of diverse identities and associations that transform into generative projects (RQ2). These initiatives multiply across territories, offering interconnected counter-public spheres capable of attracting participation and generating tangible impacts for democratic deliberation (see Della Porta 2022). Concrete examples include the successful blocking of biomass plants and the formation of the Croatian consortium. Through symbolic resistance strategies – including artistic expression and performative protest – these communities challenge hegemonic discourses while reclaiming both public spaces and narrative power. This process demonstrates how interpretive communities can structure bonds of belonging by creating shared spaces for civic action, develop processes of knowledge through collaborative activism, and produce symbolic ruptures in the public sphere by challenging dominant narratives about ecological issues and citizen power. However, as our analysis reveals, symbolic resistance alone proves insufficient for achieving concrete political change without direct policy engagement or institutional recognition.

Despite their effectiveness in physical spaces, these communities struggle to inhabit digital environments (RQ3). They prioritize direct, in-person experiences or private communication channels such as WhatsApp groups, showing a limited digital presence. Though they position themselves as alternatives to societal individualization and fragmentation, this form of resistance does not offer a true alternative to communicative capitalism (Dean 2019), lacking even their own alternative media outlets. While some communities engage in hybrid activism – combining digital and online resistance strategies – many face challenges in effectively coordinating between decentralized digital networks and localized, embodied forms of protest. This creates a tension that limits their potential impact. Within the media ecosystem paradigm (Barbas and Treré 2022), the partial absence of media utilization by these interpretive communities constrains their potential pervasiveness in society and confines them to private, situated projects. This exposes them to control by unprepared yet decisive political actors and the interests reflected in legacy media narratives or non-narratives (see Ruiu *et al.* 2024), rather than enabling direct citizen engagement for social change through consensus-building and awareness-raising.

In conclusion, adopting Mikael's *et al.* (2023) proposal of resistance as a link between individual and collective dimensions and between constructive and destructive dissent, we propose the following activation spheres in Fig. 1.

Resistance communities are effectively made up of proactive and monitorial citizens who can operate within their local areas. From this perspective, the individual

Figure 1. Conceptual model of resistance community. *Source*: Authors' elaboration.

and destructive dimension of dissent represents an intimate awareness of resistance that is subsequently transferred to collective action. The core values that guide resistance communities include perseverance in difficult situations and a balance between emotional resources and rationality in the pursuit of collective goals. Furthermore, the ability to recover and reuse historical, legal or cultural elements as tools of contemporary resistance, as demonstrated by the innovative use of historical civil rights to counter neoliberal modernisation projects. In addition, the capacity to link different social, economic and environmental issues within a holistic vision of resistance connects environmental concerns with social solidarity, cultural integration and sustaina-ble economic development. Considering the communicative and relational sphere, the individual and constructive dimension of dissent – focusing on communication and education as tools for transformation – implies the ability to create networks between existing communities and small associations in different territories, connecting different local realities to build a broader and more cohesive fabric of resistance.

The strategic use of educational and communicative processes as tools for social transformation and resistance creates spaces where learning becomes an act of resistance. The collective and constructive dimension of dissent addresses internal negotiations and attractive-ness through strategic approaches. The simultaneous

use of multiple and complementary approaches combining social activism, legal strategies, the mobilisation of specialised knowledge and strategic communication creates alternative channels of communication, combating media blackouts through the strategic use of social media and other platforms. Furthermore, the collective and destructive dimension of dissent – which opposes dominant power structures through deliberative resistance – develops and implements initiatives independent of dominant institutional structures, mobilising to counter environmentally harmful projects and claiming historical civil rights. The commitment to democratic participation in decisions regarding natural and energy resources allows activities to be maintained over time despite limited resources, as demonstrated by projects that become self-sufficient and cyclical initiatives.

These four spheres contribute to the formation and survival of resistance communities over time, functioning in a cycle of influence that is not ordered, in which each reinforces and transforms the others. The scalability of resistance strategies emerges as a critical challenge (Tarrow 2011). While many communities succeed in mobilizing locally, they struggle to expand their influence beyond immediate environments. This limitation, coupled with the fragmentation of participation observed across multiple contexts, raises questions about the sustainability of resistance formations over time. Some communities persist through evolving strategies, while others dissolve due to internal conflicts, repression, or shifts in the political landscape. The question of how communities adapt their resistance practices in response to repression and co-optation from state institutions and private actors remains central to understanding their potential for lasting impact and structural change.

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Counter-Resistant Digital Communities: The Impact of Truth Social in a Fragmented Society

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Abstract. In today's digital landscape, social media platforms serve as central spaces for political communication and community building. However, the growing fragmentation of information has fostered ideological polarization and the emergence of closed environments, such as Truth Social, launched by Donald Trump following his exclusion from traditional channels. Focusing on the U.S. case, this study examines how Truth Social functions as a refuge for groups perceived as isolated from mainstream discourse, offering a context of cultural and political "resistance" that often conveys identitarian and exclusionary visions. The article explores communicative dynamics and the construction of political identity within this alternative digital space, where the algorithm rewards engagement regardless of the reliability of the content. The result is a progressive radicalization, fuelled by echo chambers and filter bubbles that strengthen internal cohesion and limit democratic dialogue. Through an illustrative comparative reading of significant posts published by Trump on Truth Social, X, Instagram, and TikTok during the 2024 presidential campaign, the study highlights differences in tone, political purpose, and rhetorical strategies. While Truth Social fosters a direct, intimate, and polarizing communication with Trump's electoral base, the other platforms reveal a more strategic and performative use of language. The text technically emphasizes how Truth Social is not merely a distribution tool but rather a true space of ideological belonging, contributing to the formation of closed communities and the radicalization of public opinion. The article thus offers a critical reflection on the role of alternative platforms in reshaping the public sphere and the democratic implications of growing digital segmentation.

Keywords: truth social, polarization, digital communities, political communication, ideological identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current socio-political landscape, the rise of digital technologies – particularly the internet and social media platforms – has triggered a substantial reconfiguration of communicative and participatory practices among

individuals. These mechanisms go beyond the mere mediation of social interactions; they assume a structuring role in the architecture of social relationships and in shaping democratic practices (Loader and Mercea 2011). The public sphere has been markedly amplified in the digital realm, giving rise to new models of aggregation, deliberation, and collective mobilization. According to Castells (2015), digital networks constitute the core infrastructure of new social movements, enabling more horizontal communication, less constrained by traditional media channels. From this perspective, social media not only broaden the visibility of political demands but also redefine the very modalities of participation by promoting forms of "connective" activism (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), characterized by individualized engagement coordinated through digital technologies. Several studies have highlighted how these tools have reshaped the social and political spheres, influenced not only interpersonal relationships but also formed of activism and civic engagement (Boulianne 2015; Gil de Zúñiga *et al.* 2012). It is therefore argued that the use of social media has a significant impact on social life and political participation, facilitating access to information, the construction of social networks, and collective mobilization. Indeed, social platforms are not limited to being entertainment spaces but become genuine "digital squares" where opinions are formed, values shared, and political causes promoted. Clearly, digital networks are also central to new forms of political communication, encouraging more horizontal and decentralized participation (Battista 2024a), while also fostering active citizenship that promotes a sense of belonging and collective responsibility (Dahlgren 2009). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the influence of the digital dimension on participation is not exclusively positive, as the algorithmization of information, echo chambers, and misinformation often hinder the openness of democratic debate (Sunstein 2007, Pariser 2011). Yet it is equally undeniable that the digital ecosystem today represents one of the main channels through which citizens get informed, organize, and participate actively in political life. It has thus become widely acknowledged that in the digital age, virtual arenas have become the new agora's of political communication and community building. At the same time, the proliferation of such spaces has generated a fragmentation of public opinion and increasing polarization among political groups. One emblematic case is Truth Social, a digital realm created at the initiative of Donald Trump in reaction to the censorship he experienced on more traditional social media platforms. This paper aims to explore how Truth Social functions as a refuge and space of cultural and political resistance

for those social groups perceived as marginal or excluded from dominant discursive arenas, and how this fragmentation of digital communities contributes to intensifying the socio-political divisions of our time. The analysis of this platform allows for a deeper reflection on the complex dynamics of political communication and community formation in an increasingly atomized digital universe. Unlike social media giants such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok, Truth Social targets a politically homogeneous audience, often perceived as excluded from mainstream debate. In this light, the examination of the content published by Donald Trump proves essential, as his use of the platform offers meaningful insights into how communication strategies vary depending on the medium. It is, however, necessary to point out that this community does not oppose the neoliberal paradigm; rather, it represents the mirror image of those advocating for justice and social equity. It positions itself as a defender of the status quo, opposing demands for reform and social emancipation (Antonucci *et al.* 2024). Far from being a progressive force, it embodies the crystallization of rigid worldviews and exclusionary logics. It is no secret that the messages and networks surrounding the re-elected President of the United States promote political and ideological orientations that run counter to the inclusive, solidaristic, and justice-driven principles typically associated with cultural and political resistance. These communities advance exclusive visions and the protection of elite interests, supporting narratives favouring a return to authoritarian or ultraconservative power structures, thus fuelling further polarization (Lieberman *et al.* 2019). To better understand the impact of this platform, we adopt an illustrative comparative reading of Trump's most engaging posts, juxtaposing those published on Truth Social with others disseminated on mainstream platforms. This approach is not intended to be generalizable, but it allows us to examine the rhetorical strategies employed by the leader to mobilize his audience, and to trace platform-specific variations in discursive style and affective appeal. What emerges is a picture of Truth Social as a cradle for a closed and ideologically homogeneous political community, one that reinforces in-group identification and deepens polarization when compared to the more heterogeneous and performative environments of mainstream social media.

2. PARTISAN SELECTIVE EXPOSURE IN CHANGING INFORMATION ENVIRONMENTS

The concept of *partisan selective exposure* refers to individuals' tendency to favour information sources that

align with their existing political attitudes and ideological predispositions (Stroud 2017). This phenomenon is rooted in the psychological mechanism of *confirmation bias*, the cognitive inclination to seek, interpret, and remember information in ways that confirm pre-existing beliefs while avoiding contradictory evidence (Nickerson 1998). In the context of political communication, this means that voters tend to gravitate towards media outlets, and channels that reinforce their partisan views, avoiding those that might challenge or undermine their convictions. However, the extent and consequences of partisan selective exposure are profoundly shaped by the nature of the broader information environment (Strömbäck *et al.* 2023). In a *low-choice information environment*, such as the broadcast media landscape of the mid-20th century, the limited availability of channels and content meant that individuals had relatively little control over what political information they encountered. While selective exposure was still possible – for instance, by choosing a preferred newspaper or news anchor – media scarcity also led to a degree of incidental exposure (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). Citizens might come across political news not because they actively sought it, but because there were few alternatives: political content was often embedded in general-interest programming, and media outlets tended to share a set of professional norms that guaranteed a basic level of exposure to shared political facts. For example, during the era of limited broadcast television in Italy, evening news programmed such as RAI's Telegiornale were part of a shared national media experience. Regardless of political orientation, most viewers were exposed to the same content, simply because there were few alternatives. Television itself functioned as a collective ritual: programmed like the Telegiornale, followed by light entertainment/advertisement shows such as Carosello (Giusto 2021), were watched simultaneously by a large share of the population, effectively synchronizing daily life and fostering a common public sphere. In such a context, even politically uninterested individuals would often encounter political news as a by-product of routine media consumption. By contrast, in today's *high-choice information environment*, shaped by the digital revolution, the proliferation of cable, online platforms, and social media has dramatically expanded both the quantity and diversity of available content (Prior 2007). This transformation has brought about two key forms of media fragmentation: horizontal fragmentation, or the growth in the number of outlets within the same genre or function (e.g., multiple partisan news channels); and vertical fragmentation, which refers to the growing variety of content types, from hard news to entertainment and lifestyle programming (Prior 2005, Webster and Ksiazek 2012). This high-choice environment enables much more refined and consistent partisan selective exposure. Individuals can now curate their media diet in ways that almost entirely shield them from cross-cutting perspectives. More critically, however, the explosion of entertainment options means that many users opt out of political information altogether, favouring non-political content over news. This shift reduces the likelihood of incidental or inadvertent learning – the process by which citizens acquire political information passively while consuming general media (Prior 2005). One major consequence of the shift to a high-choice information environment is the potential intensification of the *political knowledge gap*. In the broadcast era, even politically uninterested or less sophisticated citizens were regularly exposed to major political events and institutional processes through routine media use. This incidental exposure functioned as a minimal informational safety net, ensuring that most individuals had at least a basic awareness of political developments (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). In contrast, the contemporary media environment enables individuals with low political interest to entirely opt out of political information flows. With countless entertainment and lifestyle alternatives available at all times, politically disengaged users are now able to construct information diets that are completely devoid of public affairs content (Prior 2005, Wei and Hindman 2011). This voluntary disconnection from political information can lead to a widening divide between politically attentive citizens – who may become increasingly informed and active – and those who remain systematically uninformed. Such dynamics challenge the normative ideal of an informed electorate and risk reinforcing inequalities in political competence and participation. A second, and perhaps equally troubling, development is the emergence of *echo chambers*. As individuals gain greater autonomy in curating their media environments, many tend to surround themselves with information sources that confirm and amplify their pre-existing beliefs. In these fragmented and self-selected media spaces, exposure to alternative perspectives becomes increasingly rare. Political discussions and content circulate within ideologically homogenous networks, leading to a reduction in cross-cutting exposure, a reinforcement of in-group identities, and a growing intolerance toward dissenting views (Hobolt *et al.* 2024). Echo chambers are not merely spaces of like-minded discussion; they actively filter and frame reality in ways that deepen epistemic closure. These dynamics are often cited as drivers of affective polarization – the tendency of individuals to dislike, distrust, and even dehumanise members of opposing political groups

(Törnberg *et al.* 2021). However, the empirical evidence on this link remains mixed. While some studies have documented a correlation between selective exposure and increased partisan animosity (Stroud 2010; Lelkes *et al.* 2017), other research challenges this assumption. For instance, Barberá (2014), in a comparative study of Germany, Spain, and the United States, find that social media use may in fact *reduce* mass political polarisation by exposing users to a greater diversity of viewpoints than previously assumed (see also Nyhan *et al.* 2023). These contrasting findings suggest that the relationship between echo chambers and affective polarisation may be highly context-dependent, shaped by platform-specific algorithms, national media systems, and users' individual predispositions. Consequently, while the potential for echo chambers to exacerbate democratic fragmentation remains real, their actual impact may vary significantly across settings. Closely related to the notion of echo chambers is the concept of filter bubbles. Coined by Eli Pariser (2011), the term refers to algorithmically curated information environments that selectively present users with content that aligns with their previous behaviours, preferences, and ideological leanings. While echo chambers arise primarily from users' active choices to surround themselves with like-minded content, filter bubbles represent a more passive form of information isolation, driven by the invisible logic of algorithmic recommendation systems. These algorithmic systems – embedded in platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Google – are designed to maximise user engagement by predicting and prioritising content that aligns with a user's past behaviour. As a result, users are not only shielded from counter-attitudinal information but are also rarely aware of the curation process itself, which remains proprietary and opaque. The personalisation logics that govern digital information flows are neither neutral nor transparent; they shape not only what users see, but also what they do not see. The lack of transparency in algorithmic curation raises significant normative questions. In contrast to the editorial accountability of traditional media institutions, algorithmic systems offer little insight into how information is ranked, filtered, or excluded. Moreover, while algorithmic personalisation can reinforce ideological bias and polarisation, its effects are neither uniform nor universally negative. Some studies suggest that algorithms may actually increase exposure to diverse viewpoints, depending on user behaviour, platform design, and national context (Barberá 2014; Flaxman *et al.* 2016). However, the unpredictability of these effects only amplifies concerns about the democratic implications of algorithmically mediated information environments. From a normative perspective, the fragmentation and personalisation of political information challenge several pillars of democratic theory. First, they undermine the notion of a shared public sphere in which citizens deliberate on common issues from a commonly accessible set of facts. Second, they foster asymmetries in political knowledge and engagement, as only some users are continuously exposed to civic content. Third, they may exacerbate affective polarisation, even if not uniformly, by reinforcing partisan identity and mutual distrust among citizens. Ultimately, the transition to a high-choice, algorithmically curated media environment raises pressing questions about the quality of democratic discourse, the representativeness of public opinion, and the resilience of democratic institutions. As citizens increasingly inhabit fragmented informational worlds, the challenge becomes not only how to inform, but how to reconnect publics across cognitive, ideological, and emotional divides. Against this backdrop, Truth Social can be seen as a paradigmatic case of how digital platforms both reflect and reshape the mechanisms of partisan selective exposure. By analysing the communicative strategies adopted by Trump across different platforms, we can better understand how platform affordances, audience expectations, and ideological cues interact to produce distinct rhetorical styles and community effects.

3. THE DIGITAL COMMUNITY AND TRUTH: ANTIDOTE VS. SYMPTOM

Whenever democracy shows signs of fatigue or manifests true pathologies – such as electoral disengagement, extreme polarization, or technocratic drift – a strong desire for community resurfaces, albeit often in conflicting and fragmented ways. This need is not merely propagandistic or reactionary but rather expresses a concrete urge to reclaim the political sphere by individuals who feel excluded and disoriented within what Rosanvallon (2014) defines as "the democracy of disenchantment". In truth, as early as 1982, Nisbet had already drawn a clear line, identifying the dissolution of community ties as one of the defining features of modernity, asserting that the contemporary individual is forced to confront a pervasive institutional loneliness. In such a context, community is not only a refuge but also a form of resistance and a space for the reinvention of the political. Bauman (2003) also spoke of "community as a response to fear," where the pursuit of community stems from a need for security in a liquid, fragmented world marked by economic and cultural uncertainties. In this sense, the crisis of democracy reactivates the desire for belonging, but also the ten-

sion between inclusion and the risk of exclusion – as Balibar (2017) aptly points out when he states that "community is also always a border: what holds together also separates." In post-democratic times, community can thus become both antidote and symptom: it can give rise to new practices of solidarity, mutualism, and active citizenship, but it can also be captured by identitarian, exclusionary, or even authoritarian rhetoric. The persistent "longing for community," then is ambivalent: it can open radical spaces of participatory democracy or harden into closed and nostalgic communitarianism's. It depends on how it is interpreted and activated – whether as openness to the other or as a defensive retreat, as a political process or an imaginary refuge. Truth Social positions itself as an alternative to mainstream social media platforms, claiming to offer a space of truth and resistance against censorship, "wokeness," and groupthink. However, this is a deeply mystified vision. Rather than challenging the neoliberal model, Truth embodies a fully compatible derivation of it: a form of right-wing counter-hegemony. After all, neoliberalism does not eliminate politics – it reformulates it as a framework of identitarian passions (Brown 2015). And it is precisely in this theatre that Truth Social inserts itself: a bubble in which the individual, detached from any collective bond, asserts an absolute negative freedom – often equated with the right to say anything, including hate speech, conspiracy theories, and disinformation. In this sense, Truth Social does not represent a resistance to power, but a reversed performativity of it – a kind of false counter-public sphere, where subaltern subjects construct counter-narratives not for emancipation, but to reinforce a wounded and reactionary identity (Fraser 2001). On the one hand, various social justice movements – from Black Lives Matter to Me Too – have used digital infrastructures to create forms of collective and horizontal mobilization, opposing different forms of oppression (Crenshaw 1991, Tufekci 2017). On the other hand, platforms like Truth Social represent their mirror image. Rather than offering a space for dialogue, Truth Social emerges as a habitat designed to reinforce a conservative and often supremacist collective identity, simulating the discursive and symbolic codes of resistance (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). This dynamic fits into a broader manifestation of the co-optation of dissent language by reactionary movements, which exploit the rhetoric of censorship, free speech, and "reverse oppression" to consolidate a symbolic order that, in fact, reproduces existing social hierarchies (Farkas and Schou 2018). Truth Social – founded by Donald Trump following his exclusion from X (formerly Twitter) – positions itself as a "safe space" for the political imaginary of the Alt-Right, reversing the logic of the platform as a public space and turning it into a self-referential bubble (Marwick and Lewis 2017). Unlike progressive social movements, which are grounded in an epistemology of solidarity (Hooks 2000), right-leaning digital communities seem to coalesce around exclusion and the idealized reconstruction of a lost past (Stanley 2018). For this reason, Truth Social can be interpreted as an explicitly identitarian structure, where the sense of belonging is based solely on a shared narrative of cultural siege and ethnic reclamation (Mudde 2019). Moreover, Donald Trump's specific adoption and use of the platform reveals a clear break in the relationship between political communication and digital platforms. Beyond its role as a platform for partisan communication, Truth Social also operates as a space for affective interaction and the cultivation of a political fandom. Trump's presence on the platform is not merely unidirectional; rather, it fosters a dynamic of identification and belonging among his followers. This dynamic resembles what Marwick and Boyd (2011) term "micro-celebrity politics," where the political figure engages directly with their audience, collapsing boundaries between public and private, and creating an illusion of intimacy. Through recurrent tropes, emotionally charged language, and insider rhetoric (e.g., calling supporters "patriots" or referring to "the fake news media" as a common enemy), Trump galvanizes a collective identity rooted not just in ideology, but in shared affect and cultural codes. This fandom operates through affective loyalty rather than policy alignment, producing a tight-knit digital community that performs devotion and defense of the leader through likes, shares, memes, and hostile engagement with dissenters (Highfield 2016, Sandvoss 2005). Truth Social thus becomes both a platform and a performative stage where followers demonstrate allegiance and emotional investment in Trump, reinforcing a feedback loop of adoration, grievance, and mobilization. The cultivation of a fan-based political community did not begin with Truth Social, but has deeper roots in Trump's earlier use of mainstream platforms. Already during the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump had used Twitter as a personal megaphone, bypassing traditional news channels and establishing a direct, polarizing relationship with his electoral base (Ott, 2017). Through informal, aggressive, and often provocative language, Trump skilfully leveraged the algorithmic logic of the internet to gain visibility and prominence in public discourse, contributing to the so-called *platformization of populism*" (Gerbaudo 2018). Following the January 6, 2021, Capitol Hill insurrection and his subsequent bans from Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, Trump launched his own virtual platform – portrayed as a censorship-free

tool, but in truth designed to foster a homogenous and ideologically rigid information bubble. In this light, even in the most recent electoral campaign, this device proved to be not just a technical alternative, but an ideological and rhetorical project aimed at countering the alleged "cancel culture" imposed by Big Tech and at institutionalizing a post-truth communication ecosystem (Lewandowsky *et al.* 2017). This marks a dangerous drift toward the privatization of the public sphere, where the rules of democratic debate are rewritten according to identity-based loyalty. This leads not only to the polarization of opinions but also to the formation of closed communities that rarely engage with opposing viewpoints, further deepening political and social divisions (Jamieson and Cappella 2008, Nguyen 2020). Similarly, Truth Social positions itself as a platform welcoming individual with a clear political alignment, thus emphasizing its distance from mainstream political discourse. Beyond polarization, however, this dynamic represents a significant form of cultural and political resistance in the digital arena. Members of this structure identify as protagonists of a struggle against dominant thought, both in the media and within the political system. This stance typically reflects elements of populism, which often thrives on distrust of traditional institutions and the media, reinforcing the idea of a constant fight against the establishment (Mudde 2004). This perpetual opposition can be understood through Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) concept of "antagonism," where politics is intrinsically characterized by conflict between antagonistic groups. In the context of Truth Social, antagonism manifests in various forms, from viral campaigns challenging conventional media to the promotion of conspiracy narratives portraying the political system as corrupt and manipulated. Memes and viral graphics play a crucial role in reinforcing group cohesion and spreading political messages with a common front. Memes emerge from a blend of popular culture elements, creating content that can be shared and spread in the form of vernacular creativity (Burgess 2006). As Jenkins (2006) explains, participatory culture in the digital context allows users to be not only consumers of content but also active producers. However, despite the strong sense of belonging and resilience, these entities are vulnerable. Their fragility is partly linked to their excessive exposure to misinformation and fake news, which thrive in environments with weak or absent moderation (Scheufele and Krause 2019). Nevertheless, these communities develop mechanisms to maintain high online visibility and strengthen bonds among participants. This resilience extends to the fight against surveillance by big tech companies. Platforms like Truth Social have positioned themselves from the outset as

alternatives to perceived power structures, providing refuge for politically marginalized communities. Analyzing this platform allows us to explore the complex dynamics of political communication and community formation in a fragmented and digital context. Unlike mainstream platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok, Truth Social caters to a user base that identifies with specific political positions, often perceived as marginalized from dominant public discourse. In this context, analyzing the content published by Donald Trump is crucial, as he is a central figure in contemporary politics, and his use of Truth Social provides significant insights into how communication strategies can vary across platforms. It is important to clarify that this community is not in opposition to the neoliberal regime but rather represents the antithesis of those advocating for greater social equity. In fact, it opposes those who seek to challenge existing processes, positioning themselves as a defender of the status quo and resisting any attempts to move toward greater social equity. This community does not function as a catalyst for social progress or emancipation (Antonucci *et al.* 2024). Instead, it contributes to entrenching rigid ideological views and intensifying exclusionary logic. The messages and groups formed around Trump and his platform obviously promote policies and ideologies that oppose the principles of inclusion, solidarity, and social justice inherent in cultural and political resistance. This type of community fosters exclusionary visions and the defence of elite interests, embracing narratives that support a return to authoritarian or ultraconservative power structures, further reinforcing polarization (Lieberman *et al.* 2019). To fully understand the impact of this platform, we conduct a comparison of Trump's posts with the highest interaction rates across several popular platforms, based on the assumption that Trump shared a total of 507 posts across the four platforms under examination during the period from September 25 to October 8. On X, he published 61 posts, while on Instagram he shared 62. In contrast, his presence on TikTok was extremely limited, with only 2 posts. His activity was particularly intense on Truth Social, where he posted as many as 382 times. This imbalance indicates a clear preference for Truth Social as his primary communication channel. However, this should not only be interpreted as a strategic alternative to mainstream platforms, but also as a means of building and strengthening an emotional bond with his electoral base. Through polarizing and highly emotional rhetoric, Trump fosters a sense of identity-based belonging that, in some respects, resembles the dynamics typical of fandom communities. In such communities, the relationship between leader and supporters is rooted in

emotional participation, deep loyalty, and a shared narrative that goes beyond strictly political engagement (Jenkins and Ito 2015). This phenomenon is part of a broader process of the *spectacularization* of politics, in which engagement is often driven more by emotions than by rational content (Wetherell 2012, Marcus 2000). Social media –particularly those designed for direct and unmediated use, such as this one—facilitate the creation of "affective publics" (Papacharissi 2015), capable of mobilizing around shared feelings rather than structured political visions. There is also a further aspect to consider: Trump handles the platform as a sort of personal press office, leveraging it to interact directly with the media ecosystem and amplify his messages (Chadwick 2017). This approach highlights the transformation of political communication in the digital age, where leaders can bypass traditional media to build a direct relationship with the public (Kubin and Von Sikorski 2021). Also, for this reason, rather than aiming for an exhaustive or statistically representative dataset, this paper adopts an illustrative comparative approach, focusing on the three most engaging posts by Donald Trump on four major platforms (Truth Social, X, Instagram, TikTok) during a randomly selected two-week period of the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign. This methodological choice reflects a qualitative and interpretive ambition: to examine not the frequency of content types, but the style, the purpose, and rhetorical logics that structure Trump's platform-specific communication. By privileging the posts that received the highest levels of engagement, we aim to identify paradigmatic artifacts – those messages that most successfully activated audience response, emotional resonance, or ideological alignment. In other words, we do not seek generalization, but we want to explore how different platforms afford different performances and how Trump's communicative persona is strategically calibrated to fit the technological and cultural logic of each medium. By analyzing his messages, we can identify similarities and differences of the specific communication strategies he uses to mobilize his audience across different platforms. This approach will allow us to highlight how Truth Social fosters the formation of a homogenous and closed political community, intensify-

ing polarization compared to the more diverse and varied landscape of mainstream platforms. From this interpretive lens, Truth faithfully mirrors this dystopia: a platform that promises truth but in fact delivers only echo chambers and closure, simulating dissent only to better integrate it into the online outrage economy. Overall, this overview demands a critical reflection on the nature and implications of this platform.

4. TRUMP'S ONLINE COMMUNICATION STYLES ACROSS DIFFERENT PLATFORMS

This section explores the variations in Donald Trump's digital communication across four major social media platforms: Truth Social, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok. Rather than attempting a systematic content analysis, the goal is to offer an interpretive snapshot of platform-specific communicative logics. To do so, we examine the three most engaged posts (in terms of interactions and views) for each platform during a randomly selected two-week window of the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign (25 September – 8 October). Although interaction volumes vary due to platform-specific user bases (in particular, Truth is the platform with lowest number of followers in comparison to other social networks), the comparative logic follows a "most engaged content" rationale, under the assumption that these posts reveal core campaign themes and communicative strategies. Just to lay out some numbers that give us a clear picture of what we are talking about: Truth has around 8.6 million followers, X has 103.3 million, TikTok over 15 million, while Instagram more than double that with nearly 34 million, and Facebook slightly less with 36 million.

The focus of the analysis is not only on the content itself, but also especially on the tone, the underlying political purpose and the discursive style. Table 1 presents the results of our illustrative comparative reading.

As the table shows, each platform affords a distinctive rhetorical function and shapes Trump's communication style in specific ways, even though the posts consistently engage with electoral and political themes

Table 1. Interpretative grid of Trump's rhetoric across platforms.

Platform	Tone	Function	Discursive Style
Truth Social	Intimate, combative	Community-building, identity affirmation	InsIder language, affective bonding
X (Twitter)	Institutional, declarative	Legitimacy signaling, elite alignment	Formal posts, policy stances
Instagram	Symbolic, emotional	Moral leadership, religious appeal	Iconography, short-form mythmaking
TikTok	Spectacular, playful	Viral charisma, pop-political branding	Memetic content, visual presence

across platforms. Truth Social emerges as the most affectively intense and ideologically enclosed space, where Trump adopts a tone of intimate combativeness, speaking directly to a loyal base in a shared language of grievance and affirmation. In contrast, X (formerly Twitter) serves more institutional purposes, functioning as a site for policy discussion and elite alignment, often through formal posts and endorsements. On Instagram, Trump leans on visual and symbolic registers – especially, in our small sample, religious iconography and emotionally resonant images – to present himself as a moral and charismatic leader. TikTok fosters a highly aestheticized and memetic form of communication, where Trump becomes less a rhetorician and more a viral figure of pop-political branding. This variation reflects a broader strategy of platform calibration, in which Trump tailors his discourse to fit the technological affordances and cultural expectations of each space. While the content often shares similar themes (patriotism, anti-elitism, populist appeals), the tone, function, and discursive mode differ substantially across platforms. The following sections offer a platform-by-platform discussion, illustrating these distinctions through a selection of emblematic posts and highlighting how Trump's rhetoric is modulated according to the communicative logic of each environment.

Truth Social

In comparison to other social networks, the communicative style on Truth Social stands out for its more explicit blend of incivility, intimacy, and mockery. Trump's posts on this platform feature direct insults ("Lyin' Kamala"), hyperbolic warnings ("They want to confiscate your guns"), excessive punctuation ("VOTE!!!"), and emotional appeals ("No Tax On Tips!"). These messages are not addressed to a general electorate, but to a clearly defined in-group, Trump's loyal base, within a "controlled" information environment. Unlike other platforms where Trump's tone often modulates toward promotional or visual performance, Truth Social fosters an intimate setting in which Trump speaks *with*, rather than merely *to*, his followers. The pictures showing him 'working' at McDonald's, as a response to Kamala Harris's claim about having worked there, exemplifies this: it does not work only as a symbolic act, but also a performance that reinforces shared frustrations and anti-elite sentiment. This helps shape a language that clearly defines the in-group and the out-group, serving as a resonance chamber for shared identity and "resistance" against the out-group. While Truth Social enables an emotionally intimate and ideologically

unfiltered mode of communication, Trump's activity on X, Instagram, and TikTok reveals a more strategic and performative engagement. These platforms still serve as crucial tools in amplifying campaign messages.

X

On X, Trump's posts maintain a more formal tone, often anchored in political messaging and elite endorsement. For example, the repost of Elon Musk's quote "Voting for Trump [is the] only way to 'save' democracy" (October 1) functions as a legitimising move, invoking tech-industry credibility and mainstream media coverage. Another post (October 2), where Trump asserts his opposition to a federal abortion ban, aligns with broader Republican efforts to moderate positions ahead of the general election. Here, the tone is declarative, institutional, and markedly less combative than on Truth: "EVERYONE KNOWS I WOULD NOT SUPPORT A FEDERAL ABORTION BAN [...] IT IS UP TO THE STATES TO DECIDE". Even the high-energy post announcing his return to Butler, the site of the assassination attempts against Trump in July 2024 ("I'M COMING BACK TO BUTLER!", October 4), blends emotional enthusiasm with patriotic imagery but avoids direct confrontation or insult.

Instagram

In contrast, Instagram emphasises an appeal to pop culture (Battista 2024b). The most engaged post features an image of Saint Michael the Archangel (29 September), captioned with a traditional Catholic prayer: "Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle [...] cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits." Here Trump fuses the political message with a religious iconography, proposing an implicit narrative using symbols and visual metaphors. Other posts, such as the rally in Butler or the stylised clip with Zelenskyy ("I WILL END THIS WAR"), also rely on the creation of his "persona" and reputation as charismatic leader.

Tik Tok

On TikTok, the messaging is even more spectacular and memetic. A popular video (7.4 million views) featuring Trump on stage, lifting and throwing branded campaign boxes into a cheering crowd, exemplifies the platform's native grammar: short-form, dramatic clips designed for rapid consumption and emotional impact.

On TikTok, Trump becomes a symbol, more brand than rhetor, and relies on implicit cues, music, movement, and slogans to construct an aura of control and charisma. Overall, the communicative style on these platforms tends toward performance and persuasion, rather than identity consolidation. Language is less intimate, more calibrated.

While Truth functions as a space of narrative co-creation with the base, X, Instagram and TikTok serve as broadcast arenas, where Trump creates and boosts his persona as saviour, warrior, and charismatic leader. The comparison of Trump's platform-specific rhetoric reveals a crucial distinction between *performative populism* and *affective identity-building*. Truth Social is not merely a content distribution tool but a discursive enclave, one that invites a deeper form of political intimacy. Such a communicative style does not only mobilise; it reaffirms membership, loyalty, and worldview. In this sense, Truth Social operates as a community forge, where the line between leader and follower blurs through a shared lexicon of resistance, resentment, mockery, and emotional charge.

5. CONCLUSION

The exploration conducted, situated within a broader reflection on digital communication dynamics, highlights how alternative platforms do not merely serve as spaces for expression, but act as true laboratories of political and ideological belonging. Truth Social emerges not as a pluralistic arena, but as an ideological enclave where communication reinforces identity bonds and deepens the distance from the other, evoking what Arendt (2019) described as the transformation of the public sphere into a space of closed, non-dialogical affiliations. The radicalization of content – fuelled by algorithmic logics based on engagement and by closed systems of information selection – demonstrates how the fragmentation of digital information is reshaping the public sphere, diminishing its inclusive and deliberative potential. In this scenario, the distinction between mainstream platforms and so-called "resistant" platforms is not merely technical or commercial, but profoundly political, aligning with Foucault's analysis of power as a diffuse and normalizing network that also restructures itself within digital contexts. Truth Social thus embodies a new form of affective and antagonistic political communication, where conflict between irreconcilable groups becomes the very structure of political discourse. Within this context, the rhetoric of permanent opposition replaces democratic debate, and the community consolidates itself more through the exclusion of the other than through rational argumentation – following a

logic akin to the "politics of wounded identity" invoked by Butler (1997). This study suggests that such dynamics are not marginal anomalies but structural symptoms of a broader transformation in the relationship between citizenship, media, and power. It is therefore urgent to reflect not only on the role of digital platforms as tools of mobilization, but also on their responsibilities in shaping public opinion and sustaining the democratic fabric. Only through a critical and multidimensional perspective – which also takes ethical implications into account – will it be possible to envision solutions capable of bridging the gap between digital participation and genuine democratic dialogue. This study has, however, several limitations. It is explicitly exploratory and descriptive in nature. It does not aim to offer systematic or generalisable analytical claims. The selection of data is deliberately narrow, based on a "most engaged content" logic within a short, arbitrarily chosen time window during the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign. As such, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of broader trends across platforms or over time. Rather than producing empirically robust conclusions, the goal of this work is to offer an interpretive lens through which to understand platform-specific communicative dynamics in Trump's campaign strategy. It seeks to raise conceptual and theoretical questions about tone, audience, and platform affordances, rather than to test hypotheses or quantify effects. This study therefore suggests that the communicative architecture of platforms like Truth Social is not a secondary feature of contemporary politics, but a structural condition through which antagonistic identities are shaped, legitimised, and mobilised. This dynamic pose urgent challenges for the future of democratic public life, as the very conditions for pluralism, deliberation, and civic responsibility in the digital public sphere risk being progressively undermined.

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SOCIETÀMUTAMENTOPOLITICA
RIVISTA ITALIANA DI SOCIOLOGIA

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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While this paper results from a conjoined effort, in the final draft, Giuseppe Masullo wrote sections: 2; 4; 5; 6. Brian Joseph Gilley wrote sections: 1; 3.

Becoming Mothers? No Thanks!
The Phenomenon of Childfree Women in a Web Community

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Abstract. The article intends to examine the cultural phenomenon called "childfree", that is, those women who choose not to have a child, and examines the forms of symbolic and relational psychological resistance that they give rise to in opposition to a culture that, instead, still forcefully affirms the equation "woman = mother". To this end, the study focuses on two web communities on the social media Facebook that bring together online all the women who adhere to this subcultural universe in which the experience of motherhood does not constitute a goal of fulfillment. Applying a digital ethnography approach, the researchers wanted to examine, through the posts, the discursive and communicative practices through which women define themselves as childfree; the motivations that lead to giving up, to the point of belittling, what is still considered the maximum expression of a woman's fulfillment: becoming a mother. The study also aims to verify whether a "collective self" is created where the community becomes a catalyst for identity, culture, emancipation and struggle, as well as the nucleus of resistance to dominant models to build alternative visions on concepts such as motherhood, gender roles, educational models, representations of femininity.

Keywords: Childfree Women, Propensity to Motherhood, Digital Ethnography, Web Community.

1. INTRODUCTION

The demographic trends of Europe signal a worrying decrease in the birth rates of some countries – especially for Italy – such as to induce sociologists and demographers to foresee a real "demographic winter". In the face of this aspect, as scholars report, today's society increasingly highlights a pronatalist orientation that exalts and encourages procreation with ad hoc policies aimed at families, in the form of family allowances, housing subsidies, leave and tax breaks for dependent children, discouraging the use of contraceptive systems, abortion and supporting traditional values on gender and family (Krøløkke, Myong, Adrian and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2016).

Men and women are therefore confronted with the imperative (cultural, social and now also institutional) to procreate, as an essential stage in their biographical and biophysical journey, but also as a personal, social and economic cost that the parental function requires. Parental obligation particularly affects women, who have always been subjected to strong pressures, despite the feminist movements having made it increasingly clear that women's social identity is not limited to the maternal function, but rather to the possibility of reconciling this need with other fundamental goals of fulfillment (Rich 1976; Butler 2004) – such as, for example, that of having a job that gratifies them. Faced with such pressures, the female universe responds with different strategies, some of which vary in relation to those that are the social determinants that predispose (or not) to the propensity for motherhood, (such as for example age, social status, educational qualifications, adequate support networks, etc.). Among these are also women who decide to postpone this eventual maternity, to defer it over time (for example after completing their studies and becoming professionally successful), or to renounce it altogether, increasingly highlighting how the decision to become mothers is also a subjective fact, and not only the result of favorable conditions of a structural nature that predispose it. In light of this premise, this article intends to examine the cultural phenomenon called "childfree", that is, those women who choose not to have a child, and examines the forms of symbolic and relational psychological resistance that they give life to in opposition to a culture that, instead, still forcefully affirms the equation "woman = mother" (Gillespie 2003). To this end, the study focuses on two web communities in the social media Facebook that bring together online all the women who adhere to this subcultural universe in which the experience of motherhood does not constitute a goal of fulfillment (childfree). By applying a digital ethnography approach, the researchers wanted to examine, through the posts, the discursive and communicative practices through which women define themselves as childfree; the motivations that lead to the renunciation, to the point of belittling, what is still considered the highest expression of a woman's fulfillment: becoming a mother. The study also wants to verify whether a "collective self" is created where the community becomes a catalyst of identity, culture, emancipation and struggle, as well as the nucleus of resistance to dominant models to build alternative visions on concepts such as motherhood, gender roles, educational models, representations of femininity (Jenkins 2006).

2. ITALIAN WOMEN'S INTENTION TO PARENTHOOD

In recent years, the governments of EU countries have reported a sharp decline in population and the consequences that this phenomenon will produce in the decades to come on the stability of welfare states.

In Italy, in 2023 there were only 379,890 births (Istat 2024), the lowest value in its history. The birth rate in Italy is among the lowest of those recorded in other European countries (6.4 per 1,000 inhabitants in 2023), with a reduction of 3.6% compared to 2022, data that confirm that the country is no longer in an emerging but structural situation that must be remedied quickly to ensure a better future compared to the present condition.

Focusing on the gender component, it emerges that women choose to postpone the birth of children, for work and professional fulfillment objectives, an aspect that in turn has repercussions on the fertility rate which, again in Italy, has fallen to 1.20 children per woman in 2023. Italian women decide to have children later and later: the average age at childbirth has risen to 32.5 years in 2023 (32.6 years in the North, 32.9 years in the Center and 32.2 years in the South), with an increase of 2 years compared to the data of 20 years ago (Istat 2024: 4). This is due to the structural reduction of the female population of childbearing age (15-50 years): not only are fewer children being born, but there are also fewer women of childbearing age who could give birth to them, since having children is a choice that is increasingly postponed over time. From the results of a recent research that investigated through a mixed methods approach the propensity to parenthood of young people in a specific area of Italy (Mangone *et al.* 2025), significant gender differences between men and women emerge. While on the one hand a lower propensity of men towards parenthood is confirmed, women have developed a more complex vision of the problem compared to the past, highlighting the difficulties in carrying out this project, on which they perceive not only psychological fears, but also difficulties resulting from precarious economic and work conditions, all these factors together affect the imagining of themselves as mothers, at least in the short term (Palidda 2021).

In the face of these data, policies seem to fail to consider how the collective imagination on parenthood that affects the new generations has changed, and women with respect to their desire to become mothers.

In fact, despite the many achievements of feminism, it is women who are primarily looked at when talking about generativity, as well as being the main recipients of awareness campaigns on the topic, such as the particularly discussed "Fertility Day", promoted in 2016 by

the then Minister of Health Beatrice Lorenzin (Grilli and Parisi 2024). The issue particularly affects women also because in Italian culture an often idealized vision of the maternal figure is established, with which women throughout the country are confronted, both because they themselves have been socialized within this model, and because this imagery, in addition to proving to be anachronistic for the times, contrasts heavily with the difficulties that they experience first and foremost during their existence in reconciling the goal of educational and professional self-realization and the desire for parenthood. To complicate matters further, Italian society is particularly ineffective in responding to the broader problem of gender equality, where women still do not achieve the same results as men in terms of employability, nor have they been able to break through that "glass ceiling" that condemns them to poorly paid and low-skilled jobs. The persistence of a Mediterranean-style welfare model and the centrality that these occupy in making up for the lack of care services make the issue of motherhood a choice that is particularly invested in women, on whose shoulders culturally falls the social expectation of having to "sacrifice" themselves for others and in particular for their children, according to a scheme still strongly based on a sexist and patriarchal vision of gender roles (Abbatecola 2023).

If a part of the female world lives with frustration this difficulty in starting a family and in particular in bringing children into the world, another part of this world does not seem to care, and not only because of a growing individualism (which today seems to affect all individuals regardless of their gender), but also because of some doubts of an ethical nature, which strengthen their choice (such as for example the question of abortion), or even because of fears that refer to psychological concerns (not feeling sufficiently ready, fear of conception, post-partum depression, etc.), as well as factors, as mentioned above, linked to the possibility of supporting them, and therefore to economic conditions, or to being able to take care of them, such as the lack of services for childcare. These women today are identified with the term Childfree and includes a group of people of different ages and social backgrounds who for different reasons decide to give up the intention of becoming mothers. According to the most recent data from the Youth Report of the Toniolo Institute (2024) and IPSOS, 21% of women of parental age (between 24 and 34 years old) say they do not want children, a sharp increase compared to 2020 when the percentage was 14.5%; furthermore, 29% express a low motivation for motherhood, and only 50% are eager to become a mother. The choice to be a woman with a childfree orientation lends itself to

two types of evaluations made by the outside world: on the one hand, this is seen as a form of failure, connected to the idea that women cannot feel complete without having found a form of fulfillment in becoming mothers; on the other hand it is considered as a sign of emancipation of a female universe that rejects visions that focus on the equation "woman = mother", but on the contrary valorizes the imperative built within feminism that women have power over their own bodies and that therefore they are autonomous in relation to the decision whether or not to bring a child into the world, on a par with the autonomy culturally and socially granted in this aspect, which has always been granted to the male gender (Blackstone 2014)

3. BEING A CHILDFREE WOMAN: BETWEEN CHOICES AND STRUCTURAL CONDITIONING

Over time, following the economic boom and urbanization, the family structure has evolved from an extended and patriarchal configuration to a poly-nuclear structure within which the relationships between the genders are more symmetrical, and where the meaning of some passages, such as getting married or having children, are almost no longer conceived as pre-established and obligatory stages, but processes of voluntary choice (Bramanti and Bosoni 2024). In fact, offspring ceases to be seen as the pursuit of a surname and the strengthening of the workforce, becoming within the couple the realization of a shared desire, but above all the product of a choice. If on the one hand a child-centric orientation is affirmed in which the couple directs its commitment and interest on the complete development of children, at the same time the desire of some not to want children and to cultivate other interests of personal fulfillment is affirmed.

In fact, if it is true that the theme of motherhood has been the subject of various studies, especially within a specific current of feminism that has exalted specific and positive aspects as distinctive elements of being female (Cavarero and Restaino 2002), on the other hand, there have been residual reflections that have highlighted how pregnancy and motherhood affect the psychological and social well-being of women. Some studies (Doyle *et al.* 2013), instead, highlight how pregnancy most often constitutes a psychologically and socially complex experience, within which women can experience various emotions, including negative ones, such as the fear of childbirth, the anguish connected to the changes to which the body is subject, the painful experience of

breastfeeding and the subsequent psychological "detachment" from the child.

The complexity with which women relate to the desire for motherhood refers to the thought of Elisabeth Badinter (2012) who highlights how maternal love is uncertain and fragile and not deeply engraved in female nature like any human feeling. Following an evolutionary conception of love, one could affirm that maternal love is not an "absolute" love, it "can exist" "or not exist" and characterizes each woman differently.

Women who choose not to procreate due to a lack of desire often emphasize the centrality of self-determination and individual empowerment. This conscious choice reflects the refusal to conform to predefined social expectations and illustrates the strength in the assertiveness of one's preferences (Hintz and Tucker 2023). The absence of desire for motherhood does not imply a lack of love or commitment to family or community life, so much so that many of these women contribute significantly to family relationships, are involved in volunteering and other forms of social participation (Foster 2000; Stahnke *et al.* 2022).

To better clarify the relationship that is established between "the choice" to be a childfree person and the historical and social conditions within which this is accomplished, it may be useful to return to the distinction that is made in literature between "childless" and "childfree", which is now more widely used to describe this condition.

The concept of "involuntary childless" around the 70s refers to the group of people, couples who do not have children for involuntary reasons, mostly related to health reasons of one or both partners, or to sterility (Calhoun and Selby 1980; Gillespie 2003). However, it is only starting from the 80s, also due to the data that were recorded regarding the lowering of fertility rates and the first studies on the subject, that the condition of "voluntary childness", or "childness by choice" characterized by the permanent will of non-fertility, began to be studied. Terms, today replaced by that of "childfree" (Gillespie 2003; Letherby 2002) where the suffix "free" was chosen precisely to be able to capture the sense of freedom for the lack of obligations deriving from those who voluntarily decide not to have children.

The clear demarcation between the two terms "childless" and "childfree", however, presents the risk of not considering how the choice not to have children is placed within a process that unfolds over time, subject to potential renegotiation, conditioned by aspects such as health, gender and generational relations, as well as structural aspects that affect or predispose to becoming parents. Identifying the boundary between voluntary choice and choice dictated by external factors becomes complex in some cases, for example, some women may postpone the choice to become mothers over time, until this becomes impossible or highly unlikely.

As Serri *et al.* (2019: 169) point out, «clearly defining the different identities of childfree women risks overshadowing the processes – always contradictory and ambivalent – of situated construction of the meaning of social and personal reality. The reality of 'childfreedom' cannot be understood as a fixed and unambiguous condition and, like all human experiences, has no intrinsic essential meaning».

Although the term refers to both men and women, research has focused on the latter, placing itself in line with the dominant biopolitical regulation of bodies and reproduction that entrusts women with the responsibility and obligations connected to reproductive choices. Most governments in Western countries have introduced pronatalist policies in recent years; childless women challenge the dominant social themes of a society that promotes the reproduction of human life, procreation and parenthood to ensure the continuity of the human species. As Grilli and Parisi point out: (2024: 49) «Procreation is thus considered a social good that needs to be controlled and cultivated from childhood to adulthood through lifestyles appropriate to the reproductive function of the subjects, avoiding incorrect habits and behaviors [...] particularly harmful to the good health of spermatozoa and oocytes».

Considering these aspects, childfree women are often the object of condemnation and judgment by society. Many, due to their choices, are perceived as "selfish" people who renounce their natural predisposition, an impoverishment not only of their social identity, but more generally of their feminine identity.

The equation "woman = mother" is deeply rooted not only in common sense, but also within political institutions, and is evident from the orientation of family policies in which women and in particular motherhood is considered central pivots that also find their maximum expression in the model of the traditional nuclear family (Guerzoni, Trappolin and Parisi 2024).

In light of these considerations, the choice to be Childfree women also refers to the reflective capacities that they develop about themselves, in relation to a patriarchal and sexist system that assigns them, on the basis of a naturalized vision of gender roles, certain attitudes and stereotypes, including taking for granted their propensity for motherhood, their predisposition for care work, and other aspects that have always been put under the lens of observation and criticism of feminist thought (Rich 1976). From this point of view, the relationship

between childfree women and feminist thought is not a given, therefore there will be childfree women who will not question an essentialist vision of gender identity and roles, others who on the contrary will claim a precise position within precise currents of this matrix of thought, often presenting their point of view as a form of resistance to counter the reproduction of the gender order and its power relations.

4. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE STUDY OF CHILDFREE WOMEN'S ONLINE COMMUNITIES

In light of the theoretical aspects presented and assuming a certain lability of the boundary between self-determination and structural conditions (health, relational, social, economic, including the issue of time), the general objective of the research was to examine the variety of motivations that push women to choose not to become mothers, trying to arrive with the results collected to the synthesis of a theoretical model that can make evident in a more intelligible way the set of factors called into play in the condition of childfree women (Tarozzi 2008). A second objective, instead, was to understand how childfree web communities could, in addition to providing support to women, give rise to alternative narratives on issues such as motherhood, parenthood, gender roles, etc., connecting to some form of active feminist claim both online and offline.

To this end, the study focused on this subcultural universe within two childfree web communities that bring together people for whom the experience of parenthood is not a goal of fulfillment. Applying a digital ethnography approach, the researchers wanted to analyze, through the posts of this community, the discursive and communicative practices with which the women themselves define themselves as childfree within the web communities.

Digital ethnography or 'netnography' falls fully within the so-called "digital methods" (Delli Paoli and Masullo 2022) and consists of the direct observation (participated or not) of the narratives in the form of posts and comments expressed within digital spaces, including both the circumscribed ones (as in the case of a blog or specific web communities) and the decontextualized cross-media digital ones, connected through sharing and comments on a topic of common interest. The cognitive objective of netnographic research concerns the cultural, relational and value experiences developed within these digital spaces, to which the research aims to give meaning and interpretation (Masullo 2023). The choice of a

netnographic research approach, therefore, is linked to the fact that feminist media studies have highlighted how new ways of "saying" and "doing gender" emerge from the digital environment that question the traditional essentialist and sexist visions of gender identities and roles, an aspect that has led scholars to define this era as that of the "fourth wave" of feminism[1] (Farci and Scarcelli 2023); on the other hand, studying the theme of the propensity to motherhood in the digital environment allows us to examine how the new communication tools promote from below «forms of discourse and representations of the self and of reality implemented» (Locatelli 2023: 173) that through a classic approach to research would not have been easy to grasp due to the difficulties that some women still experience offline within interpersonal face-to-face relationships dominated by traditional visions of gender and gender roles. Online communities are configured, for childfree women, privileged spaces within which they can "co-construct" new points of view with relative safety[2], experiment with forms of agency with other women who otherwise would not have the means to intercept. From these spaces, sociocultural processes can thus arise and come to life that have practical effects on society, since «digital technologies are becoming central to the understanding of culture and society, of human experience and the social world [...] they actively constitute the self, embodiment, social life, social relations, social institutions, in a word, human beings» (Punziano and Delli Paoli 2023: V).

Going into the specifics of the Facebook communities selected ("Community 1" and "Community 2")[3] based on some criteria considered fundamental in this type of approach, that is, those that presented themselves in the light of a preliminary exploration as the most: "active", as they are characterized by regular interactions; "interactive", as they are rich in relational exchanges between members; "heterogeneous", as they contain different categories of participants, etc.; "rich in

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[1] Mainly composed of women who reached adulthood around 2000 and belonging to Generation Z born between 1995 and 2005, this type of feminist activism fully established itself around the early 2000s (for example with the blog promoted by Jessica Valenti feministing.org) and found full realization in 2006 with the #MeToo movement, which by using hashtags spread awareness of the extent of sexual abuse by asking for the perpetrators of the crimes to be punished (Farci and Scarcelli 2023).

[2] Alongside the advantages of using digital for the fourth wave feminist cause, however, the disadvantages must be considered, namely forms of abuse typical of these environments such as trolling, death and rape threats, and revenge porn.

[3] The choice to label the two communities as "Community 1" and "Community 2" is explained to protect the privacy of the users present in the two groups.

information", as they present a wide range of data useful for research (Masullo and Coppola 2023).

The observation period, in covert mode, lasted 1 year (from October 2024 to March 2025), in which 200 posts from the two communities were analyzed and collected in a special Excel grid. Regarding the metadata collected, the first group "Community 1" was born in recent years and is very active and presents daily interactions. The second group, "Community 2", was also born in recent years and is less active than the previous one, but more inclined to discuss specific topics, and presents itself from its description as a web community with a feminist orientation in an intersectional perspective. At the time of writing, the groups have, the first, 868 members, the majority of whom are women, while the second has 1324 members, the majority of whom are female, although there is also a group of male people (98 men). The personal details of the participants who wrote the posts examined have been modified and replaced with fictitious names to preserve privacy and respect the basic principle of covert observation.

5. SUBJECTIVE PROPENSIONS, STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS AND CULTURAL MODELS OF THE CHILDFREE CONDITION

Leaving aside the numerous posts that highlight a total aversion, or real idiosyncrasy towards children and more generally towards motherhood[4], many discussions that take place within the two web communities focus on two main themes: the first is related to the reasons that have pushed some women to identify themselves as childfree women, the second concerns the way in which women themselves deal with the "social expectations" of the most widespread collective imaginaries on gender identity and roles, aspects, the latter, that connect the choice of being a childfree woman to the themes connected to the broader feminist or post-feminist debate.

Regarding the reasons that women give for choosing to give up being mothers, the theme of "not feeling adequate for this role", of "not feeling psychologically ready" or "up to the task" constantly emerges, declaring a lack of predisposition, or an absence of maternal sense. Other factors that seem to weigh on this choice are the traumatic experiences and events that would have marked these women in childhood and/or adolescence (abuse, bereavement, orphanage, poverty, etc.), which they would like to avoid for any future offspring, as well as

concerns related to physical change, the emotional burden required before and during pregnancy, fear of childbirth, etc.

Now I am 38 years old, I am single, I have zero maternal sense, and I do not want to have children, I do not see myself as a mother, I do not feel able to give enough emotional and economic support to a child who is totally dependent on me (Anonymous, Community 1).

Another psychological aspect can be traced back to Depleted Mother Syndrome, a condition that occurs when a woman has already become a mother and the demands connected to the parental role cause the woman physical and emotional exhaustion, feelings of inadequacy and a sense of being overwhelmed, an aspect that confirms how voluntary renunciation is an aspect that must be placed in time, and within specific historical-social circumstances:

I am tired of this accumulation of responsibilities and worries. Among the things I would change in my life is precisely not having another child. Mind you, I love my son, and I have dedicated my life to him, but I am tired, and I look with envy at those who do not have children, they do not realize how lucky they are. That is why I did not want any more (Susanna, Community 2)

From the analysis of the posts, the concept of "parental responsibility"[5] emerged not infrequently in the discussions as a reason used to justify the choice of women not to have wanted to be mothers. The concept of parental responsibility was introduced with Legislative Decree 154/2013, which replaced the previous term "parental authority". The choice not to have children would therefore be made in the interest of the children themselves and is therefore based on the idea that the minor must grow up in an emotionally, economically and physically stable environment, bringing out the work behind it both in terms of time commitment, physical and mental energy, and in terms of responsibilities associated with motherhood.

Having children requires time, energy, specific attention, and it is not a choice that one makes without thinking about it, thinking about the consequences. I see it in many

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[4] Indeed, we must not forget how online platforms often encourage the expression of extreme points of view on things, often in the terms of hate speech, which in other contexts would be difficult to observe.

[5] The legislative reform of 2013 brings with it not so much the innovation of the concept and contents of authority or responsibility, but the value meaning in recalling the exercise of the educational relationship. In other words, in the relationship between parents and children and in coherence with the principle of responsibility for procreation, the parent has the burden not only of protecting the minor but also of promoting the development of his personality, respecting his needs in relation to the different stages of development.

friends who wanted children, and today they continually complain about being tired, about not having time for themselves. [...] These are responsibilities that I honestly don't feel like facing (Anna, Community 1)

From the results of the observations carried out on the two online communities, a second declination of the concept of responsibility emerges, namely a critical awareness of the interconnection between individual actions and global impacts, aiming at concrete actions for the benefit of planetary well-being. Giving up motherhood thus becomes an act of "environmental responsibility", a way to reduce the personal ecological footprint and contribute to the mitigation of climate change.

The fact is that we care a lot about the quality of life both for ourselves and our children, furthermore we don't believe it is an obligation to have children. More quality less quantity, let's consider that the world is overpopulated, nothing bad is done. Another matter are some populations that would do them even in their total famine a little unaware a little irresponsible a little ignorant (Alice, Community 2).

Alongside these factors that identify dimensions of a purely psychological nature, and which therefore refer to one's personal feeling regarding a propensity for parenthood, posts also emerge that see among the main reasons for the decision to have given up children, the lack of those economic, relational and support conditions, including that of the couple, which make this purpose impracticable

If you don't have the means, for me it is absurd to bring children into the world. How much I am annoyed by those women who boast of being mothers, who show off their team of children on TV, but then you realize that they barely make it to the end of the month [...] I find them reckless (Concetta, Community 1).

A second theme is the way in which women relate to the cultural models that underlie the relationship between women and motherhood and to the main social expectations linked to gender differences.

Childfree women from the two web communities feel more the weight of a culture that identifies them as those naturally predisposed to the desire to become mothers, a desire that is seen as the source of their satisfaction and fulfillment according to the dictates of an essentialist vision of gender and gender roles. Although today there is a widespread awareness that women, like men, also intend to fulfill themselves in other vital fields, the belief persists that a woman must put other interests on the back burner, especially if these conflict or compete with the desire for motherhood and with the care

responsibilities called into play in the parental role. This need to "sacrifice" for children, and in general for the family, is an aspect that the childfree women of the web communities examined here question, on the contrary they ask for more spaces of freedom and self-determination for themselves, showing themselves to be extremely critical towards a female culture (even feminist) that has contributed to solidifying the idea that the desire for motherhood is a natural and implicit need in women, while on the contrary they believe that it is more linked to historical reasons and cultural conditioning (De Beauvoir 2016).

Why should I have children? As if it were an obligation, and as if I was born to do this and not to fulfill myself as a person [...] It is something that was instilled in us as children, when they made us play with dolls to be "mothers", and the absurd thing is that many women do not realize it, they seem dissatisfied without this step, unhappy (Annarita, 25 years old).

A second group of childfree women is made up of those who do not deny a continuum between femininity and the desire for motherhood, because they are socialized within a culture that has not problematized this connection, considering it on the contrary a fundamental aspect of being feminine, a natural aspect and connected to what is commonly called the "biological clock" with which women sooner or later at a certain point in their existence have to deal. In this vision, the "right times" are fundamental, both in terms of physical energy (children are born when you are young) and in terms of expected results (the more time passes, the less likely you are to get pregnant, and the more likely you are to run into health problems both for yourself and for your unborn child)

For now, I don't think about it, because I'm still young, I have other things to think about, but I think the need for a child will emerge, it's a natural fact that you must deal with sooner or later. Today, I don't think about it because I study, but I have doubts the more time passes, because then I ask myself, will I have the strength to have a child?, and do it when I'm older and if he or she will have physical or mental disabilities?

Another key question of the study was to understand whether the communities examined could give rise to alternative narratives on issues such as motherhood, parenthood, gender roles, etc., to understand how online participation strengthened individual and collective action, to give life to forms of active feminist claims "onlife" (Floridi 2015).

From the observations, the undoubtedly important role that digital spaces have always played in offering

their users support, opportunities for discussion, and imaginaries useful especially for those who find themselves in a condition of relative isolation (Rheingold 1994) emerges.

While it is true that some of the positions examined above (identified in the Childfree women's profiles) take up central concepts and themes of some well-known currents of both classical and contemporary feminism (for example, the profile defined as liberal is close to post-feminist thought, the critical one to Marxist and intersectional feminism), the posts that appear in the communities do not always allow us to frame these within a specific current or onlife movement. On the contrary, the communities in question (although they are closed groups that can be accessed by accepting certain rules) are characterized by being environments frequented by women with different points of view, and different motivations that have led them to make this type of choice (hence the profiling of Childfree women). Although it was not possible to explore this assumption with specific techniques, the relationships that are configured are typical of what Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002) define as network individualism, that is, very "permeable" relationships, which can be created and abandoned just as quickly. The presence of some members in both communities leads us to think that childfree people are not part of a single socially homogeneous community, on the contrary they interact in multiple digital environments that are heterogeneous, elements that lead us to believe that the communities examined do not potentially configure themselves as reference online communities on the issue, nor do they promote an ideal model of a childfree person, aspects that reverberate on the possibility that these are configured as "places of resistance" in which members can build (or rebuild) their own identity without being bound by the dominant culture (De Vries 2002) as well as privileged spaces for the debate on the childfree female condition inside and outside the digital world.

6. PROFILING CHILDFREE WOMEN IN WEB COMMUNITIES

In order to identify the main profiles of childfree women that emerged from the observation in a digital environment, on the basis of the intersection between identified motivations, i.e. psychological factors (linked to reasons that do not psychologically predispose to motherhood) vs structural dimension (linked to the absence of those economic, environmental and relational conditions necessary for parental functions) adherence to a culture that identifies women with the role of mother (woman = mother) and a culture that rejects this assumption (woman ≠ mother), four theoretical profiles of childfree women emerge from the results that can be summarized in Table 1.

In the first condition we find the childfree woman who perceives herself as "deficient" or rather someone who, while not questioning a culture that takes for granted the idea that a woman has a natural propensity to become a mother, nevertheless realizes – for purely subjective and psychological reasons – that she is not ready to carry out this task, also due to the great burden of responsibility that it implies.

In the second condition we find the childfree woman here defined as "realistic" or rather the point of view expressed by those women who believe that a natural psychological predisposition to motherhood alone is not enough to constitute the reason for bringing children into the world, but who consider economic, environmental and relational conditions to be fundamental, which if absent do not allow one to adequately carry out the parental function, which in the end they renounce out of a sense of responsibility.

In the third condition, we find the childfree woman who presents a more "liberal" point of view on the subject, that is, of those who do not feel attracted or sufficiently predisposed to the parental function which is conceived as the result of cultural and social conditioning, nor do they see in this a full realization of their feminine identity. In fact, women here are conceived as people who can have other life goals or purposes, and

Table 1. Profiles of Childfree women of the communities examined.

	Psychological factors (lack of maturity, lack of predisposition for motherhood)	Structural factors (lack of economic, environmental and relational conditions)
Woman = Mother (essentialist vision of gender identity and roles)	Deficient	Realist
Woman ≠ Mother (constructivist view of gender identity and roles)	Liberal	Critical

Source: Our Elaboration.

not only that of motherhood and therefore "affirm their freedom to become everything they want to be and fulfill themselves on a personal level" (Locatelli 2022: 177).

In the fourth condition, we find women who have a "critical" point of view, not sharing a culture that conceives the equation woman = mother as a given, especially within a society in which the social, relational and environmental as well as political conditions necessary for the exercise of the female parental function are lacking. Therefore, they are the ones who are particularly severe and critical, towards a pronatalist society that pushes and sees in particular women as their main recipients, without providing them with any practical support in having to manage parental functions, forgetting to involve other fundamental figures such as men.

As is evident, in the four identified profiles of childfree women, some typical orientations of feminism can be highlighted, although this connection is not always made explicit or emerges consciously from the posts with references to a specific current. The "deficient" and "realistic" profiles identify points of view that do not touch or problematize the origin of the factors of inequality associated with gender differences: if the first profile sees the origin of the problem in an aspect of a subjective and psychological nature, the second identifies them in the absence of economic and relational conditions without critically calling into question for example the link that exists between patriarchal/sexist ideology and forms of devaluation of women functional to the maintenance of a capitalist system that is functionally supported precisely on sexual difference in establishing precise and differentiated tasks for women and men.

The third and fourth profiles, namely the "liberal" and the "critical" ones, on the contrary, are fully situated within a point of view that on the contrary problematize the origin of this differentiated and unfair system of social expectations and opportunities, but they do so according to different paths. The "liberal" profile groups women who ask for more space for freedom and self-determination and feel less burdened by the issue of gender equality, which for them seems to be an objective now achieved; in fact, they are very critical of policies that tend to protect only the objectives and needs of working women with children and not of women tout court. In the communities investigated, they often underline the advantages and benefits provided in the workplace for colleagues who have children, for example the ease with which they obtain parental leave and permits and the consequent imbalance of treatment that they suffer.

Too bad they then want family allowances and subsidies, choose holidays first, take sick leave even for a broken toe-

nail of their child... they always burden others, especially those who have not made that choice (Tania, Community 2)

If the "liberal" profile is characterized by having an individualistic orientation, the "critical" profile mainly calls into question the collective responsibilities of today's female condition, since it feels more clearly the contradictions inherent in a system in which serious absences of protection and equal opportunities for women are still evident. The users of this profile urge to recover a "feminist conscience", to choose motherhood consciously, and suggest policies that can involve men who have always been great absentees of pronatalist policies.

Do you remember Lorenzin's campaign, the one in 2016? Men were not even mentioned, as if the problem of the low birth rate in our country only concerned women, forgetting that today men themselves have changed their attitude towards fatherhood. I believe that women are tired of being considered only as gestational chambers and that the choice whether to do them or not depends on us, if we feel like it (Cristina, Community 2)

From the analysis of the posts of the two chosen communities, the composite nature of the motivations that led women to define themselves as childfree emerges, these are located in the complex interaction between subjective factors, structural conditioning and changes in cultural imaginaries of the female gender, thus allowing us to arrive at a more intelligible analytical scheme of the factors that can explain why a woman decides to give up the idea of wanting to become a mother. At the end of the study, we conclude that online childfree communities, although they constitute spaces within which women arrive at a common definition of their condition, obtaining here forms of symbolic, emotional support, these are unable to generate shared visions that can be integrated into a unitary project that can be shared inside and outside the digital world. The analysis of the posts allows us to reach the conclusion that the members of the Childfree community present conditions typical of those belonging to a minority, that is, a group of people who, by virtue of their specific ideological positioning – namely the absence of the desire to become parents, and a certain idiosyncrasy towards children – are perceived from the outside as such and with a negative connotation. Participation in these communities is only rarely an opportunity for a reflection that is characterized by urging a broader form of feminist awareness, which can also include different positions. This is even more true when it emerges that the oppressors identified are not men, or more generally the patriarchal system (a classic objective of feminism) but children, and in particular women who

peacefully live their "vocation" to motherhood. The web community presents itself as a space from which it is possible to grasp different models of digital social relations (Bakardjieva 2003) from those who simply search for information within it, to those who, in addition to this, are interested in interacting and comparing themselves with others, sharing personal experiences and feelings experienced for example on the occasion of discrimination suffered, up to those who, through the network, urge some form of feminist awareness and mobilization.

Finally, we must not forget the effect produced by the characteristics of the medium itself, considering that Facebook web communities are not only affected by a certain obsolescence, which today leads them to be gradually abandoned due to the competition of more immediate and effective social networks, but also because these spaces are particularly lacking in the new generations, those who are certainly more socialized to the effects of the changes that have affected current gender imagery, and therefore the research has the limitation of having potentially excluded them. It is concluded that the digital environment constitutes a preferential place to study new forms of positioning in terms of agency and imagery on controversial issues such as motherhood or propensity to parenthood, (in particular in detecting points of view of often stigmatized subjects such as childfree women), therefore studies on these issues should be expanded in different cross-media spaces, verifying how these contribute to modifying women's culture and whether an onlife political translation of the project, values and claims advanced by the childfree movement is imminent.

With regard to future research on this topic, another aspect to keep in mind is that if it is true that a woman's choice not to have children is part of a network of relationships, in the future the role that the partner plays in this decision will also need to be better investigated, as well as broader proximity relationships (family of origin, friends, the existence of formal and informal parenting support) (Freeman and Dodson 2014).

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Intergenerationality and Social Change through Popular Education in a Neoliberal World: A Case Study of Popular Schools in Rome

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Abstract. This article focuses on popular education as a means of intergenerational education for social transformation against the neocolonial neoliberalism imposed by the "West". The intergenerational nature of popular education has received little attention, yet it is truly relevant, especially today. Indeed, the current political and economic context is witnessing the spread of new political movements in the Global 'North', and even more so in regions like 'Southern' Europe, in which young and older educators develop intercultural relationships with children and adolescents from ethnic minorities, often from working-class backgrounds. The relationship between educators and students can challenge common sense steeped the Neoliberal Ideology, as evidenced by the illustrative example of the popular schools in Rome.

Keywords: popular education, intergenerationality, Southern Europe, Neoliberalism, educational inequalities.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Aim of paper

Our paper focuses on popular education as a means of intergenerational education for social transformation against 'Western' imposed, Neocolonial Neoliberalism. The intergenerational nature of popular education has received little attention, yet it is truly relevant, especially today. Indeed, the current political and economic context is witnessing the spread of new political movements (Della Porta 2020) in the Global 'North', and even more so in regions like 'Southern' Europe (Mayo 2025), in which young and older educators develop intercultural relationships with children and adolescents from

ethnic minorities, often from working-class backgrounds (Parziale 2024).

Our main contention throughout our international, theoretical overview is that popular education, with its context-bound community basis, and its 'majority world' [geographical and not] reference points, is, for the most part, intergenerational. It is a key historical feature of the 'global 'South' ' in that it is more holistic than 'Northern' or ' Western' conceptions of education would have us believe, the latter born out of affluent societies' interests and conditions. In less affluent societies, one has to maximise and make multifunctional community use of resources, not having the wherewithal to afford the formal specialisations one requires. These consist of grassroots ('from below') measures in contrast to imposed 'Western' models promoted by such institutions as, for instance, dictates the World Bank and those that connect with or reflect dictates of the 'Breton Woods' institutions. The latter call the tune of the market-oriented piper, a market which is anything but 'free' as it is conditioned by 'Western'-induced policies and funding agencies (World Bank, EU, IMF) and trumpeted by 'Western'-inflected and directed global media networks.

The aim of our analysis is to understand how popular education, in its intergenerational dimension, may counter neoliberalism nowadays. To this end, we first define what we mean by neoliberalism and popular education, highlighting how intergenerationality is a key feature of the latter. In the second part of the article, we present a case study of the current popular schools in Rome (Parziale, 2024): this popular education occurs in a country at the crossroads between the Global 'North' and the Global 'South' (Mayo 2025). The insights obtained, while not statistically generalizable, typical of interpretative, qualitative research which opts for contextual depth rather than positivist breath, offer very useful information for identifying one of the possible ways in which popular education may counter neoliberalism. It illustrates how it can generate social change from below through mutual learning between adults and minors.

1.2. Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism represents the gradual erosion of state protectionism owing to the emergence of what Klaus Shwab, of the World Economic Forum, calls the Third and Fourth Industrial Revolutions where capital, especially financial capital, travels widely and across national boundaries, and enables production to be dispersed across different time zones, with the various labour segments involved being remunerated differently, according to the region's or individual worker's socio-economic

and political conditions. The whole process is coordinated cybernatically on *real time*. Capitalism has since its inception been global but the techno-induced globalisation of production occurs in a manner distinct from what Marx and Engels (1848/1998) predicted, in *The Communist Manifesto*; this is globalisation occurring on *real time* (Carnoy 1999).

Neoliberalism, however, as other ideologies before it, affects not only the areas of direct production but all areas of social life. It fashions subjectivities. It helps foster personalities in tune with a mindset and *modus operandi* commensurate with the overall economic thinking. People are conceived of as consumers/producers, defined by their position in and with regard to the market (Harvey, 2005). They are not projected as more than two-dimensional beings – production and consumption are interrelated, both sides of the same unidirectional process. Neoliberalism seeks to transform people (happily people can still have agency, as we shall show), institutions and that construct we call the State, which entails, in many ways, an ensemble of regulated social relations.

According to Neoliberalism, the market, through its 'invisible' and 'not so invisible' mechanisms, seeks to replace the Social State, certainly of the post WWII and earlier Rooseveltian 'New Deal' consensus periods, what, in Clement Atlee's Britain, came to be called the 'welfare state'. Technological revolutions in information, production and organisation, have pulled further or threaten to pull further from under industry's feet the *national* ground on which it stands (pace Marx and Engels 1848/1998). The state's double function, in Claus Offe's (1973: 252) formulation, reflected in educational research by Martin Carnoy and Henry Levin's (1985) work, of balancing its need to accumulate capital with satisfying democratic needs, is being eroded, especially insofar as the latter function goes. Money for educational, health and other social programmes becomes 'tight' as the quest remains that of creating incentives to attract and maintain investment, with the constant threat of capital mobility and flight in mind. This situation also significantly reduced the bargaining power of trade unions to obtain such social and educational programmes as, for instance, the seventies' 150 + hours in working class education (Mayo 2025).

Much educational provision, especially but not only in adult and higher education, and in many ways, initial education, is conditioned to sway to this Neoliberal tune. It does so not only at the hands of Right-wing governments but also governments led by parties that were once socialist but, to appeal to a consumerist electorate and possibly bank-rolling lobbying powers, have had their head turned to the Right. Blairism is a case in

point. Suddenly, the 'Western'-oriented, competitively driven Lifelong Learning placing the emphasis on the individual *'responsibilised'* consumer, not social/ community actor, replaces all social and community forms of justice-oriented learning. It is not even *lifelong education*, "Learning to *be* (not to *have*)" which UNESCO once championed in its Soviet Union-presence days. This iteration of Lifelong Education at least foregrounded non-formal popular education rooted in a 'geographically majority world' context. It foregrounded the intergenerational, community-oriented popular education, hence the exaltation of the work of such figures as Paulo Freire. This all-embracing concept of education was holistic in a manner reflecting the exigencies of a 'majority world' context. Nations from this sector, precisely the majority, backed by the vetoing UN superpower that was the Soviet Union, had a say. This all changed after 1990 and the fall of the Berlin Wall; although the Trump administration now wants to pull out of UNESCO. A more Neoliberal-oriented Lifelong *Learning* took root, 'Western'- oriented and individualising in tenor, though looking, from the outside, as 'the innocent flower'. It however it can be 'the serpent under it', to borrow from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (English and Mayo, 2021). Luckily, popular education, outside 'Western'-influenced contexts, provides antidotes in many ways. This applies not just to geographically 'majority world' contexts, where examples are legion, but also to Europe, especially 'Southern' Europe/Mediterranean. Rome with its popular schools is a case in point, as we will show.

1.3. Popular Education

Popular education has different meanings in different contexts with a recurrent leitmotif – grassroots educational provision sometimes dovetailing but often in contrast with the formal, institutional system. It is often characterised by attempts to generate educational initiatives among the disenfranchised, occasionally by the disenfranchised themselves (Torres 1990; Kane 2001). The disenfranchised are the major casualties of the current Neoliberal juggernaut, left destitute by the dismantling of the Social State and the shredding of the 'social contract' (Giroux 2018). A key feature throughout is its intergenerational, not age-conditioned nature, often, though not always, at the furthest remove from the formalised institutional education, public/state-sponsored. Popular Education has been a much bandied about term attributed to different features of education, once again often but not exclusively outside institutional settings. It ranges from the French term, *Education Populaire* to University Extension Education in other countries. In

certain historical moments, it took on the appearance of an anarchist grassroots provision as in Spain before and between dictatorships. Being grassroots-oriented, it would, generally speaking, be conceived of as contrasting with top-down institutional impositions. In Spain's case, they would be central, institutional impositions by what is perceived as *El Estado Español*. In this regard, this feature anticipated and prefigures that form of a popular education that is most heralded in the English language, adult education literature: Nonformal *Educación Popular*. Moreover, precisely in the United Kingdom, popular education also entails appropriation of even formal knowledge by the working class, revealing an attempt to construct a 'proletarian public sphere' (Steele 2007). Even when involving universities, it was not *of* or *in* the University in the formal structural sense. It was as marginalised as the tutors engaged in it (McIlroy and Westwood 1993).

The Latin American version of Popular Education, based on nonformal learning (La Belle 1986; Tarlau 2019), is arguably the most widely heralded and researched. It is the one version which has contributed to bringing about a paradigmatic shift in our thinking with regard to education. One aspect of its more radical feature is the provision of a network of *learning webs* in accordance with the ideas of Ivan Illich and which finds arguably its best articulation in Chiapas, Mexico and by the Frente Zapatista.

The emphasis here is on learning for regional and group autonomy. Many of these fall under broad networks such as UNITIERRA, escaping what is hegemonically perceived as *education* (Prakash and Esteva 2009; Santos 2017). It is popular and holistic (Freire and Illich 2003).

2. INTERGENERATIONALITY IN POPULAR EDUCATION

2.1. Flexibility and intergenerationality

The common element is that popular education is generally rooted in an epistemology of the 'South' (Santos 2014), in a holistic vision of social transformation that departs from the existential situation of the oppressed. It is meant to be a vehicle for addressing the concerns of peasant communities and other subaltern groups, lacking facilities taken for granted in 'Western' societies. It represents the creative possibilities of people involved in addressing their specific communal needs in a context characterised by (Neo) colonialism and its related discontents such as economic and cultural

dependency and, more recently, Neoliberal-governed hegemonic globalisation – *globalisation from above.*

This bottom-up, not strictly age-conditioned, organization gives popular education a uniquely flexible nature that reinforces the intergenerational dimension of education. In particular, this aspect of popular education concerns learning, as educators and students, in theory, construct knowledge together and learn reciprocally from each other (Freire 2018).

The non-formal approach potentially brings organised education closer to home. People would thus be spared the hassle of, as in parts of Latin America and Africa, walking long distances to reach a school, with all kinds of hazards along the roads. These can be hazards caused by a civil war, as was the case with large swathes of Central America in the 70s and 80s. Popular education allows for ease of transfer of location in situations under siege. It can be of the kind which prevented parents from sending their daughters to don Lorenzo Milani's school at Barbiana, Tuscany, because of the dangers of commuting, as one needed a license to travel to the place by a 'motorino' (motorcycle), the initial motivation for several boys to attend Don Milani's school in the remote locality of Sant' Andrea a Barbiana in Tuscany's Mugello region (informal conversation with Edoardo Martinelli in Salerno 2023).

Flexibility regarding time allows people to work in the fields by day and attend school by night or late evenings, much later than usual in Summer because of Daylight Saving Time. Children, youngsters and older members of the communities can learn together in common popular settings, hence the *intergenerational learning*, aspect.

2.2. Collectively taking charge of education

Popular education, in theory, allows greater opportunities for intergenerational community members to alternate between being educators and educatees. Experience and learning to share with others are key features. One of us came across an unwritten maxim in a 1998 trip to a shaty town outside São Paulo: certain people from Brazil's socio-economically impoverished 'Nord-Este,' feel morally committed to impart the little they have learnt to others. This includes children or youth, exposed to literacy at school or through non-formal means, who teach even older members of the locality. They would eventually take this commitment when migrating for work and settling on the city's periphery (Freire 1994). This attitude and camarderie connects with prison inmates' experiences on say Ustica, in Antonio Gramsci's time there, awaiting trial under Fascist

repression (Gramsci 1996), Robbin Island in South Africa during Nelson Mandela's and Walter Sisulu's imprisonment, and at Ansar III, in the Naqab/Negev, among Palestinian prisoners (Sacco 2002). In Palestine, there are school-age children prisoners whose schooling has been interrupted for long periods for perhaps merely throwing stones during an *Intifada*. The Zionist state spares none when activating its repressive mechanisms. There is potential also for older, formally educated inmates teaching their younger fellow-detained Palestinians, to make up for the latter's loss of precious schooling days through their incarceration. These situations involve communities organising their own collective learning. People prepare material beforehand and later impart it to others. These communities involve people of different educational achievement, as well as ages, studying, teaching/learning cheek by jowl. Without relying on trained teachers, people can collectively take charge of their own learning (see Ranciere 1987).

The ultimate goal is a collective one as indicated by Gramsci when explaining and celebrating the purpose of adults attending classes of workers' education after a long day at work in Turin and the nearby zones (Gramsci 1977). They did so, he intimates, albeit idealistically, not for personal gain but for collective advancement, class consciousness and struggle. This applies also to intergenerational learning in Palestine under siege and other places lacking conventional (read: 'Western') taken-for-granted facilities..

The credentialing pull is always felt, especially in a Neoliberal-driven economy. Once people attain a certain level of education, some will exert pressure to obtain certification for aspired to employment opportunities, namely 'white collar' jobs in service-oriented economies in the cities or coastal zones in countries such as Spain or Portugal. This is where formal and non-formal education intersect and popular education and the state converge, often in non-envisaged ways.

International popular education often takes on the form of learning the tools for rural development in the hinterland, as with the *Plataforma Rural* in Spain (Guimarães *et al.* 2018) or before the time of universal primary education or even among normally secondary school age students (the country could not afford secondary education for all) and adults in Tanzania, as part of 'education for self-reliance', including popular education, under Julius K. Nyerere's Presidency (Nyerere 1968). At the same time, in several 'Western' countries, we witness the rebirth and transformation of political movements (Della Porta 2020), increasingly focused on mutualistic practices aimed at countering neoliberal policies, in

many cases reviving the centuries-old tradition of popular education (Steele 2007).

2.3. Revolutionary Momentum

Popular education was promoted by states for a variety of reasons, including keeping the momentum alive during early revolutionary situations. In Spain, during the Second Republic, in between the Miguel Primo de Rivera and the Francisco Franco dictatorships, popular education played its part in the cultural momentum seeking to raise the literacy and general education levels of a then largely illiterate population (Mayo 2025) with few schools available for everyone.

Nicaragua, after the 1979 revolution, constitutes a classic example of intergenerational popular education: it provided what people wanted, education and health services. Health education is an important feature of popular education (Maria Zuniga, in Borg and Mayo 2007). School age children were sent to the countryside to live with campesinas/os, learn rural skills and engage as *educational brigadistas* in a literacy/ popular education *cruzada*

With many of the countries concerned not having the wherewithal to provide formal education for all, nonformal, intergenerational popular education becomes a viable alternative. This is what must have led UNESCO to promote non-formal and popular education strongly in the 70s as part of its Lifelong Education for everyone, driven, more recently, under the rubric of 'Education for all' (English and Mayo 2021). Lifelong Education then was very social democratic-oriented, subsequently distorted beyond recognition when ideologically morphed by the OECD and the EU into market-driven, Lifelong Learning. Learning, in true Neoliberal fashion, was converted from a social into an individualised concern (English and Mayo 2021).

Even in revolutionary situations, the momentum can get out of control to the extent that the state is required to balance its one-time obligation to respond to the democratic demands of its constituents, at various levels, with the need to address its economic imperatives. This often places the state at odds with popular education as in Portugal during the 'interim period' following the 1974 'Revolution of the Carnations' (Lind and Johnson 1986). The main aspect of this popular education, however, was not to start with a literacy programme, as had been the case with other great revolutions from Russia to Cuba and later Nicaragua. It would have emphasised what people lacked. That would come later. The immediate attempt was to unleash popular creativity and culture (Melo 1985), officially suppressed under periods of totalitarianism/*Salazarismo*. This was the peo-

ple's manifestation, intergenerationally, of what Antonio Gramsci would call the "popular creative spirit". It was in the spirit of UNESCO's Lifelong *Education* not modern-day individualising lifelong *learning*. UNESCO was very active in the first years of the 'Carnations Revolution' (Guimarães *et al.* 2018).

Popular education alternatively took the form of academic support for struggling students, an effort to transform the formal school system, as has been seen in the last 15 years in countries like Italy (Zizioli *et al.* 2024) and Brazil via the MST (Tarlau 2019). It is this latter trend that our case study addresses, which is particularly exemplary for exploring a possible connection between the intergenerational dimension of popular education and its capacity to question the social order shaped by Neoliberalism.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND CASE STUDY

To address the question posed in this article, we relied on a case study based on uncovered participant observation regarding the "Rete delle Scuole Popolari di Roma" (henceforth "Roman Network"), made up of political activists from organizations committed to providing free educational support to struggling students.

The first Network meeting was held on January 10, 2020; that year, there were only two meetings owing to the pandemic lockdown. The other meetings we attended were distributed as follows: two in 2021, five in 2022, four in 2023, and one in 2024. We attended 14 out of 16 total meetings organised by activists in the observation period. Each meeting lasted approximately 3-4 hours.

Furthermore, the ethnographic observation concerned the educational practices developed in the individual popular schools of the Roman Network during the afternoons in which 26 in-depth interviews (Bichi 2007) with the activists were carried out. Therefore, in addition to ethnographic notes and backtalks (Cardano 2020), the article draws on information obtained through these interviews, conducted in 2022.

The interviewees were selected through snowball sampling that involved the most engaged people in the nine popular schools of the examined network[1] (Table 1).

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[1] The popular schools examined are the following (the areas of the capital where they are located are indicated in brackets): "Scuola Popolare Carla Verbano" (Tufello, northeast of Rome), "A testa Alta" (San Basilio, northeast of Rome; this popular school closed in 2024); "Scuola Popolare Federica Stiffi" (Centocelle, southeast of Rome); "Scuola Popolare di Tor Bella Monaca" (Tor Bella Monaca, southeast of Rome); "Mammuth" (Rebibbia, east of Rome); "Sciangai" (Tor Marancia, south of Rome); "Nessun Dorma" (Roma 70, south of Rome: this popular school closed in 2023), "Spin Time+" (Esquilino, centre of Rome),

Table 1. Distribution of interviewes.

Number assigned to the interviewee	Gender	Age	Neighbourhood where the popular school is located
1	F	27	San Basilio
2	F	28	San Basilio
3	F	27	San Basilio
4	F	28	Esquilino
5	F	45	Esquilino
6	M	27	Tor Bella Monaca
7	F	30	Tor Bella Monaca
8	M	44	Tor Bella Monaca
9	F	31	Rebibbia
10	M	30	Rebibbia
11	M	34	Rebibbia
12	M	27	Roma 70
13	M	28	Roma 70
14	F	29	Roma 70
15	M	67	Centocelle
16	M	71	Centocelle
17	F	43	Centocelle
18	M	34	Ciampino (municipality in the urban belt of Rome)
19	F	26	Ciampino (municipality in the urban belt of Rome)
20	F	56	Ciampino (municipality in the urban belt of Rome)
21	M	26	Tufello
22	F	64	Tufello
23	M	40	Tufello
24	F	38	Tor Marancia
25	F	32	Tor Marancia
26	F	48	Tor Marancia

The overall analysis of the interviews was conducted as follows: each interview was divided into sections reserved for specific topics, either anticipated in the outline or unexpectedly emerging from the interactions with the interviewees. Once the topics were systematized and classified, we proceeded to a comparative analysis of the interviews for each individual topic.

The Roman Network can be considered a 'collective actor' belonging to the new political and social movements of the last decades (Alteri 2014): activists provide free community services aimed specifically at the working-class (these are made up of a progressively larger fraction of migrants), in order to reduce social inequalities and offset the progressive and radical contraction of

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"Dopòlis", operating in Ciampino, a city in the urban belt of Rome. Over time, another popular school also joined the Roman Network (see Zizioli *et al.*, 2024).

the welfare state by neoliberal policies (Bosi and Zamponi 2020).

While placing themselves in the Italian tradition of initiatives to provide scholastic support for disadvantaged children, the schools we examined represent an exemplary case study to show in particular the intergenerational nature of all popular education experiences. Indeed, although field analysis highlights the political limitations of the initiative studied (Parziale 2024), it is interesting to focus on mutual learning of educators and pupils: this is a significant aspect, given its enormous potential to challenge neoliberal education and its concomitant colonial nature (Kundnani 2021).

4. INTERGENERATIONALITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE. INSIGHTS FROM ROMAN POPULAR SCHOOLS

"No one educates anyone, not even him[*one*]self: men educate themselves in communion, through the mediation of the world" (*sic.*) (Freire 2018: 89). This famous statement by Freire finds fulfillment in the pedagogical approach, albeit often improvised, of the Roman popular schools' activists. Although only a section of the activist-educators (those graduates in social and educational sciences) know Freire's work, and openly refer to him, this approach is quite widespread in the popular schools in question.

In this regard, it must be said that the cultural mediation implemented in the popular schools entails a continuous work of translation that is not limited to linguistic aspects and also its underlying conceptual dimension. Pupils in popular schools predominantly attend primary or lower-secondary schools. Especially when they have to do their homework, these pupils often resort to social media to translate specific concepts of Italian culture (or 'Western' culture, given that many come from Asia, Africa and 'South' America) to their own culture. It is a tiring task, full of pitfalls, but promising.

Activist-educators seem to have grasped this aspect, given that, in several cases, they encourage their students to use the resources, offered by social media, to better understand a word or an expression (this has been a recurring theme of the Network's meetings, such as the ones held on 21st April 2022 and 9th March 2023). All this occurs rather offering students direct answers to the questions posed – an alternative way to surmount difficulties arising from their lack of knowledge of the Italian culture and language. The translation of words by students of popular schools is necessitated, however, not only by linguistic needs or ethnic-cultural differences, but also by lack of that knowledge, skills and abilities

rewarded by the schools. The latter constitute the official culture, an expression of Italian middle class lifestyles. Popular school pupils are instead characterized by what Stuart Hall (1990) terms the 'diasporic condition': these students reveal a particular cultural identity. It derives from the coexistence of different and contrasting norms, beliefs, values, symbols, some deriving from the parents' national (and local) culture of origin, others from the culture of the receiving country. The diasporic condition, therefore, is marked by the stigma of those ensconced in an overall disadvantaged material condition, denied full recognition for a cultural identity perceived above all by Italian adults as 'deviant' from the ideal model of 'normality' or 'hybrid'. Thus, the diasporic condition is an easy target of social and racial prejudice.

In this regard, it is necessary to highlight how our ethnographic observation rests on the continuous work by educators to instil students' self-confidence. This process of cultivating self-esteem is enhanced through popular educators' progressive recognition of their students' competences, skills and knowledge, foregrounded, through a laborious process of mediation and linguistic-cultural translation, especially in the carrying out of homework. Without this work of social recognition and cultivation of self-esteem, struggling students risk continuing to be stereotyped as 'inadequate', 'listless', 'unintelligent'.

In this regard, educators – especially those from working-class backgrounds in a 'contradictory class location' (Wright 1985) – try to enable their students embark on an upward educational (and then social) mobility path similar to the one they themselves experienced. Indeed, educators are well aware of the academic difficulties of working-class students, while also understanding that times have changed; these students are also migrants:

I graduated with a degree in philosophy, and I went to high school in the suburbs, in Aprilia. I hail from the public housing estate in Aprilia... so this is my world!.. and this is what I mean... I grew up in this world. My father was a worker at Olivetti, and then, when he was laid off, he invented a job trying to make ends meet with coffee machines; he was an installer and supplier of coffee machines. So, basically, we have a very working-class status. Young people today have many difficulties, partly because school causes performance-related anxiety that should be addressed. At the same time, young people are foreigners; they face enormous economic difficulties, even greater than mine when I was young. However, we try to build a different idea of education based on exchange of knowledge to break the social selection mechanisms of the school. (Interview no. 8, male, 44 years old, Tor Bella Monaca)

My family never had access to middle class lifestyles! I come from a working-class background, but over time I've learned to discover things: I want to understand them, and, at the same time, at a certain point, I felt the need to share the knowledge I had, because of the need to discover new knowledge; it's truly an exchange! Then I have great insecurity // because the school system is a bit like that, it terrifies you in some way, but why does it do that? Because the point of reference wasn't someone good at sharing knowledge and not just judging you; however, I was lucky enough to have some teachers who were sources of reference in my growth path, and I still feel in touch with some of them (I'm still in contact with them, ed.). Today I try to do the same thing with the younger ones. (Interview no. 1, female, 27 years old, San Basilio)

Here, the intergenerational dimension emerges clearly: educators' previous school experience and their ability to resist the social selection mechanisms of the formal education system become resources to be handed down to younger generations, directing them toward social trajectories opposed to those designed by neoliberal policies for the subaltern classes (Mayo 2015). Furthermore, the good example set by some schoolteachers in the past encourages educators today to do likewise for their students. Nonetheless, educators know well that their pupils face social conditions worse than those of the Italian working class in the past. However, exchange, albeit indirect, of working-class students' school experiences among different generations fosters popular education. This is based not only on the mutual exchange of knowledge, emphasized by activists, but also on comparing the experiences of different generations. And in this sense, young students also furnish their educators with an important lesson: the ability to modify teaching techniques, directing them towards understanding the Other. Knowledge of the Other is central to this case study, given that the relationship between educators and learners highlights the knowledge of individuals belonging to different generations, ethnicities, and social classes.

In this regard, the prolonged observation among educators has shown how the emotional dimension of teaching – encouragement – is not enough, if it is not integrated with the cultivation of the skills that nowadays migrant and working-class students employ, or seek to employ, in their work of linguistic-cultural translation/mediation:

If I had to try to introduce you to our students, I would tell you that they are a nice group, first of all of lively and active children, all very intelligent, basically with a lot of potential and when I talk about potential I mean human potential, of expression (interview no. 6, man, 26 years old, Tor Bella Monaca)

But then we did this work on 'hidden' wars (which are not talked about at school), to discover that one of these two boys knew a lot about it and we didn't imagine it, we didn't imagine it at all // There are guys who have derived great satisfaction; there is another who even failed sixth grade, and now that he is in eighth grade he shines, but he really shines with his own light! (interview no. 20, woman, 56 years old, Ciampino)

These testimonies seem to confirm Raymond Williams' (1958) contention, expressed, almostv 70 years ago, by someone once involved in popular education, that the reproduction of scholastic inequalities between social classes can be prevented through action that would sever the link between official education and middle-class culture. According to Williams (1962), in following individualistic values and favouring social competition, the school provides an education that is to the detriment of working-class children. Therefore, scholastic inequalities can only be removed by rendering education in harmony with the values of popular culture, structurally linked to an equal and truly inclusive conception of human and extra-human relationships. Similar to Williams' approach, activists seek to place their students on a par with others. This necessitates the educators' attempt to adapt the ('Western' and white) official school curriculum to the culture of their pupils:

We educators, militants ask ourselves what sense is there in teaching the "Divine Comedy" to a child who comes from a culture very different from ours. Will it be useful to the child in life? Is it too abstract? However, we also know there are relevant things that the school transmits by having these works studied. So let's try to adapt the " Divine Comedy" to the different culture of these children. More generally, let's start from practical problems and try to understand how the school culture helps to solve them. We have to start from their world otherwise how do they learn to read, write to say the least? (interview no. 21, man, 26 years old, Tufello)

In Williams'(1958) formulation, this would mean making such works connect, also involving problematisation regarding their ethnocentricity (e.g. Dante and Islam: Elsheikh, 1999) with a whole new way of life:

Coming from other cultural contexts, these students struggle to understand the historical mechanisms of the West; the latter are really far from their reality, in short. And so often, in fact, we have found that they ask us for help with history and I am trying to understand this a little more deeply, in short, because in reality it would be a bit of a comparison, a comparison with their original cultures, even historical, and those they encounter living here in Italy. (interview no. 16, man, 71 years old, Centocelle)

The activists try to understand how to adapt to or reinvent the official Italian/ 'Western' culture for students from other areas of the world, establishing a dialogue with and between them. This action has a three-fold purpose: a) to reduce the social distance between the linguistic-cultural code of the school (and of the middle class) and the code of the working class students: most of the pupils examined belong to this last class; b) to point out to the latter that their knowledge and also skills have value, given that school knowledge actually refers to practical problems that students can face if they acquire self-esteem and awareness; c) to trigger through social recognition a love for knowledge, and for school study, so that this can be combined with an emancipatory process.

Regardless of how many students handle official knowledge, it is interesting to note that, in their pedagogical work, activists learn to know their students, to love them by finding skills and abilities typical of this specific fraction of the working class made up of young diasporic foreigners. These students straddle multiple ethnic and class cultures. They do so in an ongoing process of intersectionality marked by the continuous reconstruction of meaning through cultural mediation/translation reflected in the performance of tasks. Through relevant support, the activists would hope to reveal to their students the constant social construction of reality and their underlying power relations – an unveiling of ideology residing in school requirements.

In turn, activists are progressively made aware of the linguistic and cultural richness of their pupils and fully understand that they can learn from them. The evident linguistic-cultural diversity of the students, possibly accentuated by somatic traits different from those prevalent in Italy, stimulates the reflexivity of popular educators. In focus is the dialogue between the middle class milieu to which they belong and that of the working classes, especially their foreign component. This dialogue has its social effects. In fact, activists discover that bourgeois uprooting (unlearning bourgeois privilege) – which Milani urged (Roghi 2023) – represents a precondition for rendering effective both school support for subalterns and the underlying popular education orientation. It would however be naive to assume that this uprooting can be complete; one does not easily 'jump out of one's skin', as argued regarding don Lorenzo Milani (Batini *et al.* 2014)

A prolonged relationship with students over the years can, however, lead activists-educators to strengthen their social commitment to popular schools, questioning the typical middle class ' cultural arbitrary', based on the

rigid separation between work, political-social commitment, public/private life.

In this regard, several activists involved are largely vocational educators, social workers, and teachers (Parziale 2024), i.e. welfare professionals who find in popular education a vehicle to make alternative use of their often bureaucratically debased expertise and 'craft knowledge'. In doing so, many activists-educators satisfy the need to give their work a social purpose, updating it without organisational constraints.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Popular education takes on a strong intergenerational connotation, connecting to the mutual exchange of knowledge. This is an aspect that has rarely been explored in studies in this field. However, it can be found in many past and present experiences, from the Barbiana School in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s to community education of the Sem Terra (MST-Landless Peasants) in Brazil today. Intergenerational exchange is also evident when popular education is nominally aimed at adults, because it still involves cooperation between different generations, for example, between young, more qualified workers and older, more experienced ones, as in community theatre in Mediterranean countries such as Spain in Garcia Lorca's time, literacy classes involving adults and seniors who bring their children and grandchildren with them, popular culture clusters in Portugal post 1974, *medresses* in Muslim centres, mobile classrooms among Bedouin communities, community TV audiences in Alberto Manzi's Italian televised literacy project (Non e' mai troppo tardi – it's never too late)(Mayo 2025), Christan-base community groups in Latin America or between young activists and migrant families, as in many experiences related to new political movements in 'Western' countries (Bosi and Zamponi 2020).

In this article, we have emphasized how intergenerational education can challenge Neoliberalism. The case study examined here appears exemplary in this regard. In popular Roman schools, the educational relationship – decidedly less asymmetrical than what is found in the wider society and official schools – favours the slow reconstruction of skills and social competence owned by students belonging to the subaltern class. It can lead students to discover their value as subjects forced to overcome obstacles deriving from a family cultural capital that is different from that required by the official school (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

The work of social recognition of the skills, identity and knowledge of students, belonging to migrant and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, could represent a first and important step to stimulate a working-class pride in these young people, after decades of devaluation of the working class by neoliberalism (see Harvey 2005). This potential is yet to be fulfilled. For the moment, we have seen a process of 'inverted consciousness' concerning activists as members of the middle class. The pedagogical practice of Roman activists is characterized by the search for a synthesis between what can be learned from the theory of cultural reproduction and what is suggested with regard to the theory of cultural resistance promoted by British Cultural Studies.

Authors such as Bernstein (1971) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) belong to the first perspective: in highlighting how the official school ratifies social inequalities, these scholars have focused attention on the social distance between working class culture and the official culture, the latter part and parcel of the middle class's 'cultural arbitrary' or preferences.

At the same time, British cultural studies have highlighted how the social selectivity of schools stems from the failure to recognize working-class culture. What was highlighted in the past by authors such as Williams (1958, 1962) seems even more valid today, given that neoliberalism tends to exalt white middle-class culture, revealing the colonial nature of capitalism, as highlighted by postcolonial scholars, following Hall (1990). Kundnani's analysis (2021) has revealed how Neoliberalism fosters the belief – well systematised by von Hayek – that freedom, exclusively made possible by the self-regulating market economy, necessitates the assimilation to the white middle-class consumer culture ideology. Experiences like the one explored in our case study appear to challenge neoliberalism precisely on these grounds. This type of counter-hegemonic struggle draws on the resources derived from intergenerational dialogue inherent in the flexible and reciprocal exchange of knowledge in popular education.

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Digital Reflexive Community as a Healing Force: The Case of *HakSende* Among Alevi People in Turkey

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Abstract. The Alevi community in Turkey, numbering over 15 million, has faced social and political marginalization due to its distinct cultural and religious heritage. In recent years, Alevi culture and identity have provided opportunities to redefine key fault lines in Turkish society. The rise of digital media has enabled Alevis to create online communities and negotiate their spirituality and morality. This study explores the digital spiritual community of Alevi people, analyzing the key characteristics of Alevi spirituality and morality in online spaces. We examine how Alevi individuals use digital platforms to construct their identity, reconnect with their heritage, and engage in moral and spiritual discussions. Our research draws on in-depth interviews with 10 members of an online Alevi community, virtual ethnographic research, and a focus group with 8 participants. We investigate the interplay between reflexivity, spirituality, morality, narrativity, and agency in the digital sphere. The findings suggest that the online Alevi community provides a discursive space for negotiating spirituality and morality. Members use digital platforms to share narratives, seek guidance, and engage in moral discussions. The community's spiritual understanding of the lifeworld is mediated through daily conversations, social media, and other digital practices. We argue that the Alevi community's digital presence is a response to the challenges of modernity and the need for solidarity and collective identity. The online community offers a space for Alevi individuals to re-construct their heritage, negotiate moral virtues, and develop a reflexive self. This study contributes to our understanding of the intersection of digital media, spirituality, and community building. It highlights the importance of reflexivity and narrativity in shaping moral identity and constructing community in online spaces.

Keywords: reflexive community, Alevi culture, storytelling, spirituality.

1. SPRITUALITY, NARRATIVITY AND ONLINE COMMUNITY BUILDING

The concept of community has been central to social sciences since the 18th century, emerging from the need to understand the rural and urban divide during European modernization. The epistemological foundation of

sociology included the concept of structure, where interstitial relationships were revealed as a complex network of events. When Emile Durkheim characterized communities as morphologies, as part of social structures, the issue of meaning did not arise. However, in today's world, with the rise of digital culture and technologies of the self, 'community' can no longer be adequately described solely in terms of institutions and components, as it is now recognized as a symbol to which its various adherents impute their own meanings (Cohen 2013). Regardless of societal configurations, studying communities requires an examination of their power in constructing symbols and subjects who constantly reposition and innovate themselves.

This paper illustrates the process of reconstructing a community through a group of individuals organizing themselves in the digital world, which allows for a series of non-mediated interactions. As will be seen in the following pages, the online community practices we have studied include various discursive features and innovative methods of expression. These practices consist of interpretations of spiritual poems, the sharing of reflexive notes on faith, storytelling, consultations at personal and communal levels, the rearrangement and reinterpretation of narratives on Alevi faith, and moral affirmations. Participants in a digital community receive information and knowledge, which is intertwined with the process of being an author, creating or formulating their own narratives that are uploaded and shared with other members. We argue that this reciprocity and reflexivity establish a network of opportunities for members to develop emotional and cognitive management skills, thereby fostering healing.

As Sommers and Gibson (1994) noted, narratives function as a vehicle for identity. Wagener (2020) describes the power of narratives as both content and a form of agency. Research on authenticity and narrative identity explores how individuals construct life stories that align with their authentic selves. Authenticity, often defined as self-congruence (Kernis and Goldman 2006), plays a crucial role in shaping narrative identity by influencing how people interpret their experiences. Similarly, Adler *et al.* (2016) find that individuals who integrate core values and self-defining themes into their life stories report greater life satisfaction. Overall, the literature suggests that an authentic narrative identity fosters resilience and well-being by enabling individuals to construct a coherent and meaningful sense of self.

In addition to the role of online practices and narratives at a personal level, their significance in reproducing faith communities reveals a unique process investigated by various researchers. As Hidayati notes, since

the 1980s, religious communities have been networking through the Internet. Since then, the research and knowledge on the relationship between religion and the cyber world have developed since (Hidayati 2022). Spiritual online communities have significantly transformed religious experiences, offering new ways for individuals to explore and practice their faith. While these communities provide accessibility, inclusivity, and innovative spiritual guidance, they also raise ethical and theological questions. Online Sufi communities, for example, have significantly transformed the way spiritual seekers engage with Sufism. Digital platforms offer new opportunities for learning, community-building, and global connectivity. However, they also challenge traditional notions of Sufi authority and ritual practice. As Sufism continues to evolve in the digital age, future research should explore how online spaces can maintain the depth and authenticity of Sufi traditions while embracing technological advancements.

Bunt (2022) explores the expansion of Sufism in cyberspace since the mid-1990s, highlighting how Sufis utilize digital media for the reinvention of practices and sociability. Studies in Indonesia (Eko Putro *et al.* 2019) and Pakistan (Waheed *et al.* 2024) focus on how Sufi orders utilize modern communication technologies, including the internet, to maintain their existence and transmit their teachings. These studies also emphasize the opportunities for dissemination and the potential for misinterpretations or aberrations. According to Karaflogka, online communities facilitate new forms of religious practice and identity expression, particularly among younger generations. However, these communities also present challenges related to authenticity, misinformation, and the potential for radicalization. The interplay between online and offline religious engagement is a significant area of research, as is the influence of social media algorithms and evolving gender dynamics within these virtual spaces (Karaflogka 2002). These ambivalences in the dynamics of online community building offer a new research area where the power of spiritual rituals and narratives should be studied through different linguistic devices, which serve as clues to investigate meaning-making methods within the community itself. For example, to what extent do shared narratives, such as stories, provide unity or diversity? When and how do people innovate new rituals to form new claims for their identities? How do spiritual narratives play a role in their healing practices? These and similar questions require the delineation of a series of discursive patterns.

As Newsom (2013) notes, three key traits of traditional storytelling – variability, performance, and collectivity – are evident in specific instances of contem-

porary participatory storytelling. Each of these traits draws from a pair within a recursive loop: variability refers to the storyteller's ability to work within the boundaries set by tradition and custom; performance represents the negotiation between the storyteller and the community during the storytelling process; and collectivity reflects the influence of the community on the growth and evolution of the story over time. As we will see in the following pages, the members of the community investigated in this paper employ and rearrange these traits of storytelling on a new scale, whereby participants redefine the boundaries set by their tradition. They constantly allow members to open up a space for balancing discursive acts, which display their performativity. They develop mechanisms to evaluate the process of growth and evolution of the story they create. The following evaluations provide an insight into the community selected for this paper.

2. ALEVI CULTURE IN TURKEY

Turkish society exhibits sociological characteristics rooted in the intersection of secular and non-secular cultural dimensions in everyday life, an amorphous sphere where Sunni and other religious groups interact, and modern and traditional public and cultural symbols are employed in the process of mediatization presented as popular and political cultural itineraries. These tensions largely stem from attempts to reconcile constructivist and essentialist arguments, which seek different epistemological frameworks to understand contemporary political and cultural issues within Turkish society. A vast literature exists on Alevi identity and historiography, which occasionally functions as an ideological force in framing the phenomenon of Alevi communities in various national and transnational contexts. The Alevi people are the most significant minority group, accounting for twenty percent of the population according to some historical sources (Shindeldecker 1998). The major fault lines in Turkey, secularism versus Islam, modernity versus tradition, could never be addressed without considering the symbolic power of Alevi historiography and what Dressler (2017) terms 'religiography.'

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Alevi communities is their social organization, where spiritual leaders at different levels guide their followers in developing moral selves through deep commitment. Culturally constructed institutions serve the community through conflict resolution methods. When people join gatherings such as *cem* ceremonies, which guide individuals morally and spiritually, they are motivated to par-

ticipate in spiritual conversations (*muhabbet*) with their spiritual leaders, shaping their reflexive selves. During these rituals, they can formulate questions for the spiritual leaders to discover possible ways for reconciliation and self-evaluation. Moreover, Alevi rituals and gatherings differ from most Sunni practices in their allowance of the joint participation of men and women. Spiritual conversations, consultations with community leaders, and engagement in storytelling are key elements of the tradition, where oral tradition is strongly embedded in narrative and moral teachings.

The role and position of mysticism and spiritualism in this tradition have been central to intensive and strongly contested debates within Turkish society. A comprehensive understanding of the spiritual characteristics of Alevi theology necessitates an examination of its metaphysical basis and the development of its spiritual perspectives. In the religious worldview of Alevism, the distinction between *batin* and *zahir*, and the belief in the immanence of God, are fundamental principles (Dressler 2002)[1]. The reflection of this theological understanding in everyday life can be observed in routine activities and the organization of social life. Healing practices, the belief in reincarnation, and the transmigration of souls are among the characteristics shared in various settings among Alevi people.

Alevism is a broad umbrella term for Muslims belonging to the House of Ali, those descended from Ali. This term was used for Hz. Ali and his descendants after the passing of Hz. Muhammad. Approximately in the 7th century CE, Alevis, who were descendants of Ali, found it impossible to live in the Arab lands and migrated to various regions. Khorasan, near Iran and Afghanistan, was one of the primary regions they migrated to. The shamans and Manichaean priests in Khorasan welcomed these newcomers warmly and integrated them into their own lineages through marriage. Consequently, this process led to the introduction of positions such as *ocaklık* (hearth/lineage), *dedelik* (elderhood), and *pirlik* (spiritual leadership) to the Turks. Alevis are individuals who accept the descendants of Ali as their *pirs* (spiritual guides) and are bound to them by a relationship of *taliplik* (discipleship). In this sense, almost all Alevis either claim descent from the Prophet or hold the bond of

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[1] The *batinyya* worldview is based on a distinction between the *batin*, the "interior" or "hidden," and the *zahir*, the "exterior" or "visible." According to the Alevi interpretation of *batinyya*, the inner meaning of religion is paramount. Through reference to the *batin*, Alevis de-emphasize both the literal meaning of the Quran and the practical religious duties (especially ritual prayer, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and fasting) prescribed by orthodox Islam. For Alevis, these practices are merely *zahir* and are not essential for those who seek the "Truth" (*Hakk*), that is, God" (Dressler 2002).

Evlad-ı Resul (descendants of the Prophet) above all else. The most widespread and powerful understanding of Alevism is also defined by many researchers as *Ocakzade* (descendants of a spiritual lineage). The *Dede-Talip* (spiritual guide-disciple) relationship takes its roots from Alevi theology. Built on the foundation of consent (*Rızalık*), it accepts the production of high moral standards as the most fundamental principle of worship (Işık 2017)

Concepts related to Alevism are also affected by the conceptual confusion currently prevalent in Turkey. Thus, at the forefront of these concepts, which are used and interpreted by being diverted from their historical contexts, is the term "Alevi" itself. As is known, contemporary Alevis insist on using this term for themselves. There seem to be two reasons for this: Firstly, the term is derived from the name of Hz. Ali, who stands at the center of Alevi belief. Secondly, compared to other derogatory names historically given to them from outside, such as *Kızılbaş, Rafizi, Zındık* (heretic), *Mülhid*, and similar terms, it does not reflect a demeaning meaning. On the contrary, it is exalting because it is derived from the name of the Prophet's son-in-law (Ocak 2000). Consequently, the markers of identity-making practices have manifested within a discursive space, transmitted through diverse historical and political forces observable in contemporary cultural politics.

The ways in which cultural characteristics manifest themselves reside in the differences between Sunni and Alevi lifeworlds. The so called *cem* ceremonies where men and women participate in the same sphere are accompanied by musical and spiritual poetics. Alevi women are not required to wear a hijab. The history of Alevi culture reveals a series of institutional practices that balance potential tensions within the community and family, allowing for spaces of negotiation, discussion, and reinterpretation of faith and traditional wisdom. In contemporary Turkish society, numerous Alevi foundations and associations, which aim at maintaining the Alevi traditions, base their validity claims on different cultural and historical narratives, rendering problematic the issue of agency and the political space for religious freedom and coexistence.

Social and global transformations have impacted Alevi culture, which has been undergoing modernization and secularization, rendering traditional communal structures contested, if not obsolete. Processes such as urbanization, religio-secularization (Dressler 2008), changing population dynamics, digitalization, transnationalization, and de-traditionalization have all characterized a variegated sphere of faith and belief systems. With the rise of digital culture, Alevi culture has begun to reflect characteristics of mediatization. Akın (2021),

for example, investigates the online platform dedicated to one of the prominent figures of Anatolian Alevism, Haji Bektashi Veli, which has nearly twenty-eight thousand confirmed members. Established in 2012, the group averages ten posts per day. Besides the words attributed to the historical figure, whose motto 'always read and teach so that you can learn what is good, beautiful, and right' is used by the group, members share *nefes* (spiritual poems) and *deyiş* (sayings/hymns) written for or attributed to Haji Bektashi Veli. Öze and Soyer (2021) analyze the role of two associations that protect Alevi people's rights in Northern Cyprus (TRNC) by examining posts that contribute to the formation of sociocultural identity through the associations' social media usage practices. In her study of Alevi people in a transnational setting, Emre Çetin (2023) argues that Alevi television serves as a significant case for understanding how citizenship is enacted through media, enabling us to view the community media of minorities across different countries and stateless communities in a different light. Şahin, on the other hand, claims that virtual and transnational communities in Germany are cognitive structures of this symbolic construction process. Two virtual communities based on associations and forums are offered as case studies, displaying the transition from ritual to faith (Şahin 2019).

Diverse interpretations and reimaginings of Alevism now shape prominent discussions about Alevi culture. The historiography of Alevism is intensely debated, a reflection of the political tensions within today's cultural landscape. Consequently, numerous social, historical, and political processes affecting Alevi people have been redefined in relation to key societal divides, such as the secular-religious worldview and Islamism. According to Çamuroğlu (1998), political dynamics were key to igniting Alevi revivalism in Turkey. One significant trigger was the collapse of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. This period saw politically frustrated Alevis reclaiming their *Alevi* identity, which evolved into a distinct ideology. A second, equally powerful factor was the escalation of Islamic fundamentalism in Turkey. The Alevi community's defensive posture against this rising Islamism became tragically clear with the Sivas massacre on July 2, 1993, when a cultural festival turned into a horrific killing of participants. In addition, the highly negotiated and contested identity of Alevi people, as Delibaş notes, has been facing challenges deriving from modernization, globalization, urbanization, and mass migration (Delibaş 2016).

In today's late modern world, so to speak, different interpretations on Alevism also amplify the markers of political projects and ideologies. Problems which

have been formulated as challenges in the literature on Alevi culture emphasized Sunnification (Erol Işık 2021; Jongerden 2003), exclusion from governmental positions, different tools for discrimination at cultural levels, isolation from political projects for political coexistence, and recognition of religious freedoms. These macro level problems bring about micro level expectations for unity and community building, which is one of the engines for formulating the problem in this paper. The case study we chose focuses on such a communal effort by which a large group of people among Alevi population constitute a topic for investigation.

3. THE ONLINE REFLEXIVE COMMUNITY OF *HAKSENDE* (*HS*): A SITE FOR THE RE-PRODUCTION OF SPIRITUALITY AND MORALITY

The community investigated in this paper is called *HakSende (HS),* which literally means "The Mighty is within you," referring to the individual's inner strength in discovering the true path in their life. In 2012, a group of people with Alevi cultural background took the initiative to create an online presence by producing short videos on YouTube. Their primary goal was to inform others about the Alevi path, which significantly facilitated interaction within their community. Sharing knowledge and the authentic tradition of Alevi faith led to the design of a series of materials on Instagram, where they declared the community's mission as follows:

"The *HS* website is a community formed by people who believe that humanity is a universal being, accept that the soul is a trust from the Creator, desire to live a life in accordance with the command and consent of *Hakk* (Truth/God), are connected to wise and enlightened individuals (*erler and erenler),* and seek what is right and true both within the country and abroad, in all four corners of the world" (M.Y).

According to one of the founders of *HS*:

Well, if you ask, "What is Hak Sende?" Hak Sende is that the spirit which came into existence through the breath of the Creator is Hakk (Truth/God). It is what makes the human spirit dominant over the body. Humankind is the one who lives and governs through the spirit, and in this sense, is Hakk. Don't forget that your spirit is within you and wants you to take control of your body with your free will. I look at you as Hakk, as a being with a spirit; receive the influence of truth coming from my spirit as truth with your spirit (T.A.).

This community operates with a dispersed membership across Turkey. Its structure is composed of three tiers: 1) core management members, 2) secondary management members, 3) subgroups, and 4) viewership. HakSende is particularly notable and worth studying because of its diverse web of activities focused on re-interpreting Alevism.

The sustainability of both their online and face-to-face practices is highly organized. This structured environment encourages members to actively position themselves within the community. Some members also take part in organizations of foundations which aim at becoming a voice in Alevi affairs. Furthermore, some members have been developing ties with Alevis living in Germany by organizing forums and activities. These gatherings allow people to come together and discuss the theological and organizational aspects of Alevi community-making practices.

In 2017, the founders of the community, from diverse occupational backgrounds, established the YouTube channel @HAKSENDE. They initiated online discussion groups focused on theological insights into Alevi beliefs and encouraged people to organize online activities. This diversity of voices, attempting to assert Alevi agency politically and culturally, appears to have been significant in the formation of this community, which presents itself as a family, a school, a path, and a source for seeking the truth, that is, *Hakk*.

The majority of the members preferred to address one another as *can* or *canlar*, meaning soul or souls, respectively, according to the Alevi theology[2]. In other words, the ways in which daily recognition rituals are characterized by spiritual identification. In other words, daily recognition rituals are characterized by spiritual identification.

According to the founders we interviewed, the core management of the community comprises approximately 90 individuals, followed by 250 people whom they guide, although these individuals are afforded opportunities for independent decision-making in organizing various activities. The rest of the community (around 1000 people) can be categorized as followers, some of whom actively participate through their social media member-

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[2] The terms scholars most commonly use to acknowledge the concepts of soul/spirit are largely derived from esoteric readings and interpretations of the Quran, which emphasize the significance of the transcendental world. Furthermore, the keywords 'soul/spirit' can be evaluated based on the distinction between the material world (embodied by our bodies and psyche) and the immaterial world, signified by the spiritual dimension. The human body is the ultimate entity symbolizing the material world. Accordingly, '*Can*' (soul) is the embodiment of spiritual beings reflected through our bodies. It is also possible to emphasize '*can*' as the power of enabling forces (Uludağ, 2012). '*Can*', therefore, influences *Ruh* (spirit), which is believed to imply the animated breath of life breathed into a living being, which departs from the physical body at the point of death. Members of the community greet one another with the word *Canlar* (souls), reflecting the emphasis on the *Batın* dimension in Alevi culture. See: (Işık 2007).

ship. The social media managers of *HS* restrict access to certain activities for all followers, aiming to protect the privacy of those playing crucial roles in determining activities and negotiating identity-making claims, due to the sensitivity of some spiritual issues and the prioritized themes of discussion[3]. It can be argued that *HS* is a semi-private or semi- public community that seeks sincerity in membership candidates who are seeking the right path. The working groups described above prepare discussions on daily matters, spiritual concerns, and interpretations of diverse written and non-written issues, leading to the construction of narratives and discursive markers with unique rhetorical forms. As discussed below, since one of the key puzzles in the spiritual and reflexive identity-making process appears to be the sustainability and reproduction of meaningful moral claims, the activities, practices, and narratives of *HS* as a community are based on a series of online and offline negotiations, discussions, and consultations. Some of the activities and discursive practices listed below include face-to-face interactions where members strengthen their commitments and affiliations with both Alevi identity and group membership. These practices also facilitate networking on non-spiritual matters, which is crucial for establishing solidarity among members.

The community also employs other social media outlets and strategies: specific WhatsApp groups where members can pose questions to spiritual guides, and weekly Instagram presentations where individuals listen to diverse topics and issues ranging from historical and cultural subjects to everyday life concerns. Additionally, they collectively publish books that interpret spiritual poems and analyze how minstrels refine them.

Certain groups within the community organize weekly online meetings where presentations are delivered to discuss spiritual or everyday challenges faced by individuals. They also hold online sessions to interpret the spiritual meaning of specific texts (e.g., the spiritual poetry of dervishes, or theological poems) and organize meetings where individuals' questions are addressed by spiritual leaders. These practices foster a space for reflexivity and agency, enabling individuals to share the personal impact of these consultations and participatory opportunities.

The activities of *HS* can be summarized as follows:

Table 1. Data on Social Media Membership (*HS*).

Social Media	Numbers
The Number of Produced Videos	1219
The Number of Views (Youtube Videos)	1.421.368
YouTube Membership	6030
X Membership	135
Instagram Membership	8109
Facebook Membership	1200

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Category 1: Content Creation and Dissemination

a) Creating and sharing video content on YouTube. This serves as a common method for reaching a broader audience and disseminating information, teachings, or event details.
b) Live broadcasts on various social media platforms. This enables real-time interaction and the sharing of events, discussions, or teachings.
c) Writing and editorial work, encompassing text analysis, proofreading, blog post creation, and the preparation of visual content with text for social media. This focuses on written communication and content development.

Category 2: Spiritual and Educational Activities

a) Interpretation of *Kelam*, which can refer to sacred texts, teachings, or discourses within a spiritual or philosophical context. Specifically, theological poems are discussed within the group.
b) Quranic studies: learning and understanding the Quran.

Category 3: Healing and Well-being

a) Healing group: activities related to physical, emotional, or spiritual healing practices.

Category 4: Skill Development and Arts

a) Diction training and voice-over work: focusing on the improvement of speaking skills and potential audio content creation.
b) *Saz* course and education: instruction on the traditional Turkish and Alevi stringed instrument, indicating engagement with music and cultural heritage.

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[3] The social media links are: https://www.youtube.com/@HAKSENDE,
[a] https://www.haksende.com
[b] https://www.instagram.com/hak.sende?igsh=MWZmY3M3Z2RvNDNzcA
[c] https://x.com/hak_sende?s=09
[d] https://m.facebook.com/?wtsid=rdr_0aDyH5IJ4pQOJGicj&_rdr

Category 5: Community Support and Practical Involvement

a) Financial support group: a group potentially focused on providing financial assistance, although its current status requires verification.
b) Gathering and support for the Hak Sende Hazelnut Orchard: indicating practical involvement in a project related to agriculture or community resources.

Category 6: Ritual and Observance

a) Attending the *Cem* (Alevi religious gathering/ritual) of the spiritual guides and participating in service: a core aspect of Alevi religious practice.

Category 7: Youth Engagement

a) Young members in the youth branches of *Cem Evi* (Alevi cultural and religious centers) organizing various events: activities and initiatives led by the younger generation within the community.

Members participating in the activities of these groups belong to WhatsApp groups, where the group leader organizes a division of labor, overseeing tasks and providing feedback to group members. Each group is encouraged to develop annual plans for activities and the assignment of roles. Accountability and transparency is required for these activities.

The members of this community, most of whom reside in different cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, and Izmit, meet both online and offline, depending on their diverse activities and intentions. Members living in the same city convene for specific occasions, such as *muhabbet* (a spiritual discussion), routine dinners, special holidays, and other events. One of the community's major characteristics is to reproduce and cultivate their faith in a spiritual manner. The second significant identity marker appears to be their effort to develop modes of interaction that facilitate a method for re-evaluating their lives and themselves, which leads us to the issue of reflexivity. Data analysis reveals that the two aims formulated in this paper are interrelated.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

To explore how digitalization empowers a community, our research questions required employing qualitative methods, including netnography, in-depth interviews, thematic analysis, and archival research. Accessing

all members at the management level proved challenging due to time restrictions. Given our methodological reliance on interviews, our primary objective was to schedule these interactions based on participant availability. We conducted both in-depth interviews and focus group sessions, with their arrangement being contingent on accessibility and voluntary participation. These factors played a vital role in securing authentic responses. As evidenced by the focus group data, the participants' willingness to provide comprehensive answers substantially contributed to the robustness of the study's methodological design.

4.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The first step of our research was to collect data from the people responsible for designing the social media pages, managing online meetings across various groups, and coordinating numerous activities within these groups. These preliminary interviews served to elucidate the structure of *HS*, and were subsequently followed by interviews with other community members. These members, as well as the participants in the focus group interviews, volunteered for the research, which presented further opportunities to incorporate more insightful questions.[4]

The majority of participants originate from urban centers, while four were born in cities and towns considered more traditional. There are members who reside in Europe, which makes the community transnational in addition to its local and national connections.

Members of the group became affiliated through connections with individuals, exposure to social media

Table 2. Social-demographic features of participants.

Age	Gender	Occupation
32	Female	Optician
29	Female	Security Guard
32	Male	Accountant
26	Female	Graduate Student
40	Male	Technician
57	Male	Retired Worker
48	Male	Retired Military Official
53	Male	Retired Worker
44	Male	Government Official

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

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[4] The preliminary questions and the consent form were distributed to the participants via Google Forms.

Table 3. Method for discovering the community.

Method of Discovery	Description
Social Media	Found the group through platforms such as Instagram.
Personal Connection /Meeting Individuals	Direct interaction or introduction by individuals affiliated with the HS group or its community.
Online Video Platforms	Discovered the group through online video platforms, specifically YouTube.
Verbal Information/Recommendation	Learned about the group through word-of-mouth, advice, or general spoken information.
Family Member (General)	Learned about the group through a family member, without detailed information about the initial encounter.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

pages and videos, and interaction with family members. All but two participants actively engage in the organization of group activities. Five of the participants are part of a group that convenes every Monday evening (21:00-23:00) to share and discuss Alevi poems. We also participated in this group, employing a virtual ethnography technique, which revealed a highly systematic group discussion on the interpretation of theological poems known as *kelam*. The participants receive the poems a week prior to each meeting. The group leaders prepare a preliminary analysis to guide the discussion of potential meanings within the poetry. When questioned about the rationale behind preparing this analysis before the online discussion, the leaders explained that this strategy serves as a necessary tool to mitigate potential deviations and to foster a more systematic group dynamic. During the online meetings, participants share their reflections by explicitly articulating their opinions, drawing upon observations, knowledge of other teleological markers, and their emotional and cognitive inspirations. This process of self-reflection and life contemplation appears to be shaped by an intense pursuit of a true path and an authentic interpretation among peers, drawing from deep-seated moral frameworks. Some participants, for instance, reflected on their past selves before their involvement with this community for sharing their spiritual inquiries, drawing a comparison between their former and current states. They concluded that engaging with these texts, some of which are in the form of poems or parables circulating among Alevi people, has led to spiritual empowerment or refinement. Consequently, the collective reading of poems renders their subjectivity more enriched and empowered, which directly correlates with a sense of strength in addressing practical issues. The session on reading theological poetry is not intended to impose specific meanings on the participants. Conversely, they are encouraged to discern a personal path in the process of constructing a reflexive self, which is then shared publicly.

One of the key questions that helped formulate a problem concerning membership within the online community is associated with the major discursive patterns in individuals' characterizations of their motivations. The participants identified five primary categories:
a) spiritual growth,
b) understanding truth and reality,
c) providing service to others,
d) receiving guidance from others,
e) personal conduct.

These are intertwined with questioning and re-evaluating their roles in the community, seeking cognitive and spiritual tools for self-empowerment, and negotiating their moral selves and social roles. When asked about the most significant activities within the group, community building, gatherings, continuous engagement as a means of addressing daily challenges, fostering self-knowledge, achieving balance, and practical application in life were listed as the main themes, which were complemented by their motivations for participating in *HS*.

When we asked them to describe the community they are affiliated with, the answers were as follows. HS is a community, emphasizing:
a) Spiritually Focused and Seeking Truth (*Hakk*)
b) Personal and Spiritual Development
c) Unity, Solidarity, and Sincerity
d) Learning and Understanding (especially teachings)
e) Spreading and Applying Truth (*Hakk*)
f) Balancing Spirituality and Worldly Life

The ways in which participants characterized their community appear to rely on negotiating a personal and collective identity-making process embedded in spirituality. As noted in the analysis of the focus group interviews, the participants' sensitivity to balancing worldly activities with spiritual idiosyncrasies is far from simplistic or one-dimensional. The seeker identity they internalize is elevated to a level where they resist the cessation of exploring their spiritual path, even though the repetitiveness of rituals and the circulation of the same texts and meanings in teachings may occasionally

Table 4. The categorization of the motivations for following *HS*

Category	Motivations
Category 1: Spiritual Growth and Development	a. to develop myself both spiritually and in terms of willpower. b. Its closeness to spirituality and how it keeps me from getting caught up in worldly anxieties. c. It allows me to see my shortcomings and deficiencies, adding depth to my understanding and inner state. d. The presence of spiritual purification practices. e. Completing our personal development. f. Spiritual purification. g. The transformation of a person from humanity towards perfection. h. Spiritual purification and cleansing practices on people. i. Humanity's struggle to know itself and connect with its spirit.
Category 2: Understanding Truth and Reality (*Hakk and Hakikat*)	a. to gain new knowledge and experiences in the name of reality. b. Explanation of the truth within the path. c. My desire to be within this reality. d. My wish to discover new and accurate information with a different perspective. e. We believe that this is the truth and the way of *Hakk* (God/Truth). f. Learning new information, applying and living according to what is right (*Hakk*). g. Spreading what is right (*Hakk*). g.1. The true purpose of life. g.2. The right way of living, which we call *Hakk* (Truth/God) and *hakikat* (reality/ultimate truth). g.3. Interpreting the Word (*Kelam*), understanding the meaning of what is heard and said.
Category 3: Service and Support for Others/Community	a. To serve and support other people. b. Taking a role [in the group] not only helps the potential within us to be revealed but also allows us to see the things that prevent this potential from emerging. c. Doing something for unity and togetherness. d. I want to provide all kinds of support to the group because I believe that we will rise together, not alone. e. Thirdly, the people who join HS knowingly and with belief give me confidence. I enjoy being in the same environment as them. f. Those who connect with their spirit supporting the awakening of other brothers and sisters.
Category 4: Guidance and Learning from Leaders/Teachings	a. We consider some people here to be our guide. b. We believe that trying to understand and interpret these words contributes to personal development and is educational. b.1. I first learned about creation and the path from the leaders, my *Pir* (spiritual guide), and my *Rehber* (guide) within *HS*. Firstly, I feel a responsibility towards them.
Category 5. Personal Conduct and Alignment	It enables me to seek and see what is right within a universal perspective, and it always keeps the goal directed towards what is right.

impede the process of self-development. Although the intensity of seeking guidance and constructing a frame of reference for their lives may vary among individuals, the online and offline activities, rituals, and discourses have significantly shaped their definition of how they perceive *HS* and themselves.

The participants were also questioned about their level of reflexivity concerning their membership in HS, specifically, changes in their spiritual lives after joining the community. Their responses centered on increased spiritual awareness and understanding, personal and ego transformation/struggle, positive shifts in perspective and life outlook, experiencing a spiritual situation *Hal* and spiritual flow, and general positive spiritual development.

Another question concerned members' advantages or disadvantages in sharing Alevi culture during online activities. Their responses include: gains in understanding and disseminating authentic Alevi culture, challenges related to reactions and comprehension from non-members, limited reach to external audiences, personal choices and social considerations affecting disclosure, positive personal growth and development, and social impact on personal relationships. Some members express the possibility of not reaching out to other groups, becoming isolated. The issue of authenticity points to a wider problem within Alevism in terms of identity and agency. In other words, as noted above, Alevi culture has become one of the most significant symbols through which diverse voices have attempted to offer their own ideological and political definitions based on a revised

historiography. The participants of *HS*, as the focus group interviews clearly show, expressed their frustrations with these ideological tensions, articulating an ultimate collective goal: seeking a moral path without becoming instrumentalized by those attempting to dissociate Alevism from its core values and reconstruct a new culture.

4.2. Focus Group

To gain further insight into the primary issues addressed in this paper, an online focus group discussion was conducted on April 5, 2025, from 21:00 to 23:30. The community leaders selected the participants, suggesting that those with extensive volunteer experience would provide more informative perspectives; consequently, they invited ten members. Two individuals had also participated in the semi-structured interviews, which did not present any issues when they were asked about volunteering twice. The online focus group research was organized to analyze the main issues and arguments at a deeper level, employing a reflexive approach. All participants articulated their opinions and feelings analytically and comprehensively. Space limitations preclude a full account of all responses and their relevance. However, the following explanations of the questions we asked are worth evaluating in order to remember our main task: interpreting the main amalgam of the online community and reflexive self-formation through online activities and narratives.

Accordingly, participants were asked questions regarding their own interpretations of the identity of their online community, *HS*. Their responses were as follows:

A place where spirituality is emphasized more, where people support each other to feel each other's souls and connect with their souls… in addition, this is a community where misunderstandings about Alevi culture are corrected. (INT 1)
What keeps us together, all of us? We are making progress. Day by day, our understanding changes and develops, and in fact, we can see our own evolution because between our yesterday and today, a capability is developing for us to both correct our behaviors, understand the other person, and find what is Right, or at least trace its path. [...] So, we can say that the missing pieces, the gaps, or the flawed parts within our previous framework of thought are both being improved, repaired, and healed over time. And this process shows that our system of thought is becoming more mature, more holistic, and more perfect day by day. We are experiencing a kind of mental and spiritual evolution. (INT 2)
Spirituality, if we need to summarize the inner dimension, looks to me exactly like a military order. So there's always a command and control system. There's a superior, and

a superior above that. There too, there's a 'Hand in hand towards God' system because there's a private, there's a corporal, there's a sergeant. Here too, in the same way, there are souls performing duties, and there are individuals in higher positions who carry out these duties. Because of this, I see this solidarity in the middle as the struggle of conscious beings who are aware of the war, right here right now. (INT 3)
Together with solidarity, the HS group is based on three main fundamental principles: 'sharing, love, and being solution-oriented'. This sharing is both material and spiritual. Along with this, it's based on love, but specifically among those who are believers and progress based on faith, and furthermore, without actually pursuing any commercial gain or self-interest [...] Yes, you're right. As you also stated at the beginning, therapy and many similar things actually have pieces of all of them here. Therefore, it simultaneously has both a foundation in psychology and a foundation in social solidarity, and there's a piece of support within all the things that professionals who practice positive sciences also do in many areas. (INT 4)
As you also expressed, the fact that all souls in HS are in a spiritual quest, I also think that our souls feel and seek that energy, as our dear ones (canlar) mentioned at the beginning. It's this energy that brings us together. So, because the soul has a kind of insatiability or a need, this sincerity and warmth in HS what has brought us to these places. (INT 5)

In their responses, the participants prioritized collectivity through online sharing and production, a solution-oriented group identity, and a moral quest or path. The community's identity was defined by a de-emphasis on explicit Alevi affiliation, which fostered a more universal moral perspective. When questioned about this lack of Alevi emphasis, most participants highlighted their engagement in the process of discerning the right path or acting ethically. Nevertheless, two participants highlighted the value of belonging to an Alevi community over distancing themselves from their cultural ties.

Regarding the problems within the community, the participants' responses were as follows:

No matter how much this community is based on spirituality, we can make mistakes when given responsibilities. When there are errors, we can make mistakes in the services provided. Due to these mistakes, people can sometimes, even if occasionally, be left with or face misinformation on this matter. This also actually occurs not due to the imperfection of the service here, but because we turn towards our own ego. (INT 1)
We can try to isolate ourselves from that community. We start to withdraw into our own shell. Of course, things happen within ourselves too. I think these assumptions occur, and they can happen due to what we feel. That's generally what I've observed. (INT 7)
While there's a constant occurrence of this information being presented in a way that other people could also ben-

efit from, we're perhaps a group of 100-150 people, and if we include our spouses and children, this number increases even more. In a place with so many people, we need to be more productive in this sense. We are experiencing a problem here as well. For example, in our (online) group for interpreting the Alevi poetry, there are 18 people. Actively sending comments and participating in the commentary that evening are 6 or 7 people. The remaining 10 or 11 people are in the background with their screens off and no sound. They are just listening. (INT 4)

Now, we have problems, it's not that we don't. So, we're not in a position to paint everything rosy right now. After all, we all carry egos. I fundamentally see these problems under two main headings. Firstly, we all initially came with a certain level of understanding, and we are all striving within the material world. Our common ground is that the more we enrich ourselves in terms of both the apparent and the inner, both spiritual and material knowledge, the more we mature spiritually in this sense. We evolve. Therefore, a person makes mistakes in proportion to their level of perfection. Not everyone comes at the same level and on the same path. However, there's one constant thing. We all know that with these efforts, our understanding matures. We have truly experienced purifications in a spiritual sense. We can truly tolerate our negative thoughts at certain levels and everyone is sure of this: we are trying to find what is Right. However, despite this, very sharp and different opinions can emerge. (INT 5)

As the participants' responses indicate, the majority define the community as a spiritual venue providing opportunities for the psychological and spiritual evolution of their souls and selves. Second, they appear to internalize the significance of *HS* as a source of moral identity, intended for application in everyday challenges and tensions. Personal growth and communal evolution are viewed as interconnected, as their statements heavily emphasize altruism and collectivism. Individual spiritual growth is framed as dependent on the strength of communal virtue. Problems are characterized as having both personal and communal origins. The *batin/zahir* distinction discussed earlier appears to play a key role in shaping the members' worldview. Experiencing and discerning the spiritual meaning of fundamental life questions seem to be articulated within the context of a communal meaning-making process, heavily influenced by their seeker identity in what they term a moral quest.

During the online focus group session, one participant expressed concern that their responses were not sufficiently sophisticated to address the questions posed, although the researchers did not insist on obtaining answers from every individual. After the focus group, the participant sent us a twenty-line stanza, a poem inspired by our group discussion, which is defined as having a spiritual energy that created a lively and productive exchange. The following extract from the poem reveals

their interpretation of the situation (*hal*), suggesting a need for re-evaluation.

I have embarked on a long journey, my companions,
"There is death, there is no turning back," the wise ones said.
"The path is difficult," they said, I accept, my companions,
"Continuous struggle," the wise ones said. (INT 7)

The manner in which a focus group participant expresses his insight by writing a spiritual verse, in order to reconstruct his ideas and emotions, reveals a process of meaning-making in which reflexivity is at the core of the practice online spiritual community-building practices. Evidently, their conviction, expressed in verse, transcends the shared conversation among participants. Our questions triggered a novel mode of thought, or an internal conversation (Archer 2003), culminating in the creation of a poem-a personal expression and a tool for collective healing. Such texts are products of intersubjectivity, mediated by online practices and norms, thereby establishing a discursive space for both innovation and, at times, inhibition.

When participants were asked about potential problems associated with their membership, they cited the routinization of activities if members lack sufficient energy and initiative to develop and organize new activities, facilitate the sharing of diverse perspectives, and keep the community management informed. Another challenge identified was the tendency of some members to categorize non-members as 'others,' potentially creating divisions within the community. The overemphasis on sharing verses, reading poems, and creating social media content, they argued, could pose a threat to the erosion of the core spiritual heritage of Alevi people. In essence, the members of *HS* seem to be aware of the difficulty of maintaing and reproducing a well-balanced, structured, transparent, and equitable community serving *Hakk*.

5. CONCLUSION

The long-investigated rural versus urban distinction in Turkish society's morphology has traditionally informed evaluations of community function. However, understanding the ongoing features of community-building practices necessitates accepting community as an entity reproduced through situated and embodied performance and practice (Wills 2016). To illuminate the practices and performances of an online community established by a group of Alevi individuals presenting themselves in a socio-theological and spiritual manner, this

study has analyzed the ways in which they create a symbolic universe where subjects revitalize their convictions.

Characterized by political tensions and struggles, Alevi politics have fostered cultural discourses on Alevism that have evolved to the point where the digitalization of the world has not led to community erosion. On the contrary, traditional rituals are being transferred to urban settings where individuals have formed associations, foundations, and online forums as a means of reconstructing their culture, supported by diverse anthropological and theological features. While attempts to demythologize Alevi culture have historically served as political tools to reassemble Alevi politics, it has been observed that traditions, perceived as non-monolithic, adapt and find new remedies and functions. At the political level, Alevi communities have witnessed hegemonic markers such deep scrutiny by non-Alevi forces, which made negotiations over religious freedom, the processes known as Alevi openings in 2008, necessary. These perceived unholy alliances have strengthened their motivation to reclaim their identity and rights at the macro level. Simultaneously, cultural public spheres have emerged via new digital innovations at the meso level. In this context, *HS* stands as one such community serving to revitalize the path for seeking a reflexive community under spiritual leadership.

Various factors have driven the community's formation, with personal storytelling, the construction of moral narratives, and communal gatherings for spiritual energy and zeal serving as guiding principles. The healing power of this online community stems from the ways in which a series of narratives and discursive practices provide ontological security, which has been eroded by the vicissitudes of a highly politicized cultural realm. The traditional characteristics of Alevi culture, as previously described, have been exposed to national and transnational repositioning efforts, potentially obscuring intimate spiritual dynamics and practical theological concerns.

The online community investigated in this paper, *HakSende*, offers a partially structured and partially accessible space that primarily organizes itself in the digital sphere. The members' activities and practices have cultivated a habitus where their narratives about Alevi identity are negotiated, reinterpreted, and reflected upon. The discourses of this community exhibit characteristics of building a space for reflexive spirituality. Despite varying interpretations regarding the role of Alevism in the virtual space, the members of this online community emphasize a significant marker: striving to follow a path towards a consensus on a moral way of living. The online and offline practices and narratives of *HS* affirm the group as a collective storyteller. As noted

earlier, their initial motivation was to share short videos on social media platforms to foster an authentic understanding of their faith. These practices evolved into the formation of groups where diverse activities could produce a form of hermeneutical negotiation often lacking in everyday life conversations. Such awakenings at the group level have spurred the innovation of other groups and activities with specific narratives, driven by virtuous and morally insightful intentions.

The community engages in various activities encompassing different styles and operations. However, the common thread uniting them is participation in a moral path, identified as *Hakk*. All narratives are integral to this path, presenting themselves as stories. In other words, *HS* has formulated its own storytelling procedures, revealing features of variability, performance, and collectivity (Newsom 2013). Variability refers to the storyteller's ability to operate within the boundaries established by tradition and custom. Most members of the online community expressed their commitment to respecting the common ground for safeguarding their tradition in understanding the divine and the moral within certain parameters. For instance, when the reading group encounters atypical interpretations of a verse or poem, the majority typically agree on teaching the most reasonable caveats and potential methods for understanding the interpretations. Performance represents the negotiation between the storyteller and the community during the storytelling process. Most online sessions allow for a space of negotiation and the creation of a forum with equal opportunities, although a spiritual leader may occasionally intervene to redefine the situation. Participants' performances are expected to be highly contributory. Lastly, collectivity reflects the community's influence on the story's growth and evolution over time. The ways in which participants expressed the degree to which they are affected and transformed by the collective aura and motivations highlights the significance of reflexivity as a healing force.

HakSende articulates its mission as protecting membership on the right path, empowering individuals, fostering healing, and providing an accessible venue for their quest to find meaning-making practices. Whether or not they achieve their goal lies beyond the scope of this paper. In today's digitalized, commodified, and alienated world, the role and function of social media carry significant ambivalences that impact all dimensions of everyday life. However, the reintegration of community in this context empowers individuals in ways that spirituality, as a cultural category, provides an agency to address their predicament stemming from definitions imposed by the historiography of their culture. Discovering and

reproducing their voices can lead to an authentic existence and a more virtuous human presence.

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Social Vulnerability and the Right to Housing in Brazil: An Example of Urban Resistance

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Abstract. The awareness of a given phenomenon involves the implementation of an organised and defined solution based on the perception of social insecurity and exposure to different forms of inequality (economic, social and cultural). From these processes emerge forms of resilience and resistance, i.e. the capacity of an individual, a community or a society to adapt, endure and emerge from problematic and critical situations. In Brazil, there are numerous examples of social movements as a collective form of resistance that fight for land and housing, both in rural and more urbanised areas. Such as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST). Starting from the concept of resilience and social resistance, this work aims to analyse the forms that these take, through the actions of the Movement, to provide social responses to combat inequality and poverty. In the first part, more of a theoretical nature, the different declinations and modes of expression of the concepts of resilience and social resistance will be highlighted. In the second part, these concepts will be declined by analysing the work of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST), in the implementation of rights, opportunities and in defining criteria for social justice.

Keywords: resistance, resilience, social vulnerability, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto, culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Worsening social inequalities in contemporary societies represent a structural challenge to the full realisation of fundamental rights. The right to housing plays a central role. In Brazil, the housing issue reflects the historical dynamics of land concentration, racial and gender marginalisation, as well as a process of urbanisation marked by profound territorial asymmetries. The persistent housing deficit, significantly localised among the poorest segments of the population, is an emblematic indicator of the insufficiency of public policies in guaranteeing minimum conditions of housing dignity.

Social movements play a fundamental role in denouncing structural injustices, while also promoting alternative models for the production and distribution of urban space. The Movement of Roofless Workers (MTST) stands out for its capacity to not only mobilise but also for the pressure it exerts on institutions, demanding the right to the city and the adoption of inclusive housing policies.

Starting from the concepts of resilience and social resistance, this contribution aims to analyse the ways in which these dynamics manifest themselves in the collective actions of the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto* (MTST). Set in a context of the struggle for the right to housing in Brazil. The first section has a theoretical-conceptual perspective and examines the main interpretations of the two concepts, highlighting their critical potential in the analysis of social practices. The second part presents an overview of the Brazilian housing situation, illustrating the role of the MTST in popular mobilisation, political pressure and the construction of concrete alternatives for access to housing. The movement's initiatives represent a form of social response from below, capable of articulating strategies of survival and transformation, while expressing adaptive capacities and collective protection practices for the communities involved.

2. RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE: THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY

Resilience and social resistance are two concepts that have become increasingly visible in the social scene in recent years due to crises and the continuous increase in inequalities. They are two different concepts that are expressed differently, but which represent the ways in which individuals express themselves in relation to a specific event. Pentland (2014) states that the meaning of individuals' actions is determined by the mechanisms of their social interaction, which allows for specific and well-defined reasoned reactions to arise that aim at the expression of strategies for change, while also overcoming social phenomena. It materialises the notion that social and individual responses to phenomena depend on the combination of social and individual learning (Pentland 2014). Resilience encompasses the capacity of subjects and the social system to persist in specific situations to be structured in such a way as to respond to events by not succumbing to them. The capacity for social resistance is the implementation of specific actions defined by and in agreement with the social system (Clarke 2003). In social resistance, individuals and communities express their

empowerment, emphasising the processes of social interaction and community dynamics (Antonucci, Sorice and Volterrani 2024). In social resistance we find the capacity of a community to reproduce a certain social process in such a way that it can address the political and cultural struggle conducted by social actors to challenge and counteract the negative actions implemented by the dominant political system with a structured social process in the form of movements. Resistance may be well organised and present itself in the form of social movements or community organisations. It may also be visible in the practices and attitudes of everyday life (Dello Buono and Fasenfest 2012; Kennis 2022).

Social resistance aims to challenge the dominant power, promote social change and imagine alternative futures (Vander Zanden 1959; Poulakidakos, Veneti and Rovisco 2024). Moreover, it seeks to overturn the existing situation by attempting to reverse the difficult and crisis situations in which the community lives through strong actions and resistance (*Ibidem*). Demonstrating and resisting are carried out by following the cultural and social process of belonging as well as by activating social movements, parties and activist groups. There are various ways of resisting, that can manifest themselves on different levels and situations. These include actions to oppose political power or mechanisms of social and cultural violence, climate change, poverty and inequality, or the effects of digital platforms and social (Bonini and Trerè 2024).

The theme of resistance is different, which takes into consideration the response modes and activated capacities. In the dynamics of resistance, the capacity of the community to succeed in activating actions that allow them to return to existing mechanisms and conditions is expressed.

The concept of resilience is the other theme that has returned to the analyses of social systems. This is the case when considering the concept of how the community reacts and how it can be an engine of social reactivation as a dynamic process (Luthar, Cicchetti and Becker 2000) that has a positive adaptation in relation to significant adversity.

The community has always played a fundamental role in social construction as well as the implementation of social growth and regulation actions (Cohen 1985; Delanty 2018). The same relational dynamics determined by the community involve the construction of resilience processes that guide individuals in the manifestation of their choices. The mechanisms that determine community dynamics are given by social culture, which in turn determines both resilience and social security mechanisms.

Social systems and communities defined as resilient act not only by renewing themselves but also by maintaining their functionality and recognisability of the systems themselves (Gunderson and Holling 2002).

However, resilience does not imply the restoration of an initial state or a return to previous conditions, but rather the restoration of social functionality through change and adaptation (Martini 2025). Resilience is the potential of a system to remain in a particular configuration and maintain its feedback and functions. Building resilience into a system configuration often requires the improvement of structures and processes, highlighting the crucial role of adaptive capacity in ensuring the survival and success of such systems in increasingly complex and changing contexts (Martini 2012). Moreover, it can be characterised by three different distinctive elements that manage and define its modes of expression. These include the amount of change a system can undergo and maintain the same controls over function and structure; the degree to which the system is capable of self-organisation; and the degree to which the system expresses the capacity to learn and adapt (Walker and Meyers 2004). It depends not only on the personality system of the individual but also on the culture system (Sorokin 1948). The community plays a central role both in the relationship and construction of the social system as well as in the expression of resilience of individuals. It is a drive that comes from the community and facilitates social construction and reconstruction (Malaguti 2005).

For this reason, it is possible to speak of a culture of resilience that is proposed by the community itself and that fosters investment in programmes, communication and policies, including by activating latent resources in the relationships between different actors (Rampp, Endreß and Naumann 2019). This makes it necessary to provide actions in response to the events at local, national and international levels that promote the resilience of communities (Wright 2022). This includes those segments of the population that, due to phenomena of a different nature, are more vulnerable than others.

Resilience enables reconstruction through social collaboration, policy activation, and the investment of programmes and contexts to foster resource activation by ensuring collaboration and support within the community. The resilience mechanism makes it possible to continue planning the future. The resilience mechanism allows to undergo an event and manage it (Poulakidakos, Veneti and Rovisco 2024).

Community resilience refers to communities working with local resources together with local expertise to help themselves prepare for, respond to and recover from difficult and extreme situations (Twigger-Ross *et al.* 2015). It is necessary for survival to understand what resources they can invest in and build their resilience for future livability.

Faced with critical social situations, the community has to create situations that can be the expression of its own social resilience, activating its social mechanisms to cope with such situations and, at the same time, through a process of resilience, setting in motion social dynamics that can be expressed under an opportunity where the future could be different from the past, through a proper analysis of the possible conditions to improve social life for the future dimension (Johnson *et al.* 2021). The community presents itself as a set of bonds, common goals and shared interactions between members. Interactions help community members to be resilient and overcome difficult situations (Colazzo and Manfreda 2019). Social dynamics play a key role in the enactment of resistance and resilience practices through networks, interpersonal relationships and active participation. It is also determined by the social capital (Coleman 1988; Portes 1998; Putnam 2000) of communities, which refers to the value of social connections and mutual relationships within a community (Colazzo and Manfreda 2019). The concept of community as a resource in the context of social resilience highlights how a community's social dynamics, support networks, collaboration and sharing of resources are essential for coping with and overcoming difficulties. They play a central role (Cohen 1985; Delanty 2018). It is through cultural dynamics that they guide individuals leading them to the realisation of a path that is based on trying to improve one's condition with well-being at its core. Living in a community implies the need to reconstruct what was lost in the events of trauma, to return to social dynamics already in place. The community expresses its capacity and resources through social cohesion and solidarity actions, in which they try to find a possible solution in line with the reconstruction of social ties. The community allows for a condition of support, resistance but also resilience through dynamics of participation and collaboration as a social reconstruction guaranteeing a reproducibility of the social system (Colazzo and Manfreda 2019). The community generates a social drive that moves the different social partners, giving them social responsibility for the role they play (Betz 2023).

The participation triggered by social institutions such as schools and families is also fundamental to be able to set up information, education activities (Prati and Pietrantoni 2009) on risk, crisis and emergencies, building a knowledge base for the creation of a resilience culture for such events.

The community is a fundamental resource for human growth and development. Moreover, relationships, interactions and active participation can contribute to creating a thriving community environment that can be resilient and regenerative in situations of maximum vulnerability. In the actions that the active community takes, we observe how it wants to respond to events, difficulties and forces external to it. At the same time, community capacities present themselves in the form of movements and activist groups.

3. OVERCOMING SOCIAL VULNERABILITY: BETWEEN RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

Resilience is the ability of a community to continue its development by organising itself against external shocks that may increase its vulnerability and even its existence. Talking about resilience means understanding the social and political role of different actors as well as the role communities play not only in resilience and immediate response but also in the strategies used for the resilience, adaptation and transformation (Wright 2022) of events into socially beneficial situations. When looking at the concept of a resilience culture, we have to understand the community, what are the elements of vulnerability and what are the emotional, social resilience and finally what are the cultural, social and economic capitals that distinguish them. We can also speak of a multi-resilience (Fathi 2022) in which there are different aspects on which the community can cope with events. It is these characteristics that succeed in rebuilding a social system, at the basis of which there is a community that, being formed, is aware of its own characteristics and of the reconstruction and regeneration plan that is to be undertaken.

The condition of social vulnerability considers several dimensions such as socio-economic status, household characteristics, type of housing, services and possessions (Cubeddu 2022; Aksha and Emrich 2024). Social vulnerability is determined by the different types of inequalities within the community and the individual.

It is necessary to specify that the condition of inequality changes not only depending on the social system to which it belongs, but also on the type of development existing at a given historical stage. The type of society and development in a specific time phase are determining factors in the change of each individual's condition. The type of development proposed at an economic level also influences social development and political actions. Focusing only on an increase in economic development very often worsens the social aspects, as this is not only determined by the economic dimension, but also by the political, social and environmental context. As Sen (1994) states, the idea of inequality contains two different aspects: the actual heterogeneity of human beings and the multiplicity of components of inequality with which it can be assessed and determined. Whether inequality can be defined depends on the different parameters by which it is measured and the country in which it is analysed. The social and urban context is defined by the political context. This is why marginality itself is mostly represented by the most peripheral contexts. The periphery is par excellence the visual representation of social and economic inequality in cities, although especially after the health emergency, it is not the only urban form of marginalisation, exclusion and vulnerability since we observe that even in large city centres the so-called social peripheries (Martinelli 2008), in which we can find degraded, precarious and makeshift occupations and housing, are also manifested. All large European cities testify to this (Cubeddu 2020). Just as marginal and border areas are observed in the central areas. These border areas have different names depending on where they belong: slum (English term for slums); Bidonville (mostly used in French-speaking countries); Favela or bairro da lata (name for Brazilian slums). The context of housing inequality highlights all the social problems that lead people to live in these contexts. The context of poverty encapsulates the situation of social malaise experienced by the subjects. The social context also structures a cultural condition itself. So much so that we can speak of a culture of poverty (Lewis 1966) as well as of two types of inequalities: acceptable or unacceptable (Franzini 2013). The former have opportunities for equality and mobility. The latter, on the other hand, do not have a serious opportunity because they are blocked by the family condition of origin and the deprivation of economic, human capital. Achieving acceptable inequality, for economists, means being driven by individual work and having a social and political structure, that can set in motion actions to counter these dynamics.

In societies with a high degree of inequality between rich and poor, we can observe the impossibility of meeting people's needs and achieving not only economic, but also social, psychological and political well-being. These characteristics highlight the central role that communities play in the implementation of resilience and social resistance actions.

Latin America is characterised by different policies in each country. It also has different types of development mutations and multiple forms of vulnerability. The different countries that make up South America have realities that its inhabitants experience differently, not

only economically, but also socially and environmentally. Housing is synonymous with dwelling and is the expression of the satisfaction of housing need. Its lack is the manifestation of an imbalance between the flow of demand for housing and its availability. A housing distortion is also generated by a lack of housing design (Cubeddu 2021).

Housing and its representations differ according to the social class to which one belongs. The difference between rich and poor is observed in the condition and structure of the dwelling as well as in the place where one lives. From this point of view, we therefore begin to talk about housing deprivation) and housing poverty (Adorni and Tabor 2019; Cubeddu 2020). The house has a central value in the life of the subjects since it is not only a physical place but also represents the family and the subject's living with its interiority. Since antiquity, the house has been the place that stands out as a primary good for man, so much so that Maslow (1954) already placed it on the second step of the pyramid of needs, in the area of security needs. It is a necessary good for man to feel safe, protected from the elements, a home where he can build a family and where he can confront himself. This is why it was stated earlier that housing is the primary distinguishing feature of social inequality and at the same time an indicator of poverty. Housing represents on a social level the condition in which individuals live, their dimensions of social vulnerability, strong economic inequalities but also the person with their psychophysical well-being. Individuals, as well as social groups, respond to the situations they experience according to their cultural responses. The latter learned – as already observed – in the dynamics of social interrelation with the community. The same capacity for resistance and resilience is determined by the social context. Therefore, the activation of resilient groups and actions such as movements are often stimulated and guided not only by the community but also by some external members who are able to show in situations of extreme vulnerability and fragility the possible elements of resilience on which to generate change (Cubeddu 2022).

The housing context is defined as 'the mirror of the world' in which we live (Caprioglio 2012). This implies how important it is to activate resilience actions and social resistance movements that have as their objective the well-being of the subjects as well as the change of conditions. Working for the reduction of inequalities envisages the same life chances for all subjects and the recognition of their skills and competences within the social system. Guaranteeing the same starting point, as well as the achievement of the goal (Cubeddu and Mangone 2024).

Movements that want to spread awareness that the freedom of subjects, equality and the idea of social justice. Finally, the human being cannot live as if they were a bee in a beehive because they always needs horizons that show them the possibility of a different future (Cubeddu 2021) and that guarantee them continuous social interaction.

Latin America, specifically Brazil, is one of those contexts where the condition of living is fundamental as a propensity to the activation of resistance movements and specifically the movement of homeless workers (MTST). It relates social dynamics with economic, cultural and political ones. At the same time these work on the activation of people and their resilience. In the following paragraphs, we will look at the dynamics of resistance activated by this movement.

4. THE URBAN RESISTANCE OF *MOVIMENTO DOS TRABALHADORES SEM TETO* (MTST)

Inequality, as noted in the previous paragraph, is a phenomenon that manifests itself in different forms, with it being the result of the historical, economic and political movement specific to each territory. Observing the development of capitalism in the Brazilian and, more generally, Latin American reality, its agrarian, racial, slave, colonial and patriarchal traits are evident. Renata Gonçalves (2018) states that the racial question and racism, as historical products, constitute the founding elements of bourgeois society.

In the process of the formation of Latin American states, there is a common, transversal element. They have all lived – or are still living – the experience of colonialism. Frantz Fanon (2008) highlighted with extraordinary lucidity the intrinsic relationship between colonialism and the (re)production of racism. Underlying the colonising action was the oppression of the 'other', based on the subjugation of their colour, religion, language and way of life.

In Brazil, social inequality is profoundly marked by the racial dimension, which acts as a structuring factor. If today, among the poorest segments of the population, we find predominantly people who identify as black[1]. This is due to the fact that racism has played a fundamental role in the configuration of Brazilian social classes.

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[1] According to the official classification adopted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the black population comprises two distinct categories: '*pretos*' (people who self-identify as black) and '*pardos*' (people of mixed origin, often with African ancestry). This distinction is used to analyse racial inequalities in the country more accurately. This definition was confirmed by the 2022 Census.

Sociologist Clóvis Moura (2019) observes how Brazilian society has not only failed to democratise its fundamental social relations but has also failed to democratise its race relations. As a result, it is much more difficult for black descendants of former slaves to access effective social mobility. Added to this element is the fact that all Latin American countries were built on a latifundist regime, founded on the domination and exploitation of indigenous and enslaved lands and peoples.

Brazil has been no exception. Its land structure has historically excluded significant segments of the social base. An emblematic example is the Land Law (Lei de Terras, Law No. 601 of 18 September 1850), the first initiative to regulate private property in the country. Enacted decades before the legal abolition of slavery (Law No. 3,353 of 13 May 1888[2]), this law prevented the freed Afro-descendant population from accessing land, forcing them to occupy marginal and difficult-to-access territories, such as hills and ravines. The denial of access to land has been, and continues to be, one of the most persistent structural obstacles for the Brazilian popular classes. Although Article 6 of the 1988 Federal Constitution recognises the right to housing as one of the fundamental social rights, the problem of housing persists. Having a house means having a safe and dignified space in which to live. However, throughout the country – and particularly in the large urban centres – there are precarious housing conditions, often lacking essential services such as sewage, drinking water and rubbish collection. The struggle for the right to decent housing has always characterised the reality of large urban centres. Since the 1970s, when Brazil became a predominantly urban country, cities have been unprepared to receive the large contingent of migrants from rural areas. This phenomenon led to a significant increase in irregular housing occupations.

The Fundação João Pinheiro (FJP) is the authority in charge of calculating the housing deficit in Brazil, in collaboration with the National Housing Secretariat of the Ministry of Cities. In the latest published report, with data referring to the year 2022, a housing deficit of six million housing units was found, which corresponds to 8.3% of the total occupied housing in the country.

According to the analysis of the Foundation (FJP), the housing issue in Brazil is complex and includes a multiplicity of factors that hinder the access, availability and adequacy of housing. For this reason, the institution adopts an expanded conception of housing need, which has two complementary dimensions: a quantitative one, represented by the housing deficit, and a qualitative one, relating to the inadequacy[3] of existing housing. This perspective makes it possible to grasp not only the numerical insufficiency of housing units, but also the material and structural conditions that compromise their decent residential function. This is compounded by the need for access to a home of one's own, as in the case of unwanted family cohabitation. Situations in which separate households aspire to establish an autonomous residence but lack the necessary resources. Furthermore, the deficit also includes low-income households living in urban areas who devote an excessive share of their household budget to rent payments, compromising their ability to meet other essential needs.

According to data from 2022, the housing deficit in Brazil is mainly concentrated among households with monthly incomes up to two minimum wages (equal to R$ 2,640[4]), with a higher incidence in urban areas in the South-East, South and Centre-West regions. In contrast, in the North and North-East regions, the phenomenon occurs with greater intensity in rural areas. The profile of the households affected shows a marked gender and racial dimension: 62.6% of households are headed by women and 66.3% are composed of black people, who represent the majority in almost all the categories analysed, with the exception of the South region.

Among the main factors contributing to the housing deficit is the so-called 'excessive urban rent burden', i.e. the situation of households with an income of up to three minimum wages who spend more than 30% of their monthly income on rent. This category alone accounts for 52.2% of the national housing deficit, corresponding to 3,242,780 housing units, and reflects the structural difficulty of millions of families in accessing decent housing without compromising the satisfaction of other basic needs. An analysis of inadequate housing in Brazil in 2022 shows that households composed of black people with incomes of up to three minimum wages are the most affected segment, accounting for 36.5% of all the dwellings considered inadequate. This incidence

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[2] Known as the *Lei Áurea*, this was the legislation that officially abolished slavery in Brazil. Signed by Princess Isabella, it legally ended the practice of slavery, although its social and economic consequences persist to this day.

[3] The concept of 'inadequate housing' adopted by the João Pinheiro Foundation comprises three main dimensions: (i) building inadequacy, relating to urban housing units that lack minimum standards of comfort and health, such as the absence of a private bathroom, earthen floors, tin roofs and lack of water supply; (ii) inadequate urban infrastructure, which concerns the lack or poor provision of essential services such as electricity, piped drinking water, sewerage or waste collection; and (iii) inadequate land tenure, referring to properties located on land that is not regularised, even if owned or in the process of being purchased.

[4] As of May 2025, two minimum wages in Brazil correspond to 2,640 Brazilian *reais* (BRL), equivalent to approximately 406 euros (EUR), according to the average exchange rate of 1 EUR = 6.50 BRL.

is even more pronounced in cases where the domestic responsibility falls on women. In this context, the housing issue takes on a structural dimension in which class, gender and race relations intertwine, producing forms of social inequality. Access to decent housing cannot therefore be treated as a sectoral issue, but rather as an indicator of broader dynamics of material power distribution in Brazilian society. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), in 2022, 8% of black women lived in extreme poverty, compared to 3.6% of white women. Among men, 7.4% of black men were in the same situation, compared to 3.4% of white men. These inequalities are also reflected in access to housing, revealing that the black population suffers more acutely from housing shortages. This is a tangible expression of a historical process of material marginalisation. The persistence of which continues to widen the gaps in the country's social structure. In this scenario, the housing issue cannot be understood simply as a lack of resources or public policies, but as a concrete expression of the contradictions inherent in Brazilian society. Brazil's large cities, transformed into real estate speculation grounds, are progressively expelling the poorest to suburbs lacking infrastructure, consolidating a segregated and hierarchical urban model. It is in this context of structural inequality that various collective actions and social movements have taken shape, among which the Homeless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto – MTST) stands out[5].

5. THE MOVIMENTO DOS TRABALHADORES SEM-TETO – MTST

The Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST) was founded in 1997 under the strong influence of activists from the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST)[6], who understood the strategic need to extend their action to urban areas to strengthen the implementation of agrarian reform.

In the context of the 'National March for Agrarian Reform, Occupation and Justice' held in 1997, the MST decided to send activists to consolidate its presence in urban centres. This decision marked a crucial moment of strategic transition, indicating the recognition of cities as central spaces in the struggle for social and territorial rights. As a result, MST activists living in the Campinas region began to take part in urban occupations that were already underway. As a legacy of this experience, the urban movement in question adopted, among its main tactics, the occupation of territories located in urban areas close to major roads, a strategy that allows for greater public visibility of the actions undertaken (Simoes, Campos and Rafael 2017).

The MTST affirms that its struggle is aimed at securing housing, work and bread. However, it recognises that achieving these rights requires the construction of a popular project capable of articulating alternatives to 'counter the commodification of housing, build popular power, link the struggle for housing to workers' rights and combat hunger' (MTST)[7].

In the early 2000s, occupations advanced in several cities in the state of São Paulo, namely: Campinas, Guarulhos, Osasco, Santos Dumont Highway, Bandeirantes, Dutra, Castelo Branco, Anhanguera, Raposo Tavares. In 2003, an occupation involving 4,000 families took place in São Bernardo do Campo, in the ABC Paulista region[8], on a Volkswagen site called 'Santo Dias'.

According to Simões, Campos, Rafael (2017), it was in the early 2000s that the MTST became a nationally recognised movement because, thanks to its coordination with other organisations, such as the Comunidades Eclésias de Base, the MTST began the Anita Garibaldi occupation, which involved more than 2,000 families who settled on a huge plot of land on the outskirts of Guarulhos, near the international airport (Cumbica) and the Presidente Dutra motorway. In 2002, it occupied an urban estate in the city of Osasco (Greater São Paulo), an occupation called Carlos Lamarca. In 2004, the Chico Mendes occupation took place in Taboão da Serra. It is worth noting that these actions have unfortunately been accompanied by a great deal of repression, as foreclosure and eviction proceedings involving the use

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[5] See the official website of the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST): *About us*. Available at: https://mtst.org/quem-somos/o-mtst
[6] The Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) is an important Brazilian social movement founded in 1984, committed to the struggle for agrarian reform and equitable access to land. Through the occupation of unproductive large estates and the organisation of rural settlements, the MST has built self-managed communities based on agroecological practices and principles of social justice. Beyond the national context, the movement has gained international recognition as an emblematic example of peasant mobilisation and the defence of human rights in the Global South.

[7] Cfr. See *About us*, Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST). Available at: https://mtst.org/quem-somos/o-mtst.
[8] This is a region located in the south-eastern part of Greater São Paulo. The acronym ABC refers to the cities that make it up: Santo André (A), São Bernardo do Campo (B) and São Caetano do Sul (C); sometimes Diadema (D) is also included in the acronym. Since the 20th century, it has been considered the main industrial area of the São Paulo metropolis, becoming the first centre of the Brazilian automotive industry in 1950. This characteristic contributed to the region being recognised as the cradle of the contemporary trade union movement in Brazil. At the end of the 1970s, following numerous workers' strikes in the area, the Workers' Party (PT) was founded and, at the beginning of the following decade, the Central Workers' Union (CUT).

of police force and coercion have been commonplace for the movement over the years.

In addition to occupations, the MTST also resorts to political actions such as hunger strikes, such as the one that took place in São Bernardo do Campo, in front of the home of then-President Luís Inacio Lula da Silva, which lasted three days. Thanks to this strike, the prospect of building the João Candido condominium, with more than 800 apartments, became a reality (Simões, Campos and Rafael 2017). The MTST has three types of organisational bodies: political collectives, composed of national and state coordinators; organisational collectives, whose function is to carry out specific activities in the occupations, through community centres, and regional collectives.

To ensure a better organisation, the MTST created regional centres aimed at maintaining grassroots organisation even outside the occupied territories. To this end, regular meetings were held in public places. The Associação Periferia Ativa (Active Periphery Association) was also created, 'a network of local leaders who, together with MTST coordinators, discussed and mobilised their communities for struggles that went beyond housing: against police violence, for social electricity tariffs, against fires in the favelas and other problems' (Simões, Campos and Rafael 2017: 31).

Another important aspect was the need for national expansion, which began as a process of state creation. This led to a proliferation of occupations between 2006 and 2007 in the regions of Campinas and ABC, southwest of Greater São Paulo.

The first decade of the 2000s was marked by a growing wave of urban occupations and popular demonstrations in Brazil, particularly in the years leading up to 2014, when the country hosted the World Cup. Considered the most important football event in the world, preparations for the tournament involved the allocation of large areas of land for the construction of stadiums, resulting in expropriation and significant property price increases in the areas surrounding the construction sites. This led to an exponential increase in the value per square metre and, consequently, in rents, forcing many families to abandon the homes they had lived in for years.

A prime example of this situation is the Ocupação Copa do Povo, which began on 3 May 2014 on a 150,000 m² plot of land that had been abandoned for over 20 years and located just over 3 km from the Corinthians Arena in the eastern part of São Paulo. The resistance of the occupying families and the pressure exerted by the movement led the Federal Government, on 9 June of the same year, to recognise and accept the occupants' claims (Simões, Campos and Rafael 2017: 49).

Building on this experience, the MTST gradually expanded its presence to other states of the federation: in 2010 to the city of Brazlândia (Federal District); in 2012 to Paraná; in 2013 to Palmas (Tocantins); in 2014 to São Gonçalo (Rio de Janeiro) and, in the same year, carried out its first occupation in Fortaleza (Ceará); in 2015, the movement reached Aparecida de Goiânia (Goiás), Minas Gerais and, in the same year, the outskirts of Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul); finally, in 2016, the first occupation took place in Recife (Pernambuco).

In 2015, during the MTST National Meeting, the political front *Povo Sem Medo* (People Without Fear) was created, defined as an expression of the reconfiguration of the popular camp and the Brazilian left (Simões, Campos and Rafael 2017: 119). The initiative brings together organisations with different political orientations: from entities historically linked to the Workers' Party (PT) governments, such as the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) and the National Union of Students (UNE), to autonomous movements such as the MTST itself, to critical currents of the PT, represented by various sectors of the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL).

The Frente Povo Sem Medo aims to represent a popular alternative to national needs, in a particularly difficult context marked by the advance of the far right not only in institutions – as highlighted during the government of Jair Messias Bolsonaro (2018–2022) – but also within civil society.

Operating for almost thirty years in the urban peripheries of Brazil, the MTST has understood that living in and owning decent housing is a fundamental right of human dignity. The movement is therefore committed to ensuring not only a roof over people's heads, but a home that meets standards of liveability, equipped with essential services (such as drinking water and sanitation) and access to public transport and essential public policies (health and education). This struggle goes far beyond the simple right to housing but is a battle for social justice and the right to a dignified life, as enshrined in the Brazilian Constitution. This movement fights for 'a roof, work and bread' (basic needs to be met), as its promoters and members themselves affirm.

The Movement is oriented towards guaranteeing social security and represents the community's resilience to inequality and poverty. This can be understood by observing how, on a daily basis, the leaders are committed to organising the community by strengthening resistance and fighting against the politics and culture of inequality and poverty to promote the construction of a more just and egalitarian Brazil.

In conclusion, the expansion of the MTST and the creation of the *Frente Povo Sem Medo* represent not only a concrete response to growing social inequalities and housing shortages in Brazilian urban areas, but also an attempt to politically reorganise the popular camp in a period of great instability and the advance of conservative forces. Urban occupations, such as the emblematic *Copa do Povo*, have demonstrated the capacity of social movements to articulate effective practices of resistance and protest, gaining public visibility and dialogue with institutions. In this sense, the MTST has established itself as a relevant political actor, capable of building bridges between the struggle for the right to housing, broader social rights and the construction of an alternative popular project for Brazil.

In this context, the action of popular movements, such as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST), takes on a central role not only in denouncing injustices, but also in developing practices of collective resistance and social reappropriation of space. Through occupations, mobilisations and proposals for alternative public policies, the MTST does not merely claim the right to housing but builds a concrete critique of the existing order on a daily basis, laying the foundations for a project of social transformation that starts from the bottom up.

6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

An analysis of the housing deficit in Brazil, in light of the most recent data, highlights the scale and complexity of the problem. In addition to reflecting the quantitative shortage of adequate housing, the phenomenon is closely linked to the historical and structural dynamics of poverty, rooted in colonial, racial and patriarchal processes. The state's inability to guarantee universal access to housing cannot be understood without considering the historical inequalities that still characterise the urban layout and land distribution in the country.

The state must take a proactive role not only in housing production, but also in land regularisation, control of property prices and the promotion of the right to the city as a collective right. Housing cannot be reduced to a commodity. It must be recognised as a fundamental right, interdependent with other social rights such as health, work, education and mobility.

In this context, social movements fighting for housing play an essential role in denouncing inequalities and building popular alternatives to urban exclusion. Among these, the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST) stands out for its organisational capacity and direct action in claiming the right to housing. The occupations promoted by the movement are not only acts of resistance, but real political pressure strategies that have brought the housing issue back to the centre of the national debate. The role of social resistance movements is central to triggering social change towards the pursuit of well-being. This social movement highlights how it is possible today to use resistance actions to mobilise a political force and, at the same time, generate social resilience that pushes people to seek possible solutions to their difficulties, trying to activate all the social mechanisms available to the community. Through widespread local organisation and dialogue with other popular forces, the movement has succeeded in influencing the public agenda and achieving concrete gains for thousands of families. Its existence represents a collective response to the inaction of the state and an expression of the organisational capacity of urban peripheries. In this sense, the recognition and strengthening of social movements are key elements in the construction of more just, participatory public policies that are sensitive to the real needs of the population. It is therefore possible to affirm that the practices of the MTST are oriented towards social justice and the expansion of opportunities, through forms of collective action that express an adaptive and transformative capacity from below, contributing to the protection of the most vulnerable communities.

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Ecological Resistance in Intentional Communities. A Case Study of Sociocratic Governance in an Ecovillage in Navarre (Spain)

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Abstract. This paper explores ecological resistance through the lived experience of Arterra Bizimodu, an ecovillage in Navarre, Spain, where around 40 people have come together to create a life centred on cooperation, sustainability, and shared governance. As part of a wider neo-rural movement, many of the residents – mainly aged between 25 and 45 – have chosen to leave urban life behind in search of a more meaningful and ecologically aligned existence. The community is the headquarters of GEN-Europe (Global Ecovillage Network) and plays a key role in networks supporting transformative learning and regenerative living. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in 2024, including participant observation and 12 interviews, this study looks closely at how sociocratic decision-making, permaculture design, and everyday ecological practices shape both personal and collective transformation. Tools like non-violent communication and participatory democracy help foster mutual trust, emotional awareness, and a sense of shared responsibility. Rather than representing utopian idealism or retreat, Arterra Bizimodu functions as a grounded experiment in socio-ecological transition. It illustrates how ecovillages can act as real-world laboratories in the daily practice of care, participation, and interdependence.

Keywords: Neo-ruralism, Intentional communities, Transformative learning, Participatory democracy.

1. INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK UNDERSTANDING ECOVILLAGES AS SPACES OF RESISTANCE

1.1. Participatory democracy and eco-social innovation in ecovillages

This study investigates how participatory democracy – particularly through the sociocratic model adopted in ecovillages – serves as a form of socio-political resistance and fosters eco-social transformation. Specifically, it examines how inclusive decision-making processes, collective organization, and sustainable living practices contribute to constructing alternatives to dominant socio-economic paradigms.

The research focuses on Spain, a country where, following the Francoist dictatorship and the armed resistance of ETA, antimilitarist and non-violent social movements emerged. These movements, especially active during the 1970s and 1980s (Ordás García 2024), provided fertile ground for the later development of neo-rural intentional communities. Many of these communities today self-identify as ecovillages are interconnected through the Iberian Ecovillage Network (Red Ibérica de Ecoaldeas: RIE), recognized as the European area with the highest density of ecovillages (Renau 2018).

The term "ecovillage" was introduced by Diane and Robert Gilman in 1991, reflecting a conceptual shift towards integrating social, ecological, and economic sustainability at the local level (Gilman and Gilman 1991). The 1995 conference Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities – Models for the 21st Century (Litfin 2014) and the subsequent creation of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) (Jackson and Svensson 2002) further institutionalized ecovillages as part of an emergent global movement for sustainability and wellbeing (Gough 2017).

Building on prior sociological studies, this research draws on key contributions that explore ecovillages as pioneers of change and as models for cultural transformation in the pursuit of utopia (Andrea and Wagner 2012); as spaces where cosmological and symbolic dimensions of communal living are balanced (Salamanca and Silva 2015); and, in more recent work, as laboratories of socio-environmental resilience, highlighting the interconnections between individual and collective dimensions through practices of inner work and dream interpretation (Karavioti 2024).

The theoretical framework is anchored in the rich tradition of the new social movement theory and extends into contemporary debates on ecotopian imaginaries and critiques of growth-oriented paradigms (Veteto and Lockyer 2013). Central to this approach is the work of Melucci and Touraine (1988), who foreground the role of cultural codes, collective identity, and symbolic action in the emergence of social movements, moving beyond purely class-based analyses, including forms of activism such as pacifism and environmentalism. Rather than reducing collective action to economic grievances, their perspective emphasizes how alternative communities are shaped around shared meanings, ethical visions, and prefigurative practices that enact desired futures in the present.

This framework resonates strongly with recent research on ecological and degrowth-oriented movements, which are increasingly embraced by younger generations as responses to climate anxiety and socio-political disillusionment (Asara and Alietti 2024). These movements, and the intentional communities that embody them, propose not only a critique of capitalist modernity but also experimental alternatives rooted in ecological interdependence, participatory governance, and the reconfiguration of everyday life. Ecovillages can thus be understood as spaces where these theoretical insights take form, offering concrete expressions of post-capitalist imaginaries and pathways toward socio-ecological transformation.

This perspective aligns with recent scholarship on ecotopian movements, which conceptualize intentional communities not only as spaces of resistance but as laboratories for future-oriented social experimentation (Centemeri and Asara 2022). These communities do not merely reject dominant socio-economic structures – they actively enact alternative worldviews grounded in ecological interdependence, social cooperation, and self-limitation. They embody an ethico-political project, performing alternative and prefigurative ontologies of the *buen vivir* and redefining the boundaries of political engagement through everyday practice.

Furthermore, this research engages with critiques emerging from the degrowth literature, which challenges the logic of infinite economic expansion as both unsustainable and socially corrosive (Kallis *et al.* 2020). Degrowth scholars call for a fundamental rethinking of prosperity, rooted in sufficiency, care, and conviviality – principles that resonate deeply with the organizational and situated practices observed in ecovillages such as Arterra Bizimodu.

1.2. Arterra Bizimodu: sociocratic governance in everyday practices

The empirical investigation focuses on Arterra Bizimodu (Bizimodu is the name in Euskera; for simplicity, we will refer to it hereafter as Arterra), an ecovillage established in 2014 in Navarre, Spain. Since its founding, Arterra has embodied an experimental approach to communal life, rooted in horizontal governance and shared ethical values. The relocation of the GEN Europe office to Arterra in December 2014 (Dregger 2015) emphasized its role as a key reference point within the broader European ecovillage network.

The community organizes its internal life through the application of sociocracy,

a set of tools and principles that ensure shared power. [...] Power is everywhere all the time, and it does not appear or disappear – someone will be holding it. We have to be intentional about how we want to distribute it. Power is like water: it will go somewhere, and it tends to accumulate in

clusters: the more power a group has, the more resources they will have to aggregate more power. The only way to counterbalance the concentration of power is intentionality and thoughtful implementation (Rau and Koch-Gonzalez 2023: 3).

Sociocracy originated in the Netherlands with educator Kees Boeke, who in the 1920s experimented with a decision-making method based on assent. In the 1970s, engineer Gerard Endenburg formalised this approach within a business context, developing the Sociocratic Circle-Organization Method, inspired by cybernetics and systems theory (Buck and Villines 2007). At its core is the principle of making decisions that are "good enough for now and safe enough to try," emphasising consensus that is reached through two rounds within the circle, where each member has the right to object – a right intended to serve the project constructively. Objections are not seen as blocks but as opportunities for improvement and can be integrated into the proposal during the round with the support of the facilitator. The four main principles of sociocracy are: decision-making by consent, the egalitarian election of function holders, the structuring of activities into functional circles, and the establishment of double links between circles to facilitate both vertical and horizontal coordination (Rau and Koch-Gonzalez 2023).

1.2.1. Eco-social challenges and transformative learning

Over the past eleven years, Arterra has faced multiple eco-social challenges while experimenting with a complex integration of sociocratic governance, ecological design, and intentional communal living. Each circle within Arterra functions as a semi-autonomous group with clearly defined domains and responsibilities – such as prosperity, ecology, communal living, and more specifically, hospitality, community well-being, the management of animals, food production, education, communication, and infrastructure (see Figure 1). This distributed structure, inspired by sociocracy, has enabled inclusive participation but also brought challenges related to time, coordination, and emotional labor. The layered circle system and double-linking mechanisms, while designed to ensure transparency and feedback, often resulted in meeting fatigue and decision-making overload, particularly during periods of growth or when onboarding new members unfamiliar with horizontal governance models. At the same time, Arterra's spatial and ecological practices draw deeply from permaculture principles, seeking to harmonize human activity with natural ecosystems through strategies of resource optimization, biodiversity,

and systemic thinking (Holmgren 2002; Ghelfi 2022). These principles, when applied to community-scale projects such as decentralized energy systems (e.g., biogas and solar), collective food production, and natural cosmetics, introduced significant organizational and technical complexity. Shifting from individual experimentation to collective enterprise required new forms of coordination, long-term planning, and a shared sense of responsibility, which were not always easy to sustain.

This combination of participatory governance and ecological design can be interpreted through the lens of *terraforming,* understood here as the conscious and collective effort to reconfigure the social and environmental landscape, cultivating interdependence among human and more-than-human actors (Latour and Schultz 2022; Ghelfi 2022). In practice, however, this reconfiguration is uneven and contingent. The community often struggled to balance autonomy and cooperation across diverse rhythms of life, worldviews, and social backgrounds. Efforts to nurture cohesion were supported by micropolitical methodologies – such as active listening, non-violent communication, and deep ecology –which were systematically integrated into everyday life to support self-awareness, conflict transformation, and the cultivation of collective intelligence (Devall 2020; Rosenberg 2015).

Moreover, Arterra actively engages in broader pedagogical and transformative learning processes (Mezirow 2018), participating in initiatives such as EU4-Transition and CLIPS (Community Learning Incubator Project for Sustainability), which aim to strengthen capacities for sustainable living and community resilience (Carraro *et al.* 2023). Yet even with such tools, the tension between inner transformation and collective functioning frequently emerged, particularly in emotionally charged contexts or moments of structural change. These challenges reveal the lived complexity of attempting to build a post-capitalist, eco-social alternative – not as a utopia, but as a situated and ongoing process of collective experimentation.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Constructivist Grounded Theory

This research adopted a qualitative, ethnographically inspired approach, conducted in two phases of fieldwork carried out in February and May 2024. The study employed participant observation to engage directly with the rhythms and dynamics of community life, complemented by semi-structured interviews.

Data analysis followed the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2006), privileg-

Table 1. Main Category: Life experience in an ecovillage (CGT).

Substantive Categories	Conceptual Categories	Basic Social Processes (PSB)
Duration in the ecovillage and motivation	Mindful engagement with life in the community.	Adjustment to new lifestyle
Life trajectory	Personal journey, past experiences.	Integration of past and present
Advantages and challenges of ecovillage life	Sustainability, community dynamics, sociocracy.	Adaptation to collective living
Experiences with the sociocracy	Inclusivity, active listening, NVC.	Transparent decision-making
Political ecovillage life	Think globally, act locally.	Programmatic dissemination of ecological best practices

Source: Authors' elaboration.

ing an iterative and co-constructive process of meaning-making between researcher and participants. The coding process evolved through open, focused, and theoretical coding phases, with five sensitizing concepts guiding, but not constraining, the emergence of analytical categories (see Table 1). The decision to finalize codes and categories was guided by theoretical saturation, defined as the point at which new data no longer produced substantive changes to the developing theory.

This iterative approach allowed for the continuous integration of participants' perspectives, enriching the shared construction of meaning and ensuring greater analytical depth. Advantages include flexibility and responsiveness to emerging data, while limitations encompass potential subjectivity arising from close researcher-participant interaction and the time-intensive nature of the process, which may restrict the study's scalability.

To strengthen the validity and depth of the findings, methodological triangulation was employed, combining multiple qualitative techniques to capture different facets of the research object. Furthermore, discourse analysis was used to examine the narratives and symbolic constructions through which participants articulated their identities, values, and visions of change.

The empirical corpus includes twelve in-depth interviews (see Table 2), analysed across the following thematic dimensions (see Table 1):

a) Motivations for joining and duration of residence in the ecovillage;
b) Educational and professional backgrounds;
c) Advantages and challenges of ecovillage living;
d) Experiences with sociocratic governance;
e) Political dimensions of ecovillage life.

2.2. Emerging categories and key themes about the topic sociocracy

Initial theoretical reflections suggest that at Arterra, sociocracy is not merely adopted as a technical govern-

ance tool but is understood as a broader cultural and relational framework. It redefines authority and power, promoting distributed leadership based on trust rather than hierarchical control. It also requires conscious participation and shared responsibility, encouraging members to engage actively and accountably in collective decisions. Furthermore, sociocracy fosters continuous learning and dynamic negotiation between individual and collective needs, viewing conflict and feedback as opportunities for growth. Thus, sociocracy at Arterra becomes a living system that reshapes social norms, relational practices, and collective identities.

The table below (see Table 3) synthesizes the main empirical codes identified during the analysis of participants' narratives about sociocracy. Each code is accompanied by a short description and the list of participants who mentioned or embodied in that theme. This structured overview supports the emerging theoretical proposition that sociocracy at Arterra functions as a transformative socio-cultural framework rather than a mere governance tool.

With reference to Table 3, the results are discussed in subsection 3.3.

3. LIFE EXPERIENCE IN AN ECOVILLAGE

3.1. From urban life to neo-rural intentional community

Residents shared a variety of motivations for joining the ecovillage, ranging from ecological concerns and the desire for alternative ways of living, to deeper personal and existential search for alternative forms of living, or political quests (Van Schyndel Kasper 2008).

I've been living in Arterra Bizimodu since November 2020. My decision to move here didn't happen all at once – it was a gradual process. I first learned about ecovillages in 2017 and, over time, got more involved through gatherings, facilitation trainings, and sociocracy workshops. Slowly, I began

Table 2. Overview of interview participants. Legend: This table summarizes key demographic and professional background information for 12 participants interviewed at the Arterra-Bizimodu Ecovillage in February and May 2024. All names have been anonymized, and participant codes (P.C.: P1–P12) are used for reference. Gender (G.) follows standard English notations: M = Male, F = Female, Q = Queer. Years in Community (Y.C.) indicate the length of time each participant has lived in the ecovillage.

P.C.	G.	Age	Y.C.	Country of Origin	Educational Background	Previous Profession	Current Role
P.1	F	48	10	Italy	Communication and Languages	Trainer	Facilitator
P.2	M	42	3.5	Spain	Computer Science (Amara Berri)	Computer Engineer	Environmental Engineer
P.3	F	28	4	Germany	Management Engineering	Engineer	Carpenter and Plumber
P.4	M	34	2	Spain	Sociology (UPNA)	Social Educator	Cybersecurity Teacher
P.5	M	41	3	Spain	Telecommunication Engineering	Software Project	IT Manager
P.6	M	30	3.5	Spain	Agricultural Engineering	Rural Engineer	Farmer
P.7	F	49	4	Spain	Speech Therapy	Speech Therapist	Group Facilitator
P.8	M	36	10	Spain	Agricultural Engineering	Agronomist	Horticulturist
P.9	M	27	1	Italy	Economics	Volunteer	Project Writer, Facilitator
P.10	F	63	10	Spain	Psychology	Clinical Psychologist	Facilitator
P.11	Q	38	0.3	Romania	PhD in Political Science	Researcher	Project Manager
P.12	F	24	0.3	Spain	Philosophy Student	Student	Volunteer

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Table 3 Ten empirical codes about the topic sociocracy.

Code	Description	Participants
Discovery / Encounter with sociocracy	The moment and context in which they first encountered sociocracy	P.1, P.2, P.5, P.6, P.8, P.9, P.10
Comparison with other systems	Comparison with majoritarian democracy, consensus, and assembly-based decision-making	P.1, P.3, P.5, P.6, P.7, P.9, P.10
Horizontalism and power distribution	Value of power distribution, absence of hierarchy	P.2, P.3, P.5, P.7, P.9, P.10
Responsibility and fear of mistakes	Taking on decision-making roles, risk, and impact on the ego	P.2, P.3, P.6, P.9, P.11
Pragmatic efficiency	Practical value: decision-making, experimenting, adapting	P.4, P.5, P.8, P.10, P.11
Difficulties and challenges	Feedback, incomplete implementation, conflicts, understanding the system as a whole	P.2, P.3, P.4, P.6, P.8, P.9, P.12
Circles and roles	Participation in roles, operational circles, examples of tasks	P.2, P.3, P.4, P.6, P.10, P.11
Trust in the system and in others	Mutual trust between circles and individuals, collective intelligence, collaborative insight	P.4, P.6, P.7, P.9, P.12
Review and continuous improvement	The possibility of reviewing decisions, correcting, evolving	P.1, P.5, P.6, P.9, P.12
Attraction to the model	Motivation to join the project because of sociocracy	P.1, P.5, P.6, P.7, P.9, P.10

Source: Authors' elaboration.

to realize that this kind of life really existed and could be possible for me.

At the beginning of 2020, I didn't decide to move outright. What I decided firmly was to give it a try. I understood that it was a major life shift – from living in a city to considering life in a rural community far from urban centers. But I told myself: there's no step I can't undo. I can take it step by step and see what happens. I didn't know what the outcome would be, but I saw it as a learning experience. Among the communities I had come across, Arterra stood out as the right place to explore this way of living (P.2)

3.2. Participants' life trajectories and the reconfiguration of professional identities

Several participants described how their ecological and communal awareness was not a sudden revelation but rather a natural outcome of early formative environments. Many grew up in pedagogically progressive contexts – such as the *Amara Berri* school in San Sebastián or Waldorf-inspired institutions – where holistic education, creativity, and ecological sensitivity were integral to the curriculum, or were the children of psychoanalysts, educators, or academics who fostered critical engage-

ment with ecological and existential questions from a young age.

This early cultivation of awareness appeared to lay the groundwork for their later interest in intentional community life. One young volunteer, currently a philosophy student, recounted how she had been raised on ecological theory and critical awareness of planetary care.

What I was taught at school or by my parents often contradicted the way we lived. We talked about ecology and caring for the planet, but then we consumed huge amounts of plastic – it just didn't add up. That really upset me and made me feel quite sad; I couldn't understand it. From quite an early age, I began to want to resolve those contradictions. That's also why I chose to study philosophy – to make sense of what I was experiencing and to understand why things didn't seem to align. Even within the university system, I didn't feel at ease. That's when I felt the need to come here and take part in a long-term volunteering experience (P.12)

Her story echoes a recurring theme: many residents arrived at Arterra not as passive consumers of sustainability discourse but as individuals seeking coherence between their upbringing, education, and lived experience.

Fieldwork reveals a significant shift in how residents redefine their professional paths and daily practices. Many come from conventional careers – such as engineering, agronomy, psychology, communication, education, and IT – but have chosen to apply their skills in hands-on, community-centred ways. Within the ecovillage, academic and professional identities are transformed into roles like gardeners, bakers, group facilitators, brewers, educators, engineers, social workers, environmental technicians, network coordinators, editors, and more.

This shift reflects not only a personal transformation but also a structural redefinition of labor, one that prioritizes community relevance, ecological awareness, and shared responsibility over conventional job prestige or linear career progression. Residents participate in a cohousing model in which each person or family lives in a small private unit with a bathroom and kitchen. Daily life is partially collectivized: breakfast and lunch are shared, while dinner is self-managed. A well-organized system tracks who signs up for meals and who takes on cooking duties, reflecting the sociocratic ethos of distributed responsibility and transparent communication.

3.3. Sociocracy in practice: participatory governance in everyday life

Since its foundation in 2014, Arterra has adopted a sociocratic governance model. Far from being a mere managerial tool, *sociocracy is understood here as a deep, participatory structure that distributes power horizontally and encourages everyone to engage as both a citizen and a co-responsible actor. Circle-based decision-making, double-linking between groups, and rotating facilitators are all embedded into the fabric of daily life. For example, decisions on the allocation of common resources – such as water usage in agriculture or energy consumption from solar panels or biochar – are discussed and resolved collectively, reflecting not only logistical coordination but a shared ethic of deliberative cohabitation* (P.1).

The sociocratic circles make decisions using consent-based governance, ensuring that all voices are heard and that objections are integrated constructively into the decision-making process. At the core of the structure is the General Circle, which connects delegates and operational leaders from each functional circle, maintaining alignment with the community's broader vision and values. This double-linking mechanism – where one representative and one operational leader from each circle participate in the next-higher circle – ensures both horizontal accountability and vertical flow of information.

The circle structure supports not only organizational clarity but also personal empowerment, as each member is actively engaged in shaping the life and direction of the community (see Figure 1). Here's how it's clearly explained by one resident:

In sociocracy, we work in circles so everyone can see and hear each other equally. This structure supports transparency and equality. Each meeting is facilitated by someone elected from the circle, who prepares the agenda, helps guide discussions, and makes sure ideas and proposals are clearly expressed.
The facilitator isn't the one who coordinates the group – that role belongs to the coordinator, who is either elected or sometimes appointed, especially in operational circles. The coordinator's job is to keep the group energized and ensure everyone is fulfilling their roles. If conflicts come up or tasks aren't being completed, the coordinator helps address the issue or guides a resolution process (P5).

This embedded governance structure supports a model of "prefigurative politics," where the desired social transformation is enacted in the present, not deferred to some utopian future (Andrea and Wagner 2012). Arterra, like other ecovillages in the Iberian Ecovillage Network (RIE) and the broader GEN-Europe network, is an experiment in lived democracy. Its members seek to demonstrate that another form of citizenship is possible – one where communication is active, embodied, and rooted in daily interaction, rather than mediated through abstract, symbolic, or media-driven channels.

As highlighted by the data in Table 3, presented in Subsection 2.2 of the methodology section, participants
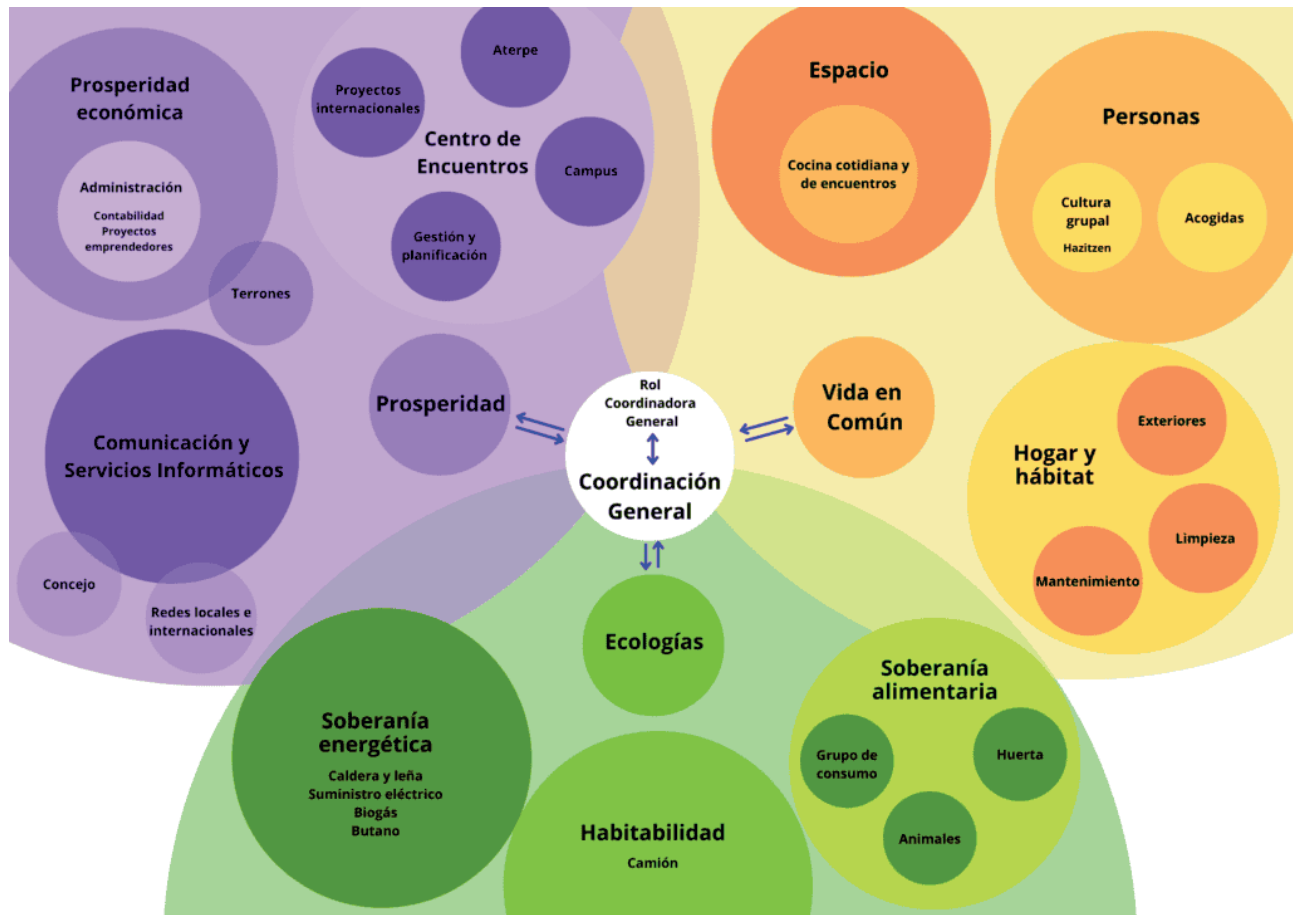
Figure 1. Sociocratic circle structure at Arterra Bizimodu. *Source*: https://arterrabizimodu.org/nosotras/sociocracia/.

often came across sociocracy through self-initiated learning or prior involvement in intentional communities. This first encounter was marked by curiosity and a desire to experiment with governance models more aligned with their personal values – particularly inclusivity and decentralization. Many described it in contrast to consensus-based or assembly models, which they had experienced elsewhere. A recurring theme was the dynamic balance between shared decision-making power and individual responsibility. Participants stressed how the circles encouraged vulnerability, emotional expression, and personal accountability. This interplay supported not only group cohesion but also personal development, fostering a sense of agency grounded in mutual commitment. Participants acknowledged that it required ongoing training, strong facilitation, and collective effort to maintain the community. Ultimately, sociocracy was not only described as a tool for making decisions, but as a practice that shaped the culture and rhythms of everyday life.

3.4. Intentional communities as spaces of counter-hegemonic political practice

In an era increasingly characterized by the commodification of public discourse and the transformation of political actors into branded influencers, the gap between appearance and action has widened considerably. As Mirra and Pietropaoli (2024) argue, the political field has shifted from the realm of deliberative governance to a theatre of visibility, where citizens are more often spectators than participants. The social role of the "citizen" has morphed into that of a "follower," a consumer of political narratives rather than an agent of political action.

Against this backdrop, intentional communities like Arterra offer a radical counterpoint. Their practices constitute a form of *factual politics* – not centred on rhetoric or symbolic gestures but on the reappropriation of collective agency through local, participatory structures. They do not merely critique existing systems; they model alternative pathways.

Well, from the beginning, as a feminist, I believe every-thing is political – even simple daily choices like living in an eco-village or deciding whether to drink bottled water or tap water. [...] In today's world, especially in Western societies, I don't think it's possible to live without engag-ing politically in some way. Here in Arterra, living togeth-er in the same place with so many people makes those dynamics even more visible. Thanks to the facilitation courses we do here, we have rich tools for giving feedback, managing conflict, and navigating interpersonal relation-ships – much more than you'd find elsewhere. What I really appreciate in Arterra is the intention to keep a bal-ance between individual well-being and collective well-being. There's real care, openness, and support for person-al processes, but without putting individual needs above the project itself. The project, the shared life, remains at the centre (P.11)

Through their involvement with networks like GEN-Europe and ECOLISE (European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability), these communities also engage in meta-political work: co-authoring policy proposals, partici-pating in EU-level deliberations on climate transition, and contributing to manifestos that call for a redefini-tion of sustainability and governance. These initiatives, far from being utopian side projects, reflect a grounded political agency that merges everyday practice with broader structural change (Asara *et al.* 2015; Kunze and Avelino 2015). Here's how one participant described it during the 2024 ECOLISE annual gathering, which took place at Arterra.

I came as volunteer in Arterra, and now I'm representing RIVE, the Italian ecovillage network. ECOLISE is a network of networks that plays a key role in connecting and coordi-nating many projects and communities with shared values. It acts as a bridge, helping community voices reach differ-ent levels – from local to institutional – while also creating opportunities for collaboration and positive cross-pollina-tion between members of the network. Its work is political, not just in the personal or social sense, but also in terms of influencing policy. That bridging role is something no one else was really taking on, and it's incredibly valuable (P.9).

The duration of the stay of the residents often reflects these motivations, with some arriving for a tem-porary experience – such as through European volun-teering programs – and others committing to long-term transformation.

Permaculture also plays a political role here, not only as a method of ecological design or land manage-ment, but as a broader philosophy of social transforma-tion – what some describe as a form of terraforming for just and sustainable futures. As one resident explains:

I see permaculture as deeply connected to the world of com-munities and collective projects. Of course, it includes things like gardening and self-sufficiency, but it goes far beyond that. It's a broad approach that also touches on social and political dimensions. It's guided by ethical principles and aims for fairness, cooperation, and an understanding of ecosystems – not just in nature, but among humans too. It's about symbiosis and coexistence, recognizing that we, as humans, are part of the same web as animals, plants, and all living beings (P.8).

3.5. Transformative learning

Moreover, each year the community welcomes long-term volunteers through European and international exchange programs, including Erasmus+, ESC (Europe-an Solidarity Corps), and other transatlantic initiatives. These volunteers, often young people from across Europe and the United States, engage in what can be described as transformative learning – gaining not only practical skills in ecological living and self-organization, but also under-going a deeper personal and political awakening. Their immersion into the rhythms of communal life, ecologi-cal stewardship, and participatory governance positions the ecovillage as a pedagogical space, where knowledge is transmitted not through instruction but through experi-ence, embodiment, and relational engagement.

By reclaiming communication as a collective, lived process – not a media construct – these communities reinstate politics as a verb: something done, shared, embodied. In this way, Arterra does not merely practice sustainability; it performs a deeply political act of resist-ance against the passive, consumers' form of citizenship that dominates much of contemporary society.

As one participant reflects:

This is another way of doing politics – aligned with the feminist idea that the personal is political. What we do here is trying to give our lives meaning and impact through how we live together. It's about transformation that starts at the root, through daily practices. For me, feminism is a key inspiration – not only for how it's shaped my life, but because it has brought deep social change without relying on violence, simply by embodying the change it seeks (P.10).

In this sense, Arterra's political practice aligns close-ly with the principles of ecofeminism – where caring for the planet and caring for people are inseparable.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has sought to illuminate how intentional communities like Arterra Bizimodu are not merely alter-

native lifestyles but dynamic laboratories of socio-political experimentation. The trajectories of the participants – often shaped by early exposure to holistic education, ecological awareness, and critical thinking – highlight the role of formative environments in cultivating a disposition toward communal and sustainable living. These individuals do not arrive in ecovillages as disillusioned idealists, but as citizens actively seeking coherence between their values and daily life.

It reinforces a culture of listening, feedback, and continuous learning – hallmarks of what we Mezirow (2018) defined as transformative learning. In this context, governance becomes not only a matter of logistics but a field of personal and collective growth. Decisions are not made on behalf of the community; they are made within it, by those directly affected.

What emerges is a form of prefigurative politics, where the community enacts in the present the values and systems it wishes to see more widely adopted. This stands in stark contrast to the current socio-political climate, where political discourse is increasingly reduced to spectacle, influence, and consumer branding (Mirra and Pietropaoli 2024). In such a landscape, Arterra's practices offer a quiet yet powerful rupture: a return to embodied citizenship, where politics is not performed for visibility, but lived through shared space, mutual care, and situated decision-making. Furthermore, Arterra's active engagement in European networks such as GEN-Europe and ECOLISE shows that these communities do not withdraw from the political sphere – they expand it. They propose new ways of relating, organizing, and envisioning futures that transcend individualism and economic instrumentalism. Their contributions to policy dialogues, educational initiatives, and regenerative practices mark them as political agents, not just lifestyle communities.

In this sense, Arterra challenges conventional understandings of both governance and political participation. Through the practical application of sociocracy, the community exemplifies a form of governance rooted not in abstract representation but in embodied dialogue, co-responsibility, and iterative learning. This system allows members to engage not merely as inhabitants but as co-creators of their social environment. Their political agency emerges through practice – planting gardens, facilitating circles, resolving conflicts – rather than through alignment with traditional ideologies or institutions.

At the same time, the findings suggest that such communities are not free from contradictions. The aspirations for inclusivity, resilience, and sustainability encounter material and relational limits: uneven participation, burnout, interpersonal tensions, and the constant friction with external socio-economic pressures. These communities enact what might be called transformative micropolitics, where individuals experiment with new ways of relating, deciding, and dwelling together. Yet their fragility remains. As Arterra grows and adapts, it must constantly balance its vision with the tensions of scale, sustainability, and external engagement. Its long-term impact will depend on its ability to remain porous and connected – sharing knowledge, influencing policy, and continuing to inspire through example.

Ultimately, ecovillages like Arterra do not offer blueprints, but seeds. They call for a rethinking of what is politically possible – not through abstraction, but through grounded, embodied, and relational ways of life. Their contribution to eco-social transformation lies not only in what they resist, but in what they quietly and persistently grow.

In this spirit, our intention as authors is to further explore these practices – particularly sociocratic governance and permaculture-based ecological design – through a comparative study between Arterra, as a territorially embedded intentional community, and other eco-social transition contexts. One relevant case is the *Sicilian permaculture movement*, which, unlike Arterra's enclosed model, operates as a diffuse, polycentric network. Since 2020, this movement has formally articulated itself through a collective manifesto, positioning itself as a political actor rooted in agroecology, land reoccupation and community regeneration (Bertino and Martín-Lagos López 2025). Comparing these two contexts – one enclosed and intentional, the other dispersed and emergent – may illuminate the diverse strategies, tensions, and innovations shaping contemporary pathways of eco-social transformation across different cultural and territorial landscapes.

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From Procurement to Food Justice: Colombia's Institutional Turn

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Abstract. This article analyzes the case of the Colombian Government Agency *Colombia Compra Eficiente* as an example of an institutional innovation that actively challenges neoliberal rationality in the fight against hunger. It argues that, through targeted strategies, the agency is transformed into a community of resistance to the dominant capitalist paradigm, thus serving as a vehicle for the democratization and institutionalization of practices traditionally associated with grassroots social movements. By examining two key strategies – *Ruta de la Democratización* and *Mi Mercado Popular* – the article demonstrates how the agency disrupts conventional dichotomies between state and civil society in food sovereignty scholarship, suggesting that institutional actors can play a pivotal role in reorienting local development models toward social and food justice goals.

Keywords: resistance, Colombia, food security, food sovereignty, government agencies.

1. FOOD SECURITY, FOOD SOVEREIGNTY, AND FOOD JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTORY VIEW

The implementation of food sovereignty is a complex process that requires the translation of a political vision of food security into a more equitable food system. A persistent challenge in this effort is the limited attention given to the role of government policies and actions within food sovereignty debates. An estimated 735 million people still suffer from food insecurity worldwide, and it is increasingly clear that the Sustainable Development Goal of ending hunger by 2030 will not be achieved (UNICEF 2023). Although food insecurity disproportionately affects rural populations, it is also closely linked to broader urbanization processes. These dynamics shape the degree of social and spatial connectivity, often leading to increased isolation and a growing reliance on nutritionally inadequate and highly processed diets. Given the complexity and interdependence of these factors, their integration into government policymaking raises a number of urgent and multi-

dimensional questions. Can government engagement be meaningfully integrated into a food sovereignty model that includes smallholder farmers? Could such a model help food-insecure nations achieve self-sufficiency? What role might alliances between governments, producers, and consumers play in building sovereign and resilient food systems? How can food sovereignty bridge the gap between corporate control of the global food system and the persistent struggles of rural food producers? Finally, can food sovereignty drive transformative change in the world's most impoverished regions?

The concept of food security has evolved significantly over the past fifty years since its original formulation, when the primary concern was on the volume and stability of food supplies. It first emerged in the mid-1970s, when the 1974 World Food Conference defined food security as "the availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of staple foods to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to compensate for fluctuations in production and prices" (FAO 2003: 27). Since the 1970s, the definition of food security has expanded beyond the mere availability of food supplies. Recognizing that the Green Revolution did not inherently reduce poverty and malnutrition eroded faith in the ability of governments' technocratic systems to distribute natural resources fairly. By the mid-1990s, the concept had shifted to a more complex definition that emphasized individual and household access to food. According to the definition adopted at the 1996 World Food Summit, food insecurity refers to limited or uncertain access to safe, nutritionally adequate, and socially acceptable food necessary to support health across the life course. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines food security as comprising four key dimensions: (1) availability: the adequacy of food supply at the national or local level; 2) access: the ability of individuals or households to obtain nutritionally adequate, safe, and culturally appropriate food; 3) utilization: the proper use of food, including the knowledge and tools to store, prepare, and distribute it safely, as well as the body's ability to metabolize and absorb nutrients; 4) stability: the consistency of access, availability, and utilization over time, without the risk of disruption due to crises or seasonal fluctuations. The widely accepted definition states that food security exists "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO 1996). This multidimensional understanding of food security evidently incorporates the four key pillars mentioned above.

While the concept of food security has played a central role in international development discourse, particularly through global institutions such as the FAO and the UN and frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals, it has faced increasing criticism for being depoliticized and overly focused on technical solutions to hunger that accommodate neoliberal approaches to agriculture, including trade liberalization, export-oriented production, and the concentration of power within multinational agribusiness (Friedmann 1993). Critics argue that mainstream discourse on food security often overlooks deeper structural inequalities in the global food system, such as the concentration of multinational corporations, land expropriation, workers' exploitation, and the marginalization of smallholder producers. Food security, as traditionally defined, does not question the social control of the food system, the way in which food is produced, or the socio-political conditions under which it is accessed. Raj Patel points out that food security, as a concept, can exist even under authoritarian regimes such as prisons or dictatorships. This is because, from a governmental standpoint, the definition of food security deliberately avoids specifying the political conditions under which it should be achieved. Such vagueness was a strategic choice, as including language that required certain political systems or democratic processes would have made international consensus on the definition much harder to reach (2009: 665). As a result, food security can be pursued through industrial agriculture, international trade and even food aid, often reinforcing the very inequalities that contribute to food insecurity for instance through the 'depeasantization' of rural areas in the name of efficiency (Araghi 1995), and the circumvention of food system power policies that must instead be explicitly discussed. In response, the concept of food sovereignty emerged in the 1990s, first introduced by the international peasant movement La Vía Campesina, as a more radical alternative.

Food sovereignty reframes the conversation by emphasizing the right of peoples, communities, and nations to define their own food and agricultural systems, prioritizing local markets, protecting seed diversity and biodiversity, and resisting corporate dominance over food systems. It aims at placing control of food production and distribution in the hands of those who produce, distribute, and consume food, rather than distant markets and multinational corporations. Unlike food security, which can be pursued within industrial and globalized food contexts, food sovereignty explicitly requires agrarian reform, protection of local markets, agroecological practices, and democratic control over food systems (Nyéléni Declaration 2007). It reframes food as a right and a public good rather than a commodity, centering justice, sustainability, and autonomy as

core values. As Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe argue, food sovereignty offers a transformative framework that "calls into question the micro-economic framework of the corporate food regime by placing great value on things with little quantifiable economic worth, such as culture, biodiversity and traditional knowledge" (2010: 27), thereby creating space for agrarian, environmental, and food justice movements. This transition, from a technical, access-based model of food security to a justice-oriented, rights-based model of food sovereignty, marks a profound shift in how global food challenges are conceptualized and addressed. It recognizes that hunger is not merely a supply problem, but a symptom of deeper structural inequalities in land distribution, trade policies, and governance.

The shift from food security to food sovereignty is epistemological and reflects more than a change in policy language. It represents a deeper ideological and political transformation in how food systems are understood and contested. In this view, food sovereignty is both a critique and a political project: it seeks to reclaim autonomy, dignity and sustainability for farming communities and smallholder producers around the world. As Desmarais (2007) writes, food sovereignty is a transformative process that challenges dominant power relations and reclaims agriculture as a way of life, rather than simply a sector of the economy. Peasants are not seen as passive victims of neoliberal capitalism, but as active political agents with their own visions of development and ecological stewardship. This redefinition calls into question the top-down, expert-driven approaches often associated with food security and development policy, advocating instead for democratized and territorially grounded food systems.

Building on these analyses of top-down food security policies and bottom-up food sovereignty struggles, we argue that Colombia offers a unique and dynamic example of how food sovereignty can be implemented not only through grassroots resistance, but also through state-supported institutional reform. While *La Vía Campesina* and affiliated organizations across Latin America have traditionally positioned themselves in opposition to state and corporate power, Colombia's recent developments suggest a more hybrid model, one in which small-scale farmers, Indigenous communities, and government actors engage in participatory governance to reconfigure the entire agri-food system, toward justice and sustainability. In fact, the Colombian government is promoting state-subsidized agriculture as a key element of national infrastructure. These government-funded reforms seek to expand food sovereignty through agroecology and enhance food security while driving

much-needed transformations in the agri-food system. Colombia presents a compelling case study due to its history of social and community-based resistance, as well as its current implementation of a distinct form of political-institutional resistance and transformation.

This state-driven resistance from within the system is rare in food sovereignty research that conceptualizes resistance as emerging from below led by peasants, Indigenous communities, and grassroots organization that resist dominant agri-food models imposed by global neoliberal institutions and multinational agribusinesses. The state, in this narrative, is frequently positioned as part of the problem: as a facilitator of land dispossession, a promoter of export-oriented agriculture, or a passive observer of global capitalist pressures. This framing reflects a broader skepticism in critical agrarian and food studies toward state institutions, often seen as structurally bound to neoliberal logic and elite interests. As a result, the state is rarely imagined as a protagonist in food sovereignty transformations, much less as a site of resistance. However, the Colombian case seems to challenge this dominant assumption exemplifying a state-led effort of political transformation of the food system where government agencies alongside smallholder farmers, Indigenous representatives, civil society organizations, and advocates of agroecological practices are collectively working toward increased food security and food sovereignty that will ultimately lead to food justice.

In a deeply unequal world shaped by a legacy of colonial domination that has primarily benefitted a privileged few, there are poor, racialized populations, women, and other marginalized groups that continue to be exploited under a neoliberal regime that undermines peasant-led agrarian reforms. Government-led food system reforms that address food insecurity create opportunities for community-engaged, place-based approaches to reimagining more just and equitable food systems. At a time when the transformation of the food system is no longer questionable, much of the theorizing around localized alternatives to the corporate-led industrial food model has come from the Global North often speculating on the viability of bottom-up, localized food initiatives.

This paper instead builds on an existing case study of a concrete example being enacted in practice to investigate the growing collaboration among government agencies that is taking place through state-led initiatives, platforms, and policy mechanisms in Colombia. We focus particularly on efforts to advance food security, food sovereignty, and ultimately food justice by examining the development of localized food provisioning networks that play a crucial role in reshaping the country's food system. We argue that these initiatives are not

isolated efforts. Rather, they represent a broader and increasingly robust social movement of multi-scaled food activism emerging from the Global South. This movement, often led by actors historically considered marginal or peripheral within global networks, challenges dominant agro-industrial paradigms and offers new models for socially just and ecologically sustainable food systems. This growing food sovereignty movement aligns with, and in many ways pushes beyond, the international policy frameworks that aim to address global inequalities in food systems. In particular, it intersects with the goals set forth by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Agenda, which seeks to create pathways for equitable and ecologically sustainable development.

2. INSTITUTIONALITY BECOMES A COMMUNITY OF RESISTANCE: THE EXAMPLE OF *COLOMBIA COMPRA EFICIENTE*

Collective social and political conflict is a dynamic process that manifests in various forms across different areas and levels. It involves both institutional and extra-institutional actors, generating interactions that continuously reshape the sociopolitical landscape (Bosi and Malthaner 2024). These transformations, much like a spiral, are interconnected, reflecting attempts to address the complexity of contemporary societies. This complexity demands a reproblematization and resignification of existing frameworks along with a stronger articulation between theoretical perspectives and practices grounded in cultures of sustainability and solidarity. As Mangone (2024) argues, thinking about solidarity requires a meta-theoretical approach; one that considers the growing demand for diverse forms of intervention prompted by new systems of social need, while also grappling with the challenges posed by developments in communication and technological processes.

The case study at the center of this contribution aligns with these theoretical dimensions. In a country ranked among the most unequal in Latin America, both structurally and systemically, where approximately 1.6 million people suffer from acute food insecurity (GNAFC 2024), current efforts challenge dominant neoliberal paradigms and propose an alternative model that is socially just, ecologically sustainable, and grounded in solidarity. As the need to transform the agri-food system is now widely acknowledged, despite ongoing reliance on frameworks rooted in the Global North, Colombia distinguishes itself not only through a legacy of grassroots and community resistance, but also through its current implementation of a unique form of political-institution-

al transformation. From the Global South, a vision is emerging that not only aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 2, but also remains deeply attuned to local realities and challenges. As such, it appears to push beyond standardized international policy frameworks toward more context-specific and transformative approaches.

Since his election campaign, President Gustavo Petro has prioritized food sovereignty and food security in Colombia. This commitment is clearly reflected in the *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2022-2026*, titled "Colombia Potencia Mundial de la Vida" (National Development Plan 2022-2026), the key legal and strategic document outlining the government's policy agenda. The NDP places the right to food, recognized as a fundamental human right, at the center of its objectives and prioritizes the promotion of sustainable industrialization and productivity through the adoption of new technologies. Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, the NDP aims to strengthen the peasant, family, ethnic, and community-based economy by providing access to production resources. It seeks to foster food security efficiently, autonomously, and equitably, while fully respecting ancestral knowledge, traditional flavors, and local biodiversity. In support of this goal, the *Comisión Intersectorial de Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional* (Intersectoral Commission on Food and Nutrition Security) has been restructured to consolidate governance and improve coordination across food policy domains.

The vision also aligns with Colombia's obligations under the 2016 Peace Agreement, which recognized food security and sovereignty, anchored in agrarian reform, as foundational to sustainable peace. The National Development Plan dedicates an entire chapter to "total and integral peace," framing it as the essence of governance. Within this chapter, rural reform is identified as the primary pillar for achieving territorial peace. One major outcome of this agenda has been the creation of the *Sistema Nacional para la Garantía Progresiva del Derecho a la Alimentación* (National System for the Progressive Guarantee of the Right to Food, Art. 216, Law 2294/2023). This system not only serves as the institutional mechanism coordinating the *Hambre Cero* (Zero Hunger) program, a national emergency plan targeting hunger in the most vulnerable regions of the country but also represents a structural response to one of the country's most enduring challenges: securing peace in rural areas and achieving social justice.

This intersectoral response advances a vision aligned with the People's Food Power, promoting food governance rooted in human rights. It seeks to ensure that rights holders are actively involved in decision-

making processes to realize the right to food, adequate nutrition, and food sovereignty. This agenda is tightly connected to the NDP's broader goals of social justice, equity, environmental sustainability, and inclusion. It also intersects with objectives related to strengthening the popular economy, promoting multilevel governance in food-related public policies, and contributing to territorial peacebuilding[1]. To support this transformation, the National Agency for Public Procurement – *Colombia Compra Eficiente* has launched an ambitious strategy to democratize participation in public procurement and ensure equitable access to public resources. The Agency has established a direct and continuous communication and training channel, enabling the participation of small-scale farmers, coffee and panela producers, small and medium-sized enterprises, local cooperatives, non-profit associations, and other actors within the popular and community-based economy. This strategy integrates two key initiatives: 1) *Ruta de la democratización* (Democratization Path), a series of ongoing virtual and in-person training sessions conducted nationwide, principally targeting actors in the popular economy to educate them on public procurement processes and participation mechanisms; and 2) *Mi Mercado Popular* (My Popular Market), a module within the Colombian government's virtual procurement platform. This tool allows popular economy actors to register as state suppliers, thereby revolutionizing the country's procurement systems and improving access for previously marginalized sectors.

Through this strategy, the *Colombia Compra Eficiente* government agency is transformed into a key driver of change by implementing alternative actions that challenge the deeply rooted neoliberal socio-economic model that has shaped Colombia for decades. This transformation involves a realignment of regulatory frameworks with political and socio-cultural objectives, enabled in part by a broader technological shift. Focusing on the two core strategies, efforts began in late 2023 with the *Ruta de la Democratización*, aimed at dismantling the barriers to access, capacity, and market participation that have long excluded sectors of the popular economy. These efforts are supported by technical assistance and the agency's sustained territorial presence, empowering marginalized actors with the tools and knowledge to engage meaningfully in the public

procurement system. The initiative seeks to open up the public procurement market to actors traditionally excluded from state supply chains such as small local producers, micro-enterprises, women's associations, Indigenous and ethnic communities, and peasant cooperatives. By promoting their participation as potential state suppliers, the strategy aims to foster sustainable industrial development, energize vulnerable local economies, and advance social and environmental justice. In this way, the state, through *Colombia Compra Eficiente*, extends its reach into historically neglected territories.

The Ruta de la Democratización is underpinned by principles of popular critical education (Freire 2005), supported by many current government leaders. It is further enriched by the tenets of digital critical education. These principles are operationalized through three main components: a) Virtual Training School: A free, 24/7 e-learning platform that offers specialized online training for administrators of local government entities, private producers, citizens, and actors from the popular economy. This is complemented by regular informational webinars on procurement opportunities, hosted via Microsoft Teams and disseminated across the agency's social media and platforms such as YouTube; b) Expansion of Territorial Coverage: To bridge the digital divide and address educational and cultural gaps, *Colombia Compra Eficiente* conducts in-person training sessions in remote regions. These sessions use participatory and dialogic forum methodologies to engage local communities, administrators, and popular economy actors directly; and c) Specialized Technical Assistance: Beyond general training, the agency offers personalized support to ensure that participants understand the requirements, procedures, and documentation necessary to take part in public procurement processes.

The dynamics of Colombia's complex public procurement system are thus being redesigned in a democratizing direction to include the popular and community economy sector as a vital ally in the country's sustainable economic development. The *Ruta de la Democratización* strategy both strengthens and is strengthened by other instruments, such as the *Acuerdo Marco de Precios* (CCE 2023). For example, through the *Café Social* (Social Coffee) initiative, the state has promoted the participation of victims of the internal armed conflict, female heads of households, and peasant, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant organizations. By expanding inclusive procurement catalogues, the government has enabled the direct acquisition of coffee from micro and small enterprises within the popular economy, supporting small local brands over large franchises and fostering the economic development of socially vulner-

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[1] According to Decree 2185 of 2023, the popular economy encompasses both mercantile activities (such as the production, distribution and marketing of goods and services) and non-mercantile ones (including domestic or community-based work) carried out by small economic units, whether personal, family-based, or micro-enterprises, across any economic sector.

able communities. This first block of strategic actions is complemented by a second, represented by the innovative *Mi Mercado Popular* platform, which became fully operational in 2024. Unlike traditional tools focused solely on transparency and efficiency, *Mi Mercado Popular* is conceived as a democratizing instrument. By recognizing and formalizing the contributions of the popular economy and small producers to national development, the platform seeks to disrupt oligarchic procurement dynamics and promote broader socio-economic and cultural inclusion. The platform allows micro-enterprises and sectors of the popular economy to register as state providers under *Instrumentos de Agregación de Demanda*, IADs (Demand Aggregation Tools). IADs are legal mechanisms used to group government demand for specific products or services, enabling state entities to procure them directly up to a set minimum amount through the Colombian State's virtual store. In combination with inclusive catalogues, these mechanisms primarily facilitate the purchase of agricultural and food products such as canastas familiares directly from actors in the popular economy. Furthermore, these strategic actions operate in strong synergy with broader government initiatives, such as the *Asociaciones Público Populares* (APPo), established under Decree 874 of 2024. These contracts allow state entities to directly engage, up to the established minimum amounts, with individuals or non-profit organizations classified within the popular and community economy sector for the execution of works or the acquisition of goods and services linked to local social and productive infrastructure, rural housing, food production, agriculture, and more.

The use of the *Mi Mercado Popular* platform, extended through the IADs to a wide range of products and services offered by sectors of the popular economy – including micro-enterprises, associations, cooperatives, consortia (even temporary ones) – together with the simplification of required documentation and the intuitive three-step registration process (account creation via email, completion of the registration form, and uploading of the commercial register), has produced notable results in terms of inclusion and participation[2].

Social justice, innovation, food sovereignty, and technological sovereignty[3] are the keywords that guide

the strategic action of the *Colombia Compra Eficiente* agency, which, through the design of these mechanisms, becomes a powerful executive arm of the *Gobierno del Cambio* (Government of Change). By combining these two strategic pillars, *Colombia Compra Eficiente* initiates a distinct form of resistance with significant social impact, complementing historical community struggles for social justice. Acting directly from within the institutional sphere, the agency designs and establishes alternative and progressive practices that translate the vision of food sovereignty and food security, as forms of resistance to neoliberal domination, into concrete action. Through this strategy, the Colombian National Agency for Public Procurement emerges as a kind of resistant community, becoming itself a space committed to reducing inequalities and protecting common goods (Ostrom 1990), such as food security, now broadly redefined within the Colombian context as food sovereignty and justice essential for internal pacification.

This interpretation of *Colombia Compra Eficiente* as a resistant community is further supported by the effects it produces at both the institutional and socio-cultural levels. At the institutional level, the agency's strategy allows the participation of actors and communities historically excluded from public procurement processes, thereby strengthening participatory democracy and open government mechanisms (De Blasio and Sorice 2016). Through the creation of articulation mechanisms and ongoing communication, merging traditional and digital methodologies, the agency strengthens public management from a responsible, ethical, and shared perspective. It does so because it subjects a public institution to social oversight, thus spreading a culture of open, citizen-oriented governance. The major challenge *Colombia Compra Eficiente* undertakes is to rethink its administrative mandate from a collaborative and co-management perspective, aiming at the sustainable governance of common goods and resources (Paltrinieri 2020), and to activate innovation processes capable of transforming sociocultural and socioeconomic paradigms.

This institutional transformation is mirrored at the socio-cultural level: by promoting civic engagement

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[2] According to estimates by the *Colombia Compra Eficiente* Agency, public procurement is fully open. In 2024, the number of suppliers from the popular economy was 166, and in the first six months of 2025, it increased to 663. Data on supplier participation in various public procurement processes are available on the Agency's platform at the following link: https://www.colombiacompra.gov.co/analisis-de-datos-de-compra-publica/visualizaciones-compra-publica/participacion-de-proveedores-en-los-procesos-de-compra-publica

[3] A National Dialogue Table is currently being established between

Colombia Compra Eficiente and the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies to replace the existing digital platform SECOP (*Sistema Electrónico de Contratación Pública*), which manages all public procurement procedures. The new platform aims to improve efficiency, transparency, and accessibility while integrating advanced technologies such as AI to optimize processes and reduce costs. A key objective is to achieve national technological sovereignty, as the current platform, although operated by the government agency, relies on digital infrastructure and source code controlled by foreign companies. We thank the current Director of the Government Agency, Cristóbal Padilla Tejeda, for the information and clarification.

across online, offline, and hybrid spaces from a perspective that challenges neoliberal logic (Antonucci, Sorice and Volterrani 2024), the agency creates a bridge between the institutional and the social spheres. The agency's major decisions, such as guidelines, framework documents, and public procurement calls, are subject to ex ante citizen participation: drafts are shared on institutional websites and social media platforms, with citizens invited to leave feedback via Microsoft Forms. The same participatory methodology, both online and offline, is applied *in itinere* to assess and improve ongoing processes and ex post for annual accountability procedures.

In terms of communication, this strategy also represents an effort to counterbalance the neoliberal logic of contemporary platform societies (Sorice 2022) by constructing a socio-institutional space that fosters democratization and conscious direct participation in the pursuit of social justice. This space, starting with the guarantee of food and technological sovereignty, is dialogic: it re-signifies resistance and resilience, redefines the social sense of community, and integrates digital ecosystems with critical education and training actions. The alternative model shaped by *Colombia Compra Eficiente* thus presents innovative elements that seem to move toward a hypothesis of radical cultural democracy (Picarella 2022). Through these efforts, Colombia is not only democratizing access to public resources but is also laying the groundwork for a deeper transformation of the agri-food system. By embedding principles of equity, solidarity, and territorial inclusion into procurement mechanisms, the state is beginning to operationalize food sovereignty as a rights-based, participatory process rather than a purely grassroots struggle. This shift signals a break from the neoliberal models that have historically marginalized small-scale producers and popular economy actors, showing that institutional reforms can serve as powerful tools for systemic change when anchored in social justice and local realities. Colombia's experience thus offers valuable insights into how hybrid models of governance might reshape the global debate on food sovereignty and rural development.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The complexity of today's social, economic, political, and environmental issues demands the urgent integration of practices and production systems that both enhance productivity and protect ecological systems. Goal 2 of the 2030 Agenda seeks to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture (UN 2023). Achieving these goals requires a profound transformation in agricultural and food systems. These sectors hold significant potential to contribute to food security and sovereignty while also playing a key role in eradicating extreme poverty, which is one of the most persistent barriers to sustainable development (UN 2023; FAO 2006; European Coordination Via Campesina 2018). The Colombian case offers a concrete example of how these global objectives can be translated into institutional practices tailored to local contexts. It represents a significant shift in policy, emphasizing the role of the state in promoting equitable and sustainable food systems. Through the implementation of the *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2022–2026* and the strategic actions of *Colombia Compra Eficiente*, the country is advancing a model that integrates food justice, ecological sustainability, and participatory governance. By aligning national policy with the principles of Goal 2, Colombia not only seeks to reduce hunger and inequality but also reframes food governance as a vehicle for social transformation rooted in solidarity, local knowledge, and inclusive economic participation.

The action of the National Agency for Public Procurement, *Colombia Compra Eficiente*, aligns with a vision of food security and food sovereignty grounded in solidarity rather than competition, aiming to safeguard human dignity and build a fairer world from the bottom up. Its approach represents the institutionalization of an alternative paradigm, one that prioritizes the protection and participation of local cooperatives, community-based agriculture, and the popular economy. By working to return control over resources and markets to small-scale, local producers (Macartan 2017; Wittman 2011), this model seeks to secure food sovereignty and food security throughout the country. Within this framework, *Colombia Compra Eficiente* becomes a community of resistance to the dominant neoliberal order mobilizing a nationwide strategy to combat hunger and promote equitable access to opportunities.

In conclusion, contrasting to dominant narratives that frame food sovereignty as exclusively emerging from grassroots resistance to neoliberal states, the Colombian case has revealed an innovative configuration of state-driven resistance. Through agencies like *Colombia Compra Eficiente*, the state itself becomes a vehicle for food justice democratizing food systems by institutionalizing practices historically associated with social movements. This reimagining of state agency challenges traditional dichotomies between 'the state' and 'the people' in food sovereignty literature, suggesting that parts of the institutional apparatus can be reoriented toward food justice goals.

In this way, food sovereignty and food justice are operationalized not only through grassroots mobilization but also through the transformation of public governance structures, procurement systems, and participatory mechanisms within the state, generating new spaces of collective empowerment and socio-ecological sustainability. Colombia's case study complicates the dominant framing of food sovereignty as an oppositional movement rooted primarily in grassroots or agrarian struggle (Patel 2009; Wittman *et al.* 2010). Instead, it illustrates a state-driven form of resistance, wherein public institutions like *Colombia Compra Eficiente* actively challenge neoliberal food systems through redistributive procurement policies and inclusive governance. This state-led engagement broadens the scope of food sovereignty, aligning it with food justice perspectives that emphasize structural inequalities, racialized access to food, and the role of state power in shaping everyday food realities (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Sbicca 2018). By embedding values of autonomy, equity, and sustainability into institutional practices, Colombia demonstrates how the state can act not merely as a regulator but as a co-creator of socially just food systems, building what Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) might call a "transformative food regime" from within the apparatus of government. The case study we have proposed pushes food sovereignty scholarship to reconsider the state not just as an obstacle or target of resistance, but as a potential ally in the construction of post-neoliberal food futures rooted in solidarity, participation, and locally grounded sustainability.

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Resisting the Malls. Communication and Networking Practices of Solidarity Purchasing Groups (GAS) in Italy

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Abstract. In neoliberal governance, the space for addressing most issues, whether private or public, is market driven. Political consumerism movements have for decades promoted a set of values, proposals, and "narratives" that aim to combine concern for the environment and social justice with profound changes in everyday life and lifestyles. In Italy, the purchase of products made by adopting criteria of sustainability and social responsibility or from organic farming, made through the collective organization of GAS, the Solidarity Purchasing Groups, is a distinctive solution among the many ethical consumption practices implemented in different territories or countries. The research's objective was a) to analyze the external communication tools of GAS; and b) to study, through a network analysis, the structure of the connections and relationships between the websites of the groups and social movement organizations. The websites, profiles on social network sites and visual identity of more than 300 GAS present in the Italian territory were analyzed. Despite the fact that network strategy remains central to the movement's repertoire of action and is articulated in a plentiful and karstic flow of relationships or, even intense, local activities and community-purchasing initiatives, these still struggle to emerge in digital communication, this potential does not invariably result in the transformation of resistance into communicative communities.

Keywords: Political consumerism, social movements, network analysis, websites, content analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

In neoliberal governance, market logic shapes virtually every sphere, turning individual and corporate choices into levers for social change. Consumer culture has thus become more attuned to environmental and social sustainability, and political consumerism has long promoted "narratives" that blend ecological concern with social justice, urging profound shifts in everyday life (Boström, Micheletti and Oosterveer 2019). To resonate, alternative

food networks need to weave this prefigurative politics into compelling imagery and storytelling.

In Italy, Solidarity Purchasing Groups (GAS) exemplify a distinctive form of ethical consumption. By pooling purchases of sustainably and socially responsible – or organic – products, GAS not only encourages changes in daily habits but also demands visible, ongoing collective engagement (Forno, Grasseni and Signori 2015; Guidi and Andretta 2015; Grasseni 2013). It is a solution that requires both a broader change in daily behaviour and consumption habits alongside ongoing, visible, structured participation (Tavolo RES 2010; Brunori, Rossi and Guidi 2012). We focused our attention on this social movement precisely because of its dispersion and individualization: its diffusion is fragmented and molecular, but it still requires continuity over time and more stable forms of engagement, organization, and cooperation.

2. FROM POLITICAL CONSUMERISM TO COMMUNITY ECONOMIES

The utilisation of consumption choices to exert influence over the behaviour of companies, political opponents, governments and entire states is a practice with a long-standing history. Matthew Hilton explores the development of consumer activism around the world as part of the expansion of the US model of capitalism (2009). The United States was established as a «Consumer's Republic» (Cohen 2003; Clarke *et al.* 2007), an economic system founded upon consumerism. Consumer organisations, originating in the United States, were established in several European countries in the years that followed, with the significant assistance of the Marshall Plan. The establishment of the Consumer Union in the United States in 1936 resulted in the formation of analogous associations in several major European countries in the aftermath of World War II. These efforts reinforced the central idea of a market economy as a system capable of promoting individual well-being through informed and effective choices, thereby strengthening the concept of «consumer sovereignty».

> *consumers were to be encouraged to debate the end results of the system of supply, but not to question the entire system of provision.* (Hilton 2009: 23).

In this context, the concept of *political consumerism* has emerged as a distinct phenomenon, separate from traditional forms of political activism. It refers to «market-oriented engagements emerging from societal concerns associated with production and consumption» (Boström, Micheletti and Oosterveer 2019: 2). For sev-

eral scholars, it is an umbrella term, not a set of clearly defined practices, but rather «a convenient catch-all phrase for a range of tendencies within contemporary consumer culture today» (Lewis and Potter 2011: 4; Harrison, Newholm and Shaw 2005; Humphery 2013; Littler 2009). Lifestyle change, or more precisely the endeavour to effect «more profound changes» in patterns of living and consumption, it is often associated with the development of movements that promote a «lifestyle political consumerism» (Boström, Micheletti and Oosterveer 2019: 3).

In recent decades, the global food system has faced increasing scrutiny due to its environmental, social, and economic impacts. Conventional food supply chains, characterized by long distances, industrialized production, and corporate concentration, have raised concerns related to food security, sustainability, and social justice (Goodman, DuPuis and Goodman 2012). In response, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) have emerged as a counterpoint to the dominant agro-industrial model, advocating for localized, sustainable, and ethically grounded approaches to food production and consumption.

AFNs encompass a diverse array of initiatives, including farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), food cooperatives, and short food supply chains (Renting, Marsden and Banks 2003). These networks aim to reconnect producers and consumers, reduce environmental footprints, and foster more equitable socio-economic relations within food systems (Sonnino and Marsden 2006). Unlike conventional food networks, AFNs prioritize values such as transparency, trust, and ecological responsibility, often incorporating principles of food sovereignty and active civic engagement (Feagan 2007; Hassanein 2003).

The academic discourse on AFNs has grown significantly, with scholars examining their implications for rural development, urban food governance, and environmental sustainability. While some studies highlight the transformative potential of AFNs in fostering resilient local food systems, others critique their limited scalability and capacity to drive systemic change (Tregear 2011; Oncini *et al.* 2020; Wahlen, Forno and Laamanen 2024). It is increasingly evident that these practices are being interpreted as a concerted effort to realign the prevailing balance, to establish a form of «food democracy» (Renting, Schermer and Rossi 2012). The focus on food citizenship is an important starting point for the establishment of sustainable movement organisations, engaged in «encouraging ongoing and direct relationships between producers and consumers» (Forno and Graziano 2014: 5). Communities «rendered as face-to-face, human,

small-scale, caring, and above all local» (Gibson-Graham 2006: 86). Community emerges as a pivotal concept in the intentional process of «resocializing economic relations» (Ivi: 79).

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The paper outlines the principal findings of the research, which pursued two main objectives: (a) to analyse the values, symbolic representations, and communication strategies – both internal and external – of solidarity purchasing groups; and (b) to investigate, via network analysis, the structural relationships and linkages among the websites of these groups and affiliated social movement organizations.

The websites, social media profiles, and visual identities of over 300 GAS across Italy were analysed. As is well established, symbols play a crucial role in shaping collective identities and guiding social behaviour (Castells 2011b; Hunt and Benford 2008). In recent years, the study of contemporary social movements has increasingly emphasized the importance of visual production, narrative construction, and shared collective imagery (Jasper 2014; Polletta 2009).

Since the birth of the solidarity economy movement, the metaphor of the network has been used to describe collaborative and organizational activities among groups and social movement organizations across the territory. In recent years, this has been complemented by the image of the community, used to describe the attempt to build stable relationships while maintaining autonomy and diversity. This dual imagery has roots in the new social movements of the 1970s, which often exhibited complex and fragmented organizational structures. In such contexts, forging a shared identity or coordinated action has frequently proven challenging. To better understand these dynamics, research has gone beyond analyzing individual websites to examine the hyperlinks that connect them – both inbound links (those pointing to a site) and outbound links (those directing to external resources). These hyperlinks reveal more than just digital pathways; they serve as indicators of relational density and as nodes of exchange, fostering both organizational coordination and identity formation. The study of these linkages highlights a compelling interplay between the straightforward storytelling of community experiences and the more intricate, symbolic language needed to articulate broader organizational networks. Ultimately, the challenge lies in developing a communication style that resonates with the realities of contemporary networked activism – one that bridges personal narratives with the strategic complexity of today's political consumerism and social movements.

3.1. The significance of the network strategy

The movement of GAS emerged in the early 1990s in northeastern Italy. Within a few years, the concept had spread across the country, gaining traction and inspiring similar initiatives nationwide. By the end of the decade, the movement had articulated its principles in a foundational text – the *Basic Document* (1999) – and established the first loosely organized networks of social movement, known as the «GAS Connection Network». As the movement matured, national conventions became more frequent and structured, culminating in the drafting of a new foundational manifesto: the *Charter for the Italian Solidarity Economy Network* (hereafter referred to as the RES *Charter*). This charter formally adopted the definition of the solidarity economy inspired by the Brazilian model, which had gained prominence through the Social forums of the preceding years. Alongside this, a new organizational framework for the movement was introduced, marking a significant step in its institutional evolution. Once again, this refers to local networks that link purchasing groups on the consumer side with agricultural enterprises, as well as with other economic actors from various sectors, including those in the social and non-profit economy. These Networks and «Districts» are defined in the Charter as «pilot projects», which envisage them as «"laboratories" of civic, economic and social experimentation, in other words as leading experiences in view of future wider applications of the principles and practices characteristic of the solidarity economy» (3). The RES Charter thus imagines a development of the movement similar to that of the early years – through the emergence and spread of grassroots social experiments – without centralised and bureaucratic structures, yet still maintaining some form of connection and coordination. This networked dissemination becomes the key metaphor for this «network strategy». In the following years, a form of informal national coordination between existing local networks, the "RES Table", will emerge, and projects and experiences of joint distribution and purchasing will continue to develop.

As this movement illustrates, ever since the mobilizations of the "new social movements" in the 1970s and 1980s (Touraine 1993; della Porta and Diani 2020) – through the rise of the Global Justice Movement and more recent international mobilizations – these movements have been marked by distinctive organizational forms (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Castells 2012; della Porta and Diani 2015; Fominaya 2014). These forms

reflect the dispersed, decentralized, and networked nature of the information society (Castells 2011a), with a strong preference for networked activism (Kavada 2016; Gerbaudo 2017; Treré 2018; Nunes 2021). The network has become a powerful metaphor with deep social significance (Freeden 2003: 51), offering a comprehensive framework for understanding both the institutions of contemporary informational capitalism and the movements that challenge them (Castells 2013). Consequently, the network succinctly encapsulates its ideological characteristics, with its representation aligning closely with the «highly figurative nature» of ideologies (Geertz 1973: 220). It provides an impeccable synthesis of this symbolic code, conceptualising ideology as a «schematic image of social order» (Geertz 1973: 218).

The image chosen as the logo for the movement's main national web portal (economiasolidale.net) – as well as for the national association that succeeded the RES Table, the RIES – effectively embodies this interpretation of the network metaphor. It emphasizes connection and cohesion, visually represented by lines linking various points. The metaphor of the network as a space for interaction among heterogeneous entities, or the convergence of differences, is further reinforced by the use of distinct colours for each node. These coloured nodes symbolize diverse entities, interconnected through lines that signify relationships. In typical network representations, nodes are portrayed as equal and decentralized, with their relationships depicted as dynamic interactions among elements occupying equivalent positions – both in relation to one another and within the broader network structure (see Fig. 1). This makes it especially important to examine how these relationships are structured, including the reciprocal connections formed through the websites of groups and organizations.

3. DIGITAL COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS

3.2. Methods

The initial phase of the research involved the establishment of a database through the mapping of solidarity purchasing groups (GAS) registered in Italy. This process was carried out in two phases: the first from April to June 2019, and the second from April to June 2021. The reconstruction process was challenging due to the unavailability of official, contemporary data. Consequently, the available data were sourced from multiple archives[1]

Figure 1. Logos of economiasolidale.net and RIES association.

maintained by various entities, often compiled through direct reporting by the purchasing groups themselves.

The initial database identified a total of 782 GAS groups across 16 Italian regions and autonomous provinces. Since one of the primary objectives of the research was to explore the practices and activities related to how these groups *communicate* their initiatives – and, more broadly, how they convey their existence and the values of responsible consumption they promote – the subsequent analysis focused exclusively on those groups with a discernible external communication presence. This included groups with a website, an official profile on social media platforms, or other publicly accessible channels.

It is hypothesised that a more structured and/or consolidated communication presence is indicative of a group that is more aware and cohesive in terms of the values around which it is gathered. Therefore, it is anticipated that this group may be capable of expanding the scope of its responsible consumption practices and extending its activism to related areas – such as engagement and mobilization around issues of participation, active citizenship, and concerns that go beyond strictly local contexts. This selection criterion resulted in the formation of a subgroup consisting of 316 GAS (40.3% of the total listed); these were investigated in terms of content analysis as a survey (Krippendorff 2018; Losito 1993), utilising a data collection form that identified the official presentation page of the group on its primary communication channel as the textual unit.

The form comprises 85 questions and investigates three key dimensions. The first is the organizational dimension, which includes elements such as basic information, the degree of formalization, and internal structure. The second is the communication dimension, focusing on the channels used, communication style and tone, as well as the presence of visual identity markers like a logo and slogan. The third is the relational dimension, which examines evidence of collaborative relation-

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[1] The constitution of the mapping process firstly involved consultation with national and territorial archives – the Italian Solidarity Economy Network (Rete Italiana Economia Solidale) (economiasoli-

dale.net); BioBank, the database of organic products in Italy (https://www.biobank.it/), the Distretti di Economia Solidale (DES, Solidarity Economy Districts) and the Reti di Economia Solidale (RES, Solidarity Economy Networks). Concurrently, a search for groups was conducted through direct exploration of the web. This exploration involved searching institutional sites through search engines and searching for groups and pages within the main social networking sites, especially Facebook.

ships with other groups and organizations in the area, along with participation in networks and local districts. The following pages present a summary of the findings related to the first two dimensions. The third dimension will be explored through a network analysis, detailed in the subsequent paragraphs.

3.3. Results

Amongst the 782 GAS traced in the research, more than half are located in the North (409, 52.3%), with a significant concentration in the North-West (281, 35.9%). The remaining GAS are situated in the Centre (357, 45.7%). Only a few units are to be found in the South (12) and on the islands (4). This distribution partly reflects the regions where the phenomenon of purchasing groups has historically been more established. The highest concentrations are found in Lombardy, Lazio, and Tuscany, which together account for 65.5% of all GAS in Italy. A comparison between the number of GAS with a communicative presence and the total number of GAS confirms that the North remains the most represented area. In fact, the proportion of GAS with a communicative presence exceeds the national average in both the North-East (44.5%) and the North-West (43.7%). In contrast, the Centre falls below the national average, with only 34.7% of GAS exhibiting a communicative presence. Interestingly, in the southern and insular regions, although the overall number of GAS is relatively low, a majority of those surveyed do maintain a communicative presence. This pattern can be partly explained by the criteria used to compile the database, which rely heavily on self-reporting by GAS in national and regional archives – a practice more common in areas where the phenomenon is well established. In the South, where purchasing groups are more scattered and less consolidated, the need for external visibility is often greater, making communicative tools not only more widely adopted but perhaps essential for the group's survival.

From an organisational perspective, the majority of GAS are constituted as informal groups (62%), while a comparatively smaller proportion (38%) are formally recognised as legal entities, predominantly comprising cultural associations and associations involved in social promotion. In 22.5% of cases, the GAS is an emanation of a related organisation that pre-existed it, and which inspired and guided its establishment (again, mainly cultural and associations involved in social promotion). The majority of GAS with a formal legal status are concentrated in the North (70.7%), whereas informal groups are predominantly located in the Centre-South and the islands (49.7%). Regarding group size – measured by the

number of individuals or families involved – data was available for only half of the total cases. Among these, large groups (over 80 members) were the most common and were more likely to be formalised (52.5%). The remaining groups were almost evenly split between small groups (up to 39 members, 31.9%), which were predominantly informal (84.4%), and medium-sized groups (40 to 80 members, 26.4%).

Focusing on the communicative presence of GAS, the vast majority maintain a website (90.2%). Most of these are standalone websites (62.1%), while in about a quarter of cases the web presence takes the form of a page hosted on an external platform or service (24.9%). Additionally, 10.5% of GAS have a page integrated into the website of a related organization. The majority of GAS websites follow a conventional structure, featuring standard navigation menus and section layouts – an attribute observed in 69.5% of cases. The primary function of these websites is typically that of a "showcase," aimed at presenting the group and its activities, a role fulfilled by 40.1% of the sites. The tone of voice employed is predominantly informative, as demonstrated in 56.9% of cases, and it is only in 25.6% of cases that the tone becomes friendlier and more direct. The majority of cases (55.7%) utilise the third-person singular voice, while the third-person plural voice is employed in a third of cases (37%).

Furthermore, an analysis of the data reveals that 57.6% of GAS are present on one or more social channels, primarily Facebook (54.4%), predominantly in the form of a page to follow rather than a group to join, with an average of approximately 500 contacts. In over half of the cases (58.3%), no news or posts were found in the seven days preceding the survey; in only 15.5% of cases were the posts accompanied by comments. A similar trend is observed in the overall communication style: an informative tone dominates in 51.2% of cases, while a more direct and friendly approach is used in 32%. Additionally, one-third of the groups reported using alternative communication methods, with electronic newsletters being the most common (23.4%).

The media presence of the GAS has been consolidated into a unified index, under the assumption that the diversification of communication across multiple channels signifies an investment by the group in its own communication and a willingness to be present and represented in various digital environments. The GAS are almost evenly split between those that use a single communication channel (40.2%) and those that rely on two – typically a website combined with a social media page (40.8%). Only a fifth (19%) expand their communication strategy beyond these primary channels, incorporat-
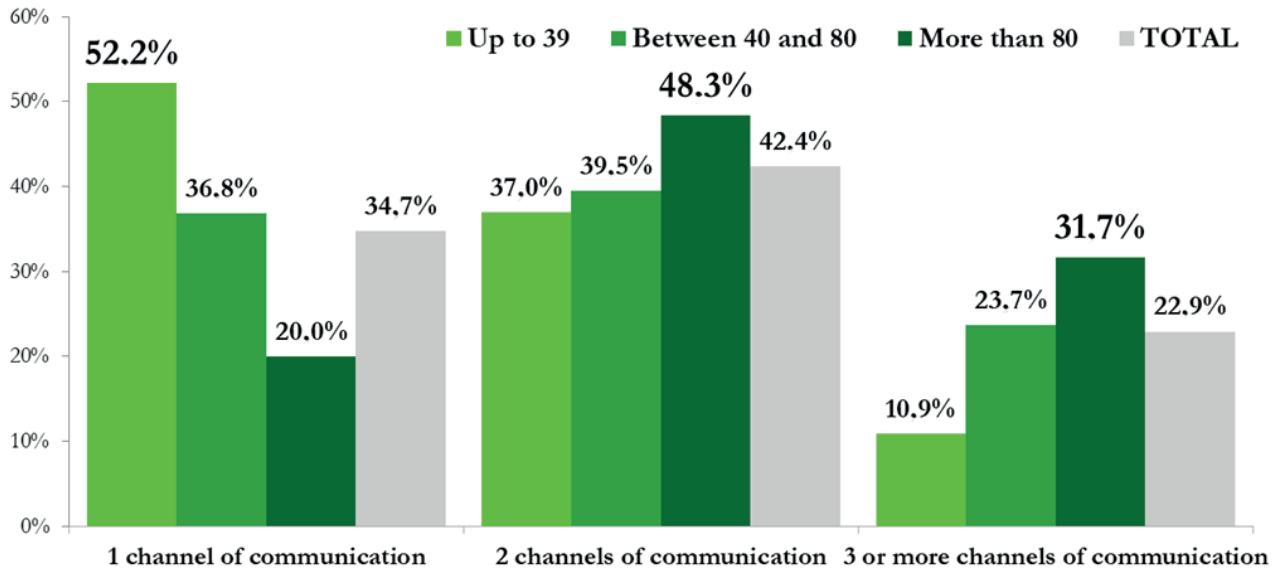
Figure 2. Media presence in relation to the size of the group (cases: 144). *Source*: Author's elaboration.

ing additional tools such as newsletters, instant messaging platforms, magazines, radio broadcasts, or podcasts. This latter group is predominantly made up of GAS located in the North (68.3%). As with logo usage, media presence correlates with group size: smaller groups tend to limit themselves to a single communication channel (48%), whereas larger groups are more likely to manage multiple channels – 47.5% are active on two channels, and 57.6% on three or more (see Fig. 2). A similar pattern emerges in relation to legal status: informal groups use only one channel in 71.8% of cases, while formalised groups adopt a multichannel approach in 51.7% of cases.

A comprehensive observation of the visual identity of the groups reveals that in 64.9% of cases there is an absence of discernible visual identity, coherence, or even a minimally recognisable style, while in 35.1% of cases a certain degree of coherence can be observed. The GAS with a discernible style are predominantly those who have designed their own logo (58%), while those lacking a brand are among the groups exhibiting a weak visual identity (61.3%). Furthermore, the majority of these groups utilise a single communication channel (either exclusively via the website or exclusively via social media) (44.2%). In contrast, those exhibiting a more consistent media presence through two channels have been found to possess a more discernible visual identity (52.3%).

The presence of visual identity has been observed to increase in proportion to the size of the group; it is predominantly evident among large groups (54.8%), while its absence is particularly pronounced among small

groups (38%). The majority of GAS located in metropolitan areas (76.8%) do not exhibit a clearly defined communication style. These groups are predominantly small in size, with 47.8% comprising up to 39 members. It is plausible that in metropolitan areas GAS are primarily organized at the neighbourhood or district level, which may explain why the size of the urban centre does not correspond to the size of the group itself.

4. NETWORK ANALYSIS

4.1. Methods

Network analysis, broadly defined, reframes social life as a web of relations rather than a set of atomised units (Freeman 2004). Actors become nodes, their exchanges are edges, and the resulting graph can be interrogated to expose influence, brokerage, and cohesion.

In this study, network analysis is conducted through a hyperlink map – a sociogram in which each web domain managed by or closely associated with the Solidarity Purchasing Group (GAS) milieu is treated as an actor, and every clickable hyperlink embedded from one domain to another represents a directed relational tie. The theoretical premise underlying this approach is that embedding a hyperlink to another actor constitutes an act of recognition: it makes the target visible to a shared audience, directs traffic toward it, and signals at least a minimal intent to affiliate. The resulting network forms a digitally traceable layer of informational attention that

may precede or accompany offline coordination, and thus merits analysis in its own right. In essence, network analysis provides a structural complement to ethnographic or discursive methods, revealing how GAS groups are situated within – and shaped by – the topology of their communicative environment.

To build the network we began with the URLs listed in Italy's principal online GAS directories. The next step was to identify which additional actors these sites deemed worthy of linking to. For that purpose, we employed a web crawler, a software that imitates a human visitor by automatically downloading a page's source code, scanning it for the hyperlinks (the links pointing towards another site's page). By logging each hyperlink's origin and destination, the crawler generates ordered pairs of URLs that serve as directed edges. The

initial crawl captured over 5,000 hyperlink instances across roughly 100 distinct domains, illustrating the network's raw magnitude. The raw harvest contained thousands of duplicate links, which were removed through several rounds of filtering. After cleaning, the observed network contains n=57 actors: n=32 local GAS collectives and n=25 intermediary entities – including national umbrella organisations, ethical producers, specialised news outlets, and NGOs – that serve as the movement's digital connective tissue.

4.2. Network analysis results

The network comprises n=57 connected websites, distilling a much larger set of potential URLs down to
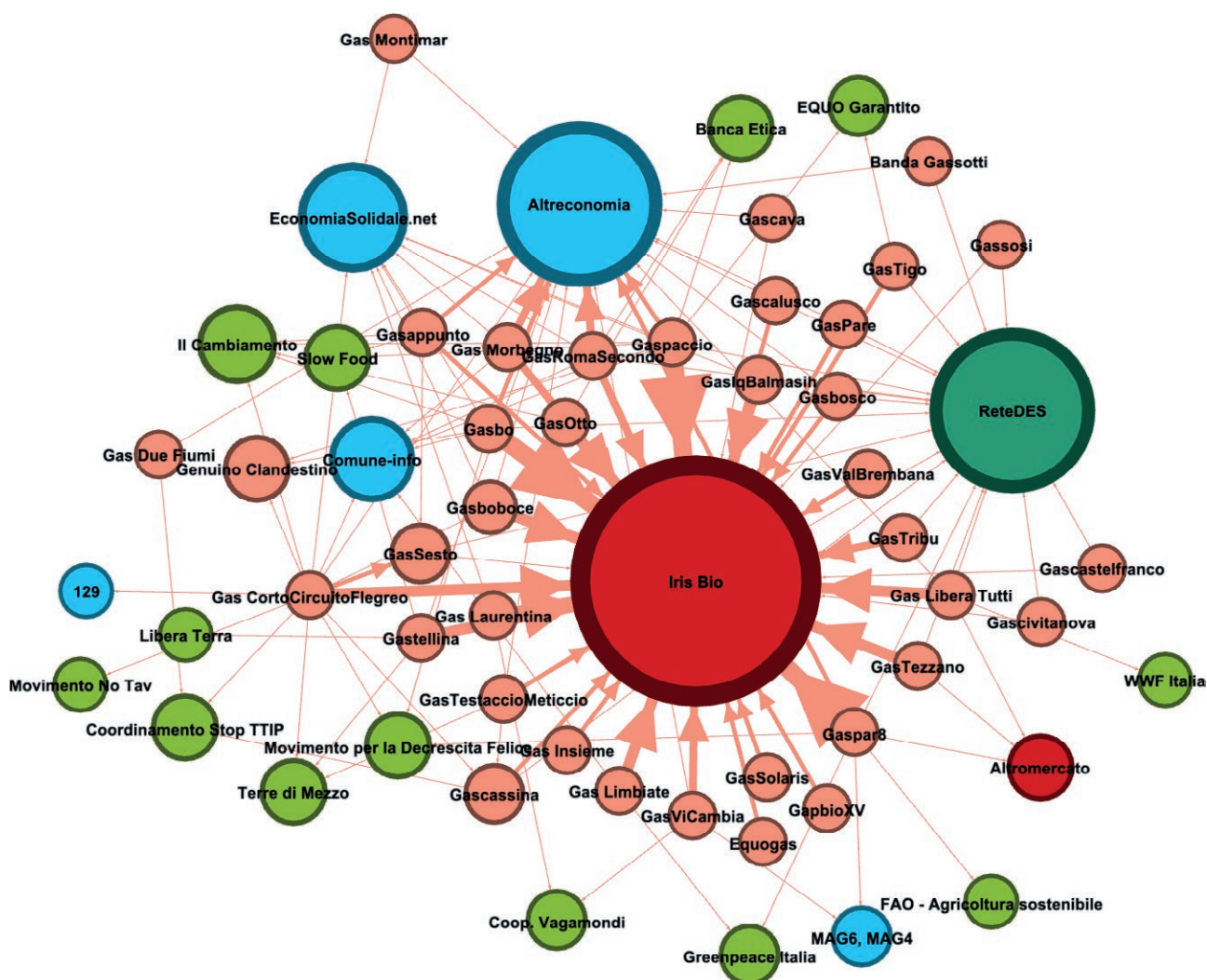

Figure 3. Relationship between actors in the GAS network.

those whose pages actively hyperlink to one another. Despite its modest size, the graph appears asymmetrical (Fig. 3). Most sites issue only a handful of outbound links, whereas a small group functions as broadcasters: n=25 receive two or fewer, and a further n=16 attract no more than eight. At the opposite extreme, three actors form a towering hierarchy of recognition. The organic producers' co-operative "Iris Bio" absorbs ninety-five weighted incoming hyperlinks, more than half of all endorsements circulating in the field, while the magazine "Altreconomia" follows with twenty-seven and the national coordination portal ReteGas with nineteen. In the visual rendering, Iris Bio appears as an oversized disc at the centre. Visibility here is therefore best understood as a collective attribution of authority: local GAS sites treat Iris Bio as the definitive reference for provisioning, Altreconomia as a trusted source of news, and ReteGas as the canonical archive of organisational resources.

If inbound links measure prestige, outward linking measures curatorial labour. The actors who shoulder this task are not the hubs mentioned above, but a handful of mid-sized GAS whose pages point energetically outward. Gas Cortocircuito Flegreo, based in the outskirts of Naples, lists eighteen distinct destinations, followed by Gaspar8 and Gasbo, each with fourteen. Because closeness centrality (the reciprocal of the average shortest path from one node to all others) is calculated on the graph of the outbound paths, these three sites occupy the top positions, with GasCortocircuito Flegreo registering a normalised score of 0.94 and requiring on average fewer than two clicks to reach any other actor. They thus serve as potential digital gateways: a visitor who happens to land on one of their pages could traverse the movement's hyperlink landscape far more efficiently than if they began with the heavyweight hubs. A similar redistribution of importance emerges from the analysis of betweenness centrality (how much a node sits on routes between other pairs). The sites that most often sit on the shortest weighted paths between third parties are ordinary purchasing groups. Their brokerage role stems from giving and receiving links. Thus, attention flows upward through unequal lines of recognition.

Based on this information, we can organize the field into four statistically cohesive blocs (Tab 1). The first and largest cluster, centred on Iris Bio, comprises twenty purchasing groups united by a focus on food provisioning. Their websites predominantly link inward to the cooperative – for price lists, order calendars, and certification documents – but seldom link to one another, reinforcing the star-like network pattern. The second cluster, anchored by Altreconomia, brings together movement media and issue-oriented NGOs such as Greenpeace Italia and Slow Food. Here, linkage is more distributed: media outlets attract many inbound links but reciprocate selectively, weaving advocacy pages, investigative blogs, and campaign platforms into a cohesive discursive sub-public. The third community, smaller and geographically compact, is formed by seven southern GAS whose sites exhibit dense mutual linking while maintaining only two outward ties, both aimed at Rete-Gas. Finally, a bridging cluster central-Italian GAS contains the chief structural brokers (Gas CortoCircuito-Flegreo, Gaspar8, Gasbo and Gas Cascina), positioning as the actors with the highest betweenness value.

In the aggregate, the hyperlink landscape is neither a densely knit commons nor a pure hub-and-spoke system. Instead, it is a hybrid in which symbolic authority is sharply centralised while the practical labour of digital connectivity is diffused among medium-scale GAS.

A further layer consists of the tenuous yet charged interface between the GAS galaxy and broader social-movement organizations (e.g. NoTAV, No TTIP). Their presence indicates that local groups look outward to anchor their everyday practice in wider repertoires of contention. However, these links remain mere endorsements and do not disrupt the network's star-shaped core.

Table 1. Cohesive blocs in the GAS network.

Blocs	Core anchors	Size (Sites)	Link Pattern	Role in the network
Provisioning	Iris Bio	20	Dozens of GAS point for price lists and order forms; no lateral links among the GAS themselves	Concentrates recognition on the main organic producer
Media and advocacy	Altreconomia (with ReteGas as secondary pole)	≈ 20	Media/NGO receive links and reciprocate selectively	Diffuses frames and acts as discursive commons
Regional cohort	No single hub	7	Dense linking inside the group	Reflects a local cohesion; relies on national portal
Bridging bloc	Gas CortoCircuito Flegreo, Gaspar8, Gasbo, Gas Cascina	10	High outbound generosity	Keep the three blocs reachable in two-three clicks

The aggregate topology overall corroborates these observations. Density appears low, yet the average weighted distance between two arbitrary sites is only 2.8 steps, passing through narrow corridors. The directed-graph centralisation index for weighted in-degree stands at 0.71, indicating that symbolic authority is heavily concentrated in just a few landmark nodes. Reciprocity is equally limited: only 5% of all dyadic ties are mutual. The practical consequence is a marked asymmetry in communicative capability. Eccentricity scores make the same point from the opposite angle: while the median actor is at most four weighted steps away from the furthest site, twenty one nodes lie at the very edge of the star and would require five or more transfers to reach certain peers.

5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

5.1. Communication analysis

The challenge of obtaining a census of the GAS that was as accurate as possible was compounded by the nature of the object of study itself. The GAS is an informal phenomenon that is managed autonomously by the individual, with no obligation for authorisation or registration, and no need for an organisational structure or federation to join or depend on. The resultant data set revealed a multifaceted and intricate array of experiences, whose geographical distribution mirrors that of activities more broadly associated with the non-profit sector in Italy (Barbetta, Zamaro and Ecchia 2016). Nevertheless, there is a sense of a perpetually evolving environment, the complexity of which defies comprehensive representation through a faithful snapshot due to the inherently subjective nature of responsible consumption experiences.

These network traits, together with the informal, non-professional involvement of GAS participants, make it especially worthwhile to examine how each group manages its internal operations and conducts external communications – practices that vary considerably from one case to another. In the context of the business world, communication has traditionally been linked to profit. However, it has gradually evolved into a recognised strategic asset, (a status that is still recognised on paper, but often not in terms of investment in resources, budget and expertise). In the realm of associations and volunteering, the role of communication is even more unstable and ancillary, due to the sector's greater economic and organisational instability.

On the one hand, the overall data reveal a low effectiveness of the tools implemented by the groups, as evidenced by the majority of cases in which there is no perceived originality in visual communication aspects or consistency in terms of visual identity. Conversely, a positive relationship has been demonstrated between the effort expended to represent the group's identity through a logo or dedicated communication channels and the potential recognisability of the group externally. Communicating the GAS beyond the group's immediate environment not only serves to promote itself and potentially increases its membership and scope of action – which is not always a priority or objective for members – but is also a thoughtful attempt at self-representation and a useful tool for disseminating the values and practices of responsible consumption that underpin the group's existence. Although a strong commitment to communication often reflects group cohesion – rooted in members' prior activism around responsible consumption or the unique social and cultural history of their locale – it is frequently undermined by amateurism and a lack of technical expertise, which diminishes its overall effectiveness.

Reflecting on the role of communication within solidarity purchasing groups meant observing a commitment on the part of the group in terms of time and resources, an investment that was not deemed to be indispensable for the functioning of the GAS itself. For this reason, it was interesting to understand what kind of groups acted in this sense, the communication tools they utilised, and the forms they adopted.

5.2. Network analysis

A first implication of the findings is that the digital life of the movement reproduces a stratification it disavows in day-to-day practices. While the GAS universe champions horizontal exchange and mutual aid, in the context of our analysis it seems that its hyperlink landscape concentrates symbolic capital in three focal nodes: provisioning (e.g. Iris Bio), framing (Altreconomia), documentation/organization (ReteGas). Thus, there is a notable tension between an egalitarian vision and the inevitable emergence of field effects in which scarce resources are unevenly distributed. First, the mere fact that so many groups choose to point upward rather than laterally generates a de facto hierarchy. The result is a core-periphery structure that naturalises certain actors as unquestioned reference points, allowing the movement digital sphere to crystallise around an unequal economy of attention. On the surface, the reason behind this may appear trivial: every local group, confronted with the practical need to reassure visitors about the reliability of producers, the legality of collective buying or the ethical pedigree of supply chains, does the sensible thing

and points to the most authoritative and professionally maintained resources available. Yet, when hundreds of micro-decisions accumulate over time they generate the macroscopic hierarchy we observe. Framed as a social movement, GAS's digital traces are far from neutral indicators of solidarity; they're the sedimented outcomes of unequal communicative capacities. Consequently, many collectives struggle to reciprocate hyperlinks generously, constrained by scarce resources and an implicit hierarchy of media practices.

As a matter of fact, decentralised movements thrive by multiplying overlapping channels of coordination, succeeding as they assemble and sustain the resources (material goods, specialised skills, organisational infrastructures) that permit collective action (Jenkins 1983). In digitally network phase of social movements, hyperlinks, as symptom of communicative capacity, have become mobilising structures that coordinate attention, lower costs for newcomers and funnel legitimacy to authoritative nodes. Though GAS groups excel at coordinating the practical choreography of weekly deliveries, they often struggle to convey its broader significance to outsiders, relying on a narrative that collective local buying is inherently virtuous. The communicative deficiency revealed by a sparse and unreciprocated hyperlinking may reflect an organisational culture in which logistical efficiency (provisioning) risks to eclipse political signalling. Consequently, each group's website functions as a silo: it efficiently provides members with order schedules but fails to articulate a shared vision of alternative consumption. In this configuration, "freeriding" no longer refers solely to those who collect products – it extends to the abdication of communicative labour itself. A range of activities, such as network coordination or organisational tasks, are less aligned with the enjoyment of responsible consumption or solidarity-based relationships (Hirschman 1982).

The result is a communicative ecology marked by implicit forms of activism, namely practices of resistance enacted in everyday routines but rarely translated into discursive claims that travel beyond the immediate circle. Consequently, while the movement succeeds in coordinating consumption with great efficiency, it may struggle to reshape the public sphere, as it aspires to.

6. CONCLUSION: RESISTING THE MALLS

Resisting the malls entails challenging the dominant retail model – centralized, anonymous, and consumption-driven – by organizing food provisioning around proximity, reciprocity, and a transformative purpose. The evidence from this investigation shows that, even when their online presence is *fragmented and concentrated around a few hubs*, the GAS movement indeed succeed in enacting an everyday alternative to "the mall": relationships of trust with producers, ethics in price formation and collective deliberation for purchase decisions turn distribution into occasions to imagine alternative consumption trajectories. On one hand, the communicative ecology here observed (a few strong hubs in the results of the network analysis) is marked by implicit forms of activism, namely practices of resistance enacted in everyday routines but *rarely translated into discursive claims that travel beyond the immediate circle of activists*. Consequently, while the movement succeeds in coordinating consumption with great efficiency, it may struggle to reshape the public sphere, as it aspires to. Alternatively, this can be seen as a pragmatic approach to daily labour. The logistical routines of GAS – collective order planning, rotational task sharing, and public supplier discussions – are modest yet cumulative acts that foster social and personal accountability, even if they *remain largely invisible* in the communicative sphere.

It is precisely this "under the radar" infrastructure that has lent the movement durability. A mall's competitive advantage rests on scale and spectacle; a GAS thrives on redundancy, local knowledge, and interpersonal obligation. Thus, reflecting on the role of communication within solidarity purchasing groups meant observing a commitment on the part of the group in terms of time and resources, an investment that *was not deemed to be indispensable for the functioning of the GAS itself*. For this reason, it was interesting to understand what kind of groups acted in this sense, the communication tools they utilised, and the forms they adopted. It is therefore pivotal to note that when only a handful of members shoulder the invisible labour that keeps the group coherent, the boundary between active co-producers and passive consumers becomes stark.

For this reason, the behaviour of those who are content with merely purchasing products (freeriding), without contributing to the essential activities necessary for the group's proper functioning – such as maintaining relationships with producers, organizing and exchanging information, or handling external communications – has been commonly referred to in the GAS jargon as "treating the group like a supermarket." The reference to large-scale retail in this type of criticism is revealing. It is significant how the GAS movement is *experienced as a form of resistance* to malls and large-scale organized retail, a resistance to industrialized and concentrated agriculture, as well as to the obsessions of

consumerism, opposing production practices considered unethical, dangerous, and disrespectful of labour rights and the environment.

This study was guided by the *twin challenges* of politicising individual practices and averting their depoliticization (Burnham 2014; De Nardis 2017). The study set out to examine whether sharing practices and networked organizing could collectively prefigure alternative worlds through food activism. Although "acting in a network" remains central – evident in a rich web of intergroup ties and vibrant local purchasing initiatives – these collaborative dynamics still struggle to surface in digital communications. The potential for novel trends in mass consumption (Boström *et al.* 2005) does not invariably result in the transformation of resistance, from an individualistic approach to solutions, into communicative communities.

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Digital Detox Communities as a Form of Resistance to Perpetual Connectedness: The Case of Social Eating

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Abstract. The advent of the Internet and the spread of online communication have represented one of the greatest socio-cultural changes in recent years, also in terms of the dimension of time. While the proliferation of digital spaces and virtual contexts—in which forms of aggregation and social identification processes can be traced—has broadened the range of possible socialization processes for individuals, face-to-face experiences have seen the primacy of the process of constructing intersubjectivity gradually eroded. However, especially in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, there has been a countertrend among some groups of people who have put forward new demands and needs: the reappropriation of face-to-face socialization. The phenomenon – defined as digital detoxification, or purification from social media and the Internet for a temporary period of varying duration—involves a growing community of people around the world across gender, age, and social class (Syvertsen, Enli, 2020; Ansari *et al.* 2024). Digital detox communities are growing throughout the Western world, according to a study by Radtke *et al.* (2021), which found that in the United States in 2020-2021, approximately 15% of the American population searched at least once on search engines for advice or ways to 'disconnect' from the internet, and that during the same period, registrations for apps or communities increased by 75%. It is precisely this new need that has prompted some dating app developers to start designing a new type of app, seeking to develop a hybrid form that combines the need to '*create opportunities for socializing on the digital side*' with the possibility of meeting and connecting with potential friends, partners, and new acquaintances solely and exclusively through face-to-face experiences. This is, therefore, a new frontier for dating apps, which mixes different features and needs to create opportunities to meet and connect through real and typically 'analog' experiences, such as attending exhibitions, concerts, day trips, or cultural events, depending on one's inclinations and passions. A new dating app called Tablo has recently been launched. It is a true social networking app in that, in order to exchange phone numbers and stay in touch, users 'must' participate in a face-to-face social experience, carving out time in their daily schedules and offline lives. The aim of this research was to analyze the motivations, relational modes, and uses of digital space among users registered on the Tablo app, while also highlighting aspects of perception and representation in the imagination of time and relationships with the need for digital detox. To answer the research questions, a mixed methods research experience was conducted, combining different research methodologies: in the first phase, a digital ethnography analysis was carried out, analyzing 300 profiles, interactions, and 'social life' of the community registered on the app; in the second phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 users who regularly use Tablo.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Internet and the expansion of online communication have significantly transformed socio-cultural processes, particularly in relation to the perception and management of time. While the proliferation of digital spaces and virtual contexts -- in which to trace aggregative forms and processes of social identification -- has expanded the range of possible socialization processes of individuals, the role of face-to-face interaction in constructing intersubjectivity has been increasingly eroded. However, especially in the post-pandemic period from Covid-19, there has been a countertrend by some groups of people who have advanced new demands and needs: the reappropriation of face-to-face socialization. The phenomenon – referred to as digital detoxification, or purification from social media and the Internet for a temporary period of varying duration – involves a growing community of people around the world across gender, age, and social class (Syvertsen and Enli, 2020; Ansari *et al.* 2024). "Digital detox" communities are growing throughout the Western world, according to a study by Radtke *et al.* (2021), which found that in the United States in the years 2020-2021 about 15 percent of the U.S. population searched search engines at least once for advice or ways to 'unplug' from the web, and that in the same time frame, memberships in apps or communities increased by 75 percent. It is precisely on this new need that some dating app developers have started a new design, trying to develop a form of hybridization between the need to 'create opportunities for aggregation on the digital side' and the possibility of meeting and connecting with hypothetical friends, partners and new acquaintances only – and exclusively – through face-to-face experience. This represents a new frontier in dating applications, blending diverse functions and users need to create opportunities to meet and connect through real and typically 'analog' experiences such as, for example, attending exhibitions, concerts, out-of-town trips or cultural events according to one's inclinations and passions.

A new dating app, Tablo, has recently emerged, which is a true aggregation app in that to exchange phone contacts and stay in touch, people 'must' participate in a convivial *face-to-face* experience, carving out time in their own organization of the day and *timing* in offline life.

The purpose of this research work was to analyze the motivations, relational modes, and uses of digital space of users subscribed to the 'Tablo' app while also trying to highlight aspects of perception and representation in the imagery of time and relationships with digital detox needs.

In the first part, the theoretical frame of reference will be briefly outlined, which will try to analyze two salient aspects of the process of *social eating* – which is Tabloo's main function – and its dual action: on the one hand, it is a phenomenon that insists on a very important human and social action for the people: the communal consumption of food as an aggregative and social action; a sociological review of the main theories on food and social aggregation around the action of "eating," theories that would resist social and cultural changes, will be presented; on the other hand, theoretical coordinates on the process of *digital detox* will be presented, with a cross-disciplinary analysis of the different disciplines that address the topic.

In the second part, data and results of a mixed methods research experience, conducted by combining different research methodologies, will be presented to answer the research questions: in a first phase, a digital ethnography analysis was conducted by analyzing the profiles, interactions, and "social life" of the community registered on the app; in a second phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 users who regularly use Tablo.

1. FOOD AS A SOCIAL FACT: SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE FUNCTION OF COLLECTIVE MEAL CONSUMPTION

The need to obtain food, and the preparation and consumption of meals have always been fertile ground for different human disciplines to study the processes of aggregation, socialization and transmission of material and intangible cultural aspects.

Anthropology, history and sociology have dialogued to fully understand the social and cultural function of communal meal eating and have provided interesting theories and interpretations, some of them resisting cultural-historical changes and the progressive modernization of structural aspects of society.

Emilé Durhkeim (1912) devotes extensive discussion in his studies and reflections to the social function of food and the communal consumption of the meal.

In the book *"The Elementary Forms of Religious Life",* he identifies religion and aggregative religious rituals as the social framework within which to initiate

and consolidate processes of "mutual solidarity" among individuals and members of a specific community, and among the various social actions, food would be a key vehicle for the aggregative function of communities, from the small family-organized community to large cultural communities.

In fact, for the French author, the collective preparation and consumption of food would represent a fundamental act in creating a twofold bond between individuals: on the one hand in the action of "eating together" a process of "intimacy" would be created between members, the apparent individual and social distances would tend to shrink, increasing the process of "socialization" that is fundamental for the construction of a recognizable and internalizable collective identity.

Durkheim did not address the process of food preparation and consumption in everyday life, in its secular aspects, but his insights are also superimposable on the convivial situations of social microsystems such as family, school, peer group and institutional contexts. For the author, therefore, food and the symbolic universe revolving around the collective consumption of food have a function in the construction and regulation of social norms, norms that are identified, accepted, consolidated and shared.

The social and conviviality aspect of food preparation and consumption is clearly identified by the thought of Georg Simmel, who in his essay *Sociabilitat* ([1910] 1977) defines food as a fundamental tool for the socialization process of individuals, consolidated by "conviviality". For the author, the collective consumption of food, over the centuries has gradually eroded the functions of "necessity and subsistence" to replace a function of "constructing space for social interaction".

Simmel in the process of collective food preparation and consumption identifies two peculiar aspects: the "content" and the "form": the former concerns the set of structural aspects of food (food, nutrients, assembly of the same, preparation and recipes); the latter refers, on the other hand, to the social and cultural aspects that insist on conviviality and sharing, e.g., the way food is set, presented, the spatial organization of the table and diners.

Nobert Elias, on the other hand, sees the evolution of how food is prepared and consumed as the "mirror" of the progress and civilization of human beings. In fact, in his volume *The Process of Civilization* (1939), the author outlines a clear correspondence between the achievements of humankind with changes in the choice of food, the evolution of combinations between elements and the way meals are presented especially in social and ceremonial moments.

Anthropologist Levi-Strauss in 1966 emphasizes a central aspect of Elias' analysis by focusing on the symbolic and cultural transition of food from raw to cooked: the author in his theory termed *culinary structuralism* defines cooked food as the evolution of modernity in all spheres of human society, definitively breaking down the rigid separations between social classes, and cooked food also becomes a form of "accuracy" in the human action of food preparation, also complexifying the social ritual of the communal meal, which also assumes a social role and structure of "regulator of time". Indeed, Levi-Strauss highlights how in modern society through the cyclical nature of meals individuals can organize the temporal function of human activities.

In 1979 Bourdieu, in his work *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, devotes reflective space to the topic of taste, food consumption and the cultural processes of food.

According to the French author, taste is not personal or individual but is the result of a complex social process and often reflect "the individual's social position in the social structure". As with other distinguishing factors, such as high culture, art and music, food would also contribute to the consolidation of social distinction between classes, creating social differentiations both in food selection and in fashions and modes of conviviality and social integration.

Transposing the key concept of Pierre Bourdieu's theory, the *habitus*, for the author there would also exist a "food habitus" that is consolidated through family socialization (in the first instance), and extended social experiences (in the second instance).

Bourdieu also devotes reflection to the symbolic and social space of the table, to the social roles reflected within the interactive context of food conviviality.

For the author, it is crucial to distinguish between the different social actors present at the table: those who serve, those who are served, those who speak, those who listen, those who choose the menu, and those who congregate. These dynamics reflect, for Bourdieu, the social status of individuals, the relational modes, but above all would reflect the field of symbolic struggle, typical of the social classes in mainstream society.

The process of globalization and modernization of social reality have profoundly changed these aspects of the social and cultural process of food and communal meal eating.

While it is true that the "table" remains one of the main symbolic and social interaction spaces where social meaning and sharing can be constructed, the modes of preparation and content aspects of food have transformed radically: the proliferation of *fast food* or "*easy*"

conviviality experiences-such as apericena and finger food-follow a need for individualization and immediacy, typical of contemporary society (Meglio 2017).

The digitization of society and the advent of social media have contributed to the transformation of the relationship between food and the community, reinforcing a true *long-time* interest-that is, interest extended beyond the need to feed oneself-and creating new forms of social gathering through the vehicle of food (De Solier 2013).

On social media, for example, the last few years have seen a proliferation of IG and Tik Tok profiles that have food, recipe sharing, healthy cooking or ethnic recipes as their "*core narrative*".

This phenomenon is known as "digital food-scape" i.e., virtual spaces where food is shared, narrated, immortalized, commented on, interacted with, and joined together in communities that have as their main narrative and identity theme a food style, passion for food or a specific traditional cuisine (Johnston and Goodman 2015).

Lupton (2017) pointed out that within the digital foodscape, a need has arisen over the years to create experiences of "hybrid interactions" that is, to associate digital sharing experiences of food-related content with the use of this aggregative expedient to organize physical and offline experiences such as events, workshops, and tastings.

2. IN SEARCH OF "DISCONNECTION": THE CONCEPT OF DIGITAL DETOX

The digitization of society has profoundly changed the concept of space and time, giving people access to the ability to be always connected and in all places.

While digital hyperconnectedness has made it possible to create new possible relational exchanges, virtual contexts in which to trace possibilities and experiences of self-determination, identity construction and possibilities to expand the spheres of interaction, it has also had negative effects on the perception of individuals' psycho-physical and social well-being, generating new forms of social exclusion, psychological malaise, pathologies and health-related issues (Brown and Kuss 2020).

In a 2015 Markowertz survey, replicated by Amez and Beart in 2020, time spent using digital devices, connecting and accessing social media increased from 70 minutes in 2015 to 360 minutes in 2020.

This prolonged exposure to the use of digital devices represents a new perspective of analysis with respect to the individual's all-round health issues: a) from a psy-

chological perspective; b) from a physical perspective; and c) from a social perspective.

From a psychological perspective, several studies have tried to highlight the psychological effects of exposure-in a long-term perspective-to digital devices and social media by identifying several negative side effects on sleep, mood, and stress (Leverson *et al.* 2016; Wilcockson *et al.* 2019; Hunt *et al.* 2018; Vally and D'Souza 2019).

Leverson and collaborators (2016) analyzed the quality and quantity of sleep of 1732 U.S. college students in relation to their habits with respect to the use of social media and digital devices in the six hours preceding the falling asleep phase, showing that students who stopped using digital devices earlier than others had different quality and quantity of sleep hours than the same students who also used the devices prolongedly in the stages immediately preceding the falling asleep phase. The quantitative differences were reflected in a greater number of hours of sleep of people who stopped using digital devices 2 hours before falling asleep (about 45 percent) than students who continued to use the same devices until sleep; from the perspective of sleep quality, the authors showed that students who stopped using digital devices before others had fewer nightmares, less fragmented sleep and a greater feeling of refreshment upon awakening, this difference is attested in a percentage of 30 percent.

Regarding the effects of prolonged use of digital devices and mood and anxiety disorders, important contributions have been the studies by Wilcockson *et al.* (2019) and Hunt *et al.* (2018)

Hunt *et al.* (2018) directed their focus of analysis on anxiety disorder in relation to digital hyperconnectedness. The authors investigated the anxiety levels of 143 individuals in relation to hours of digital device use and type of use, showing that the level and type of anxiety correlated with the hours and types of digital device use, as the hours varied the level of anxiety was significantly higher, and also the type of anxiety (specific or generalized) correlated with the use of digital devices on the performance side, i.e., for work, study, and academic purposes.

Wilcockson and coworkers (2019) also conducted a study to empirically measure the levels of depression, alertness, emotional lability, and cyclomia of 49 psychology students in relation to the number of hours and habits with respect to digital device use, social media access, and other forms of connection in cyberspace. The results, in line with Hunt *et al.* (2018), showed that alertness and emotional lability were directly proportional to the number of hours of use and the type of use: significant differences were found when the number of hours

spent in front of devices exceeded two hours, while negative effects on emotionality were shown when use was related to performance (work, study, writing) versus leisure (posting photos, viewing other digital content, interacting with other users, etc.).

Perceived stress level would also seem to be a parameter strongly correlated with digital hyperconnectedness, Vally and D'Souza (2019) conducted a study of 68 people, analyzing stress levels under conditions of usual use of digital devices and re-measuring the same stress levels (through a purpose-built survey) after a 4-week period of use restriction. The authors found that perceived stress levels systematically dropped in all participants by about 40 percent with a general improvement in other dimensions also considered important such as hours and quality of sleep, anxiety levels, and irritability.

But where the greatest impact of digital hyperconnectedness can be highlighted is on the social side, on socialization processes and forms of social isolation.

Several studies (Brown and Kuss 2020; Stieger and Lewertz, 2018; Hunt *et al.* 2018, Coppola and Masullo 2021) have shown that excessive exposure to digital devices can have effects on socialization in terms of the need to be connected, voluntary social self-isolation, and social support and pressure.

Brown and Kuss (2020) tried to study from a social point of view the impact of digital hyperconnection on the need to be connected through social media by involving 45 people aged 18-45, analyzing through a self-report questionnaire, in which participants had to "map" digital consumption habits (in quantitative and qualitative terms) in relation to different dimensions such as sociability, the need to check social and to be connected with other people. The scholars found that younger people (cohort 18-29 years old) had greater needs for digital hyperconnection and fear of being "isolated" (+35%) than people in the 30-45 age cohort.

Hunt et al (2018) and Stieger and Lewetz (2018) investigated the level of social support and social pressure in relation to digital hyperconnectedness. Hunt et al (2018), specifically, conducted a study to investigate the *social support perceived* by 124 college students in relation to digital consumption and social media connection and found that people who are hyper-connected feel they have more support in quantitative terms (about 32 percent) than people who use si social media more sporadically, an aspect that is reversed when analyzing the quality of the support network, which is considered more robust by "occasional" social media users. Stieger and Lewertz (2018), on the other hand, analyzed the social pressure perceived by 230 college students in rela-

tion to the way they use social media and digital devices, highlighting how often the digital device can be an escape route from social pressure, a pressure perceived to be greater by younger people (cohort 18-25 +45%).

The possible correlation between hyperconnection and voluntary social self-isolation – or the hikikomori effect – was also highlighted by Coppola and Masullo (2021) in a netnographic work conducted on Italian online community – Hikikomori Italia – highlighting how hyperconnection would actually represent a "digital migration" of offline socialization without a real perception of malaise on the part of some individuals, who would see, instead, online socialization as a resource to counteract the social pressure and phobia of face-to-face contexts.

In relation to the phenomenon of digital hyperconnection recently the term *digital detox* has taken hold in Western countries (primarily in the United States and Canada), that is, the need to "detoxify" for a varying period of time from the use of digital devices and from social media (in this case we can also speak of Social Detox) in order to "rediscover face-to-face socialization" (Felix and Dean 2012).

Following the *Hierarchical Computer-mediated Communication Taxonomy* (Meier, Reinecke, 2020), the concept of digital detox should not be limited exclusively to a period of abstaining from the use of electronic devices. On the contrary, it should also include intervals in which people avoid using (a) specific applications (such as social media), (b) branded media (e.g., logging off Facebook), (c) functions (such as chats), (d) interactions (e.g., active use of WhatsApp), and (e) messages (e.g., voice messages).

Meier and Reinecke (2020) point out that distinguishing these "six levels of detoxification" is critical to understanding different aspects of electronic media use in a systematic way.

In this perspective, the emerging concept of "digital well-being" or a state of psychophysical balance that arises from the healthy and conscious use of digital technologies is introduced.

An example of an organized digital detox community is the case of *Camp Groudend*, a summer camp for adults in the Mendocino Forest, California in the United States, which offered its guests the opportunity to totally disconnect from technology and actively participate in face-to-face experiences such as yoga, writing, hiking and art workshops. Sutton (2019) conducted an ethnographic study of the Camp Grounded community and found 360-degree well-being effects on dimensions such as: a) desire for technology renunciation; b) creations of temporary identities divorced from references to everyday life identities and digital identities found on social

media; c) rediscovery of play and recreational experiences and aspects of one's creativity; and d) enhancement of social and communication skills.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The Tablo app was created in the spring of 2019 with the aim of creating a "bridge" between classic apps for dating, i.e., dating apps for romantic and sexual encounters, and the ability to socialize through one of the main activities: convivial meals.

Tablo is an app included in a list provided by the official Facebook group of the Italian Digital Detox community. For this reason, it has been selected as the analysis community for the following research project.

Since 2022-the year from which pandemic restrictions have been progressively reduced until they have been totally abandoned-the number of downloads of the app has grown with an annual average of +150% until it has spread like wildfire especially in large Italian cities.

How does Tablo work? For one thing – like almost all apps for dating – it works on both iOS and Android, and to sign up you need to create a particularly detailed profile, in which you need to make explicit your gender, age, residence, profession or field of interest, you must, in addition, provide a photo that is considered authentic and a detailed biographical sheet in which you list interests, hobbies, passions and psychological and character traits.

In the second stage, based on residency or the possibility of geolocation in the case of travel or commuting, a series of specific sections appear on the home page offering nearby dining experiences to which one can add oneself and subscribe, on a special map, marked with yellow-colored pointers (in line with the social color of the Tablo brand).

By clicking on one of the yellow pins on the map, you can find out the date, time and all the details of the appointment: how many people can be invited, what age group is involved and the profiles of those who have already joined the experiment. Also available is a list view, with appointments in order of distance from your geographical location, and also a handy agenda function where you can keep an eye on all the events, past and future, that you have decided to attend.

The Tablo app also gives you the ability to "organize" your own event and set the "selection criteria" for participants in your experience.

Like many other apps, it is possible to "review" the experience both in terms of the "location," i.e., the restaurant, bar, or venue where the experience was organized, and in terms of the "diners" giving feedback on the participant's enjoyment and reliability.

Users, thus, can play an active role in participating in and creating events and build and consolidate their own "credibility" as Tablo users.

Tablo would, therefore, also represent an important opportunity for commercial establishments that host experiences, as through subscribing to the app they have the chance to advertise themselves and make themselves known perhaps to potential users otherwise not intercepted by other communication channels.

Based on the above theoretical considerations, the present research aims to analyze and understand the motivations, relational modes, and uses of digital space of users subscribed to the 'Tablo' app, an "app for experience"-that is, an app that aims to bring face-to-face strangers together around a table for dinner or also trying to highlight the aspects of perception and representation in the imaginary of time and relationships with digital detox needs, as the Tablo app falls within the apps considered "digital foodscape."

Specifically, the following *research questions* were formulated:

RQ1: What are the users who decide to sign up for the Tablo app? What are the sociodemographic characteristics?

RQ2: What is the information, one's own characteristics expressed in the submission of one's membership bio? And what characteristics do you look for in other users to create a possible match?

RQ3: What are the motivations for enrolling in Tablo? Are there peculiar differences in relation to certain variables such as gender and age?

RQ4: How do Tablo's registered users view the digital detox phenomenon?

Aware of methodological limitations, including sampling and non-representativeness of the population, taking into account the complexity of the composite universe of app users taken into analysis, it was decided to use a mix methods approach: in a first phase, a digital ethnography study was conducted (Kozinets and 2010; Masullo *et al.* 2020): which involved a covert observation of 300 profiles of users subscribed to the Tablo app, selected according to a convenience sampling procedure based on a reasoned choice to balance the sample in relation to certain dimensions such as gender, age, and geographic territoriality; in a second phase, a qualitative survey was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 30 people (15 women and 15 men) who use Tablo, sampling was done through spontaneous expression of interest after the publication of posts exposing the research on different Facebook groups in some Ital-

ian cities, specifically Milan, Naples, Rome, Turin and Palermo[1] (Coppola and Masullo 2023).

The covert digital ethnography analysis involved the use of an observation grid examining age, residence, biographical presentation, psychological and character traits made explicit in bios, interests in experiences that could be shared, and motivation for enrollment (if any).

3.1. analysis of tablo app users: between the need to "disconnect" and the "complexification" of socialization

300 profiles of users enrolled in the Tablo app in the January-February 2025 bimester until the completion of 300 profiles were analyzed, using as selection criteria: date of enrollment, gender (considered male, female) age (considering 4 different age groups proposed by the app 18-25 years, 26-35 years, 36-45 years, over 45) and biographical presentation, explicit psychological and character traits, interests in experiences to be able to share, motivation for enrollment, if any, were also analyzed[2].

Table 1 shows data from the analysis of the 300 Tablo user profiles surveyed by analyzing gender, age, education, dominant interest elabor, data are shown for the item that reached the 5% mark. It is important to note that interests are selected hierarchically, from most to least relevant, in a drop-down menu.

Regarding gender, 61.7 percent of the users were female, compared to 38.3 percent of the male gender, while the prevailing age group is the 24-35-year-old cohort (38.3 percent) followed by the 36-45-year-old cohort (28.6 percent) while underrepresented would be the Over 45 cohort (12.1 percent).

Analyzing the data on users' education, 69.6 percent of users who choose to enroll from the Tablo app are college graduates (41 percent bachelor's degree and 28.6 percent Master's degree) while only 2 percent of enrollees hold a high school diploma.

Of interest is the analysis of the dominant interest expressed at the time of enrollment (it is possible to hierarchize interests by entering 5 areas of different intensities) and the main motivation that prompted users to enroll in an app such as Tablo (again, it is possible to express a preference of 3 options, hierarchizing the position according to the sequence chosen).

As for the dominant interest, 17% of the users list Psychology as their first interest, followed at 15.3% by Food and Good Food and 14.3% by Animals and

Table 1. Analysis of Tablo users' profile.

	Cases	%
Genus		
Male	115	38,3
Femminle	185	61.7
Total	300	100
Age groups		
18-25 years old	63	21
26-35 years old	115	38,3
36-45 years old	86	28,6
Over 45	36	12,1
Total	300	100
Training		
Junior high school	6	2
Diploma	56	18,6
Bachelor's degree	123	41
Master's Degree	86	28,6
Post graduation	29	9,8
Total	300	100
Dominant interest expressed in the profile		
Psychology	51	17
History	24	8
Animals and nature	43	14,3
Informatics	40	13,3
Theater and exhibitions	33	11
Cinema	35	11,6
Religion and esotericism	14	4.6
Food and good cooking	43	15,3
More	16	4,9
Total	300	100
Main motivation for enrolling in Tablo.		
Getting to know new people	105	35
Finding people with greater compatibility	56	18,6
Fighting boredom	42	14
Fighting loneliness	34	11,4
Disconnection from social media	30	10
More	33	11
Total	300	100

Source: Author' elaboration.

Nature. The data could be explained in relation to the type of app in that Tablo is a social eating, food and cooking would represent the main topics of aggregation; the choice of Psychology and the world of nature as topics of interest that may represent aggregative drives is in line with recent studies in the literature that have mapped the topics and main interests selected by users when signing up for dating apps (find citations).

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[1] The Tablo app is mainly used in large cities and is still little used by businesses in inland areas or small towns.
[2] The phenomenon, which is still poorly studied in Italy, lacks quantitative data to support comparative analysis.

Table 2. Analysis related to the dominant interest in relation of gender.

Dominant Interest	Males	%	Females	%	Total
Psychology	5	4,3	46	24,8	51
History	7	6	17	9,1	24
Animals and nature	25	21,7	18	9,7	43
Informatics	25	21,7	15	8,5	40
Theater and exhibitions	13	11,3	20	10,8	33
Cinema	15	13	20	10,8	35
Religion and esotericism	3	2,6	11	5,9	14
Food and good cooking	12	10,4	31	16,7	43
More	10	9	7	3,7	16
Total	115	100	185	100	300

Source: Author' elaboration.

Further analysis related the dominant interest expressed at the time of enrollment in the Tablo app in relation to two variables: gender and age (Tables 2 and 3).

The dominant interests selected by men are "Computer Science" and "Animals and Nature" with 21.7 percent, much more detached are the other choices such as Food and Good Cooking (10.4 percent) and Theater and Exhibitions (11.3 percent); women prefer Psychology which was chosen as the main interest by almost a quarter of the sample (24.8 percent) followed by Food and Good Cooking (16.7 percent).

The data show an interest in Psychology among younger 18–25-year-olds (25.3%) and in the Over 45s (25%) while Computer Science is chosen by users aged 18-25 by 17.4% and 15.6% in the 26-35 age group. Interest in Animals and Nature, on the other hand, is one of the predominant choices in the 36-45 age group with 17.4%.

Analyzing, on the other hand, the main motivation for users to sign up for an app for social eating, it is interesting to note that 18.6 percent report the need to set the compatibility level of new acquaintances more closely through an app that has as its algorithmic function precisely that of proposing events on two basic criteria: geolocation and compatibility of expressed interests (Castro and Barrada 2020).

Also interesting is the motivation for disconnection expressed by 10 percent of the users: as we will see from the analysis of the interviews and experience stories of people who regularly use Tablo to meet new people, the choice to use social eating comes precisely from the need to intercept experiences that for a "lapse of time" allows face-to-face socialization and "disconnects" from social and cyberspace.

The reasons for enrollment in the Tablo app were also analyzed in relation to the gender and age variables (Tables 4 and 5)

Analyzing the data on the "User Compatibility" motivation, 24.3% of male users choose to sign up for a social eating app to refine and enhance compatibility with other users, this finding would be interesting as the app presents a very precise algorithmic table proposal technique on interest compatibility analysis, the motivation on user compatibility drops to 15.1% for female users, who instead choose to sign up for the Tablo app to combat loneliness and boredom in 24.7% of cases (aggregate figure): for women, the app can be a way to track down new spaces to meet people but especially to intercept activities to break the daily routine.

Comparing the data of the motivations "Compatibility of users" in relation to the distrubution by age groups, it is interesting to observe that the Over 45s indicate as their main motivation for signing up for the app precisely the possibility of intercepting people who are more similar in terms of general interests, a motivation also shared by the 18–25-year-olds (20.6%).

Table 3. Analysis related to the dominant interest in relation of age.

Dominant Interest	18-25	%	26-35	%	36-45	%	Over 45	%	Total
Psychology	16	25,3	15	13	11	12,7	9	25	51
History	3	4,7	8	6,9	10	11,6	3	8,3	24
Animals and nature	9	14,2	15	13	15	17,4	4	11,1	43
Informatics	11	17,4	18	15,6	7	8,1	4	11,1	40
Theater and exhibitions	3	4,7	16	13,9	11	12,7	3	8,3	33
Cinema	4	6,3	18	15,6	8	9,3	5	13,8	35
Religion and esotericism	2	3,1	5	4,3	5	5,8	2	5,8	14
Food and good cooking	10	15,8	12	10,4	18	20,9	3	8,3	43
More	5	8,5	8	7,3	1	1,5	3	8,3	14
Total	63	100	115	100	86	100	36	100	300

Source: Author' elaboration.

Table 4. Analysis related to the motivations in relation of gender.

Reason for enrolling in the Tablo app	Males	%	Females	%	Total
Getting to know new people	45	39,1	60	32,4	105
Finding people with greater compatibility	28	24,3	28	15,1	56
Fighting boredom	10	8,6	32	17,2	42
Fighting loneliness	9	7,8	25	13,5	34
Disconnection from social media	15	13	15	8,1	30
More	8	7,2	25	13,7	33
Total	115	100	185	100	300

Source: Author' elaboration.

Table 5. Analysis related to the motivations in relation of age.

Reason for enrolling in the Tablo app	18-25	%	26-35	%	36-45	%	Over 45	%	Total
Getting to know new people	20	31,7	45	39,1	30	34,8	10	27,7	105
Finding people with greater compatibility	13	20,6	18	15,6	15	17,4	10	27,7	56
Fighting boredom	10	15,8	18	15,6	11	12,7	3	8,3	42
Fighting loneliness	8	12,9	15	13	10	11,6	1	2,7	34
Disconnection from social media	6	9,5	7	6	12	13,9	5	13,8	30
More	6	9,5	12	10,7	8	9,6	7	19,8	33
Total	63	100	115	100	86	100	36	100	300

Source: Author' elaboration.

The data on the motivation "detoxification" i.e., Disconnection from social media was given as the main motivation by 15% of male users and 8.1% of female users, while the highest percentages when analyzing the data disaggregated by age are 13.9% of the 36–45-year-old cohort and 13.8% of the Over 45 users.

From the analysis of the data, then, it could be hypothesized that, beyond the main underlying motivation for using apps for dating-that is, to meet new people-the other main motivations that direct users to sign up for a social eating app are mainly two: on the one hand the complexification of the socialization process, enhancing as best as possible the possibility of intercepting users with a high compatibility of interests, skimming all other users who from the analysis of the profiles would seem distant in terms of affinity, this process of skimming and selection is enabled by several functions provided by the algorithmic function of the Tablo app; on the other hand the idea of sharing a lunch, a dinner, of conviviality in presence with other people allows a – albeit momentary and situational – disconnection from social and a face-to-face acquaintance experience.

3.2. The semi-structured interviews with tablo users: gender scripts and disconnection strategies

In order to answer the research questions and to appreciate qualitative aspects not detectable by profile analysis, in a second phase of the research project, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 (15 men and 15 women) people who are registered and regularly use the Tablo app.

Sampling was done through spontaneous expression of interest, following the publication of posts describing the research on several Facebook groups belonging to various Italian cities, particularly Milan, Naples, Rome, Turin, and Palermo.

Table 6 shows the data for the 30 participants in the second phase of the research.

The semi-structured interview explored several aspects relevant to the research, including: (a) users' motivations for signing up for the Tablo app; (b) media consumption habits, with a focus on the frequency of app use and the regularity with which face-to-face experiences are concluded; (c) users' lived experiences and feedback, with a focus on any differences related to gender, age, and geographic area of residence; (d) perceptions of safety and, at the same time, risk associated with using an app that promotes live encounters with stran-

Table 6. Socio-demographic aspects of participants.

City	Genus	Age	Partial by gender	Total City
Rome	Female	24,28,35	3	
	Male	27,22,38	3	6
Milan	Female	25,27,45	3	
	Male	32,33,55	3	6
Naples	Female	30,34,23	3	
	Male	25,28,39	3	6
Turin	Female	21,25,33	3	
	Male	23,29,38	3	6
Palermo	Female	28,29,36	3	
	Male	33,38,41	3	6
Subtotal by gender	Female	15		
	Male	15		
GRAND TOTAL				30

Source: Author' elaboration.

gers; and (e) views on the concept of digital detoxification and the need for disconnection, analyzed in light of lived experiences through Tablo.

Regarding the motivations that prompted the interjected users to sign up for and use Tablo we can – in line with the results of the analysis of the 300 user profiles in section 3.1 – identify two main motivations: 1) the need to intercept new spaces of socialization with greater accuracy than the compatibility of interests of other users; 2) being able to experience situations and aggregative moments that represent activities of "disconnection" from social media and digital tools, the enhancement of face-to-face experiences.

The following excerpt highlights the first point, which is the search for compatibility of interests among users:

I think Tablo is really an app unlike any other. You can find theme nights, find new people near you and then absolutely the people you meet are interesting and similar to you! I personally before I sign up for a table I look at the profiles of the people already signed up, but it tends to be that the app offers me tables set up already with my compatibility, I'm really glad I can have signed up and I do at least one table a week, yes at least one... (user, male, 38, Rome).

The quest for disconnection is reported by many interviewed users, who through the experience of face-to-face lunch and dinner and the various activities offered by Tablo experience the feeling of "taking a break from the social world." The interview excerpts report the experiences of the two users who enphaphasize how Tablo is a "social detox app."

Tablo is a different app, it's not like Tinder or Meetic, that is, you don't use it to find someone to date or get engaged, or rather not right away. What I like about Tablo is that it gives you the opportunity to meet people very similar to you and then you have to to write to these people meet them live first. It feels like a different activity from the others, and like getting rid of chats and social for a few hours, not all apps allow you to do activities (user, woman, 27, Milan).

What interests me about Tablo is having experiences outside social, I am 33 years old and have lived in Turin for several years. My friendships have thinned out over time due to various needs; I am single and can no longer go out with my historic friends who are now either married or with children or from other parts of the world. Tablo has given me opportunities to meet new people and make friends easily, with people who are very compatible with me. Food is a passion of mine and so I must say it was very easy. Can Tablo be considered a detoxification activity? Yes absolutely. For two/three hours you forget about the phone, and you feel reconnected with the world (user, woman, 33, Turin).

Patterns of use, motivations, and perceptions of safety and risk vary in relation to gender, creating actual "gender scripts" that users would enact both as a form of socialization and as a mode of support and social networking with other people of the same gender, a phenomenon present especially in the female gender.

From the perspective of usage patterns, the majority of women who use the Tablo app is to meet highly compatible people but mostly to create aggregative and social spaces to make new friends, especially female ones; knowing a possible partner would seem to be in the background, a consequence of the experiences not the main motivation, an aspect that would instead still be very central in the choices of enrollment, usage and experience-seeking for men, albeit with a level of complexification of compatibility of interests.

The experiences of two users, a 38-year-old man from Palermo and a 34-year-old woman from Naples clarify these two different ways of using Tablo:

I have to be honest, yes ... okay sure one of the first things I think about when I sign up for a table is if there are women and if I can find a girl among them or otherwise an experience. Eh yes ... we are men (laughs) ... of course it's not as sleazy as Tinder or other dating apps, and then it's not a one-on-one meeting ... there are other people ... I mean ... I don't know if you get it, you have to be a serious person. I like it though because they sign up all smart women... (user, man, 38, Palermo).

My main motivation for using Tablo is to meet people, mostly friends. It is honestly not the app for meeting men or having dates, if I need to meet a man I try other apps. For

me it is an additional tool to fight loneliness, in recent years I always feel very lonely and Tablo, like other apps, can serve to alleviate this sense of loneliness that often attaches me, especially on weekends (user, woman, 34, Naples).

Women, moreover, for a mode of safety and security about the experience to be had put in place real "protection" strategies based on specific participant parameters before they sign up for the table. First, many women interviewed pointed out that the ratio of men to women enrolled at the table must be equal or at an advantage for women, users would not enroll in male-dominated tables, and another parameter they take into consideration is the age range, preferring the 25-45 age cohort.

The following two interview excerpts, from a 25-year-old woman from Milan and a 28-year-old woman from Rome report their respective ways of protecting themselves before signing up for a table on Tablo:

Before I sign up for a table I put some protective strategies in place, that is, I look carefully at how the table is composed: first I see how many women there are, I never sign up for tables with a majority of men, and if during the day the initial number of women goes down, I usually unsubscribe. Another thing I look at the age, if too small and if too old I don't sign up. Then of course there are also protective behaviors that I also put in place during the evening, I always dress very casual and unprovocative, and honestly, I don't drink, I prefer to stay clear-headed. So far I have never had any negative experiences, but you never know. Oh I forgot, I never sit between two men at the table, I always choose a seat next to another woman (user, woman, 25, Milan).

I always have a lot of anxiety when I go to a Tablo table. I look at who the participants are, I look at the interests, I look at the profiles of the other women, and I also look at the scores of the tables that the other users participated in, in short I profile the profiles! (laughs). I think women necessarily have to protect themselves, with what you hear around, after all, it's still a large meeting between strangers! (user, female, 28, Rome).

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS. DIGITAL FOODSCAPE, DIGITAL DETOX, AND GENDER SCRIPTS

Several authors, such as Morozov (2013) and Zuboff (2019), consider digital detoxification to be an elitist phenomenon that affects only certain social categories and can be used by powerful agencies and media outlets to distract the masses from current issues and public debate.

However, the phenomenon of digital detox is affecting more and more social categories, highlighting, con-trary to the "elitist" position, that it cuts across all social categories and everyday human experiences.

As observed by Lupton (2017), the digitization of contemporary society and the spread of social media have also influenced the experience of food, the sharing of culinary interests, and the social experience related to food.

Lupton proposed the concept of the digital foodscape, emphasizing how this phenomenon, which was created to provide a virtual social space for food lovers, has over time captured the interest and needs of digital detox advocates, creating "hybridizations" in the media consumption of the digital foodscape. Pages on Instagram, TikTok, or specific apps can now also be used to organize live events, with the aim of "disconnecting" from virtuality.

The Tablo app, analyzed in the present research paper, represents an ideal app for the hybridized digital foodscape proposed by Lupton: it is installed mainly to meet new people, to refine the matching of common interests and compatibility of profiles between users, and to intercept experiences and events related to one's interest or social status. The need for disconnection is one of the motivations for users to install the Tablo app, reflecting a desire to experience situations in which to interact "live," temporarily detaching themselves from virtuality and "web-mediated" interactions.

As Bourdieu (1979) argues in his theory of social distinction, food and its aggregative modes also reflect differences in social status. It has been possible to observe that Tablo is predominantly used by people with an upper-middle socio-cultural level, a high level of open-mindedness and a high compatibility of common interests.

Finally, a specific gender "grammar" emerged from the research experience, a real behavioral and social script related to gender difference (Simon and Gagnon 1995). Women use the Tablo app to meet new people, regardless of gender, but they are particularly attentive to the composition of the table and the experience. They put in place "protective" strategies to avoid dangerous situations, including highlighting solidarity practices with other users and sharing reviews and comments about inappropriate or unfriendly behavior toward the female gender.

In Italy, digital detox is still a long way from the American model, which involves real face-to-face experiences without necessarily going through a web-mediated selection process.

However, future research could focus not only on analyzing digital foodscape experiences – delving deeper into gender dynamics and trying to extend the analysis of gender scripts to non-conforming identities – but also

on "pure digital detox" experiences, i.e., exclusively "net-free" experiences.

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Alternative Tourism and Platform Cooperativism: The Resistance Practices of Abruzzo's Community-based Cooperatives

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Abstract. The article presents the results of an action research project carried out in Abruzzo, a region in southern Italy characterized by high socio-economic marginalization. Eight community-based cooperatives active in alternative tourism and local services participated in the co-design of a digital mock-up of a platform that reflects their values and practices. The experience is analyzed as a form of resistance to the "hit-and-run" tourism promoted by mainstream platforms such as AirBnB and Booking. The theoretical framework draws upon studies on the platformization of tourism and the resulting socio-cultural transformations, as well as literature on alternative tourism and platform cooperativism. Inductively, it also integrates studies on community resistance practices and commoning actions. The methodological framework is based on digital co-design as a qualitative research method with a sociological vocation. The results show that the co-designed platform, *AbiTerrò*, has fostered the formation – albeit complex and not without tensions – of a collective identity among the cooperatives, which have thus positioned themselves as a community of resistance, even in the digital sphere, to the dominant tourism model enabled by mainstream platforms. Compared to the latter, the cooperatives adopt both oppositional and propositional practices and positions, which are immediately translated into the digital design of AbiTerrò.

Keywords: Communities of Resistance, Alternative Tourism, Platform Cooperativism, Digital Tourism, Design Sociology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Overtourism, conceptualized as the negative experience of both residents and visitors resulting from increased tourist flows and the insufficient carry-

ing capacity of destinations (Dodds and Butler 2019), has become a pressing issue – particularly in urban contexts where mass tourism affects the identity of cities and the well-being of local communities. This phenomenon has been further intensified by digital platforms such as Airbnb and Booking (Nilsson 2020). The resulting influx has sparked growing discontent among residents, leading to protests both in physical spaces and online forums (Milano, Novelli and Russo 2024).

However, in rural or semi-urban settings, alternative tourism models have emerged, promoting slow, responsible, and community-centered hospitality (Giampiccoli and Saayman 2014). The case of Abruzzo, a southern Italian region with high socio-economic marginality, particularly in its mountainous inland areas (Vendemmia, Pucci and Beria 2021), is revelatory. It hosts multiple networks of community-based cooperatives that protect the territory and foster social cohesion while attracting what Butcher (2003) defines as "moral tourists", i.e., guests who care about their impact on local economies and whose travel choices are gestures of lifestyle politics. This is why we embarked on a digital co-design process with some of these Abruzzo cooperatives: we were interested in understanding their experience with alternative tourism in the making of a digital platform mock-up that would reflect their cultural practices.

Indeed, digital platforms prove essential in the promotion of alternative tourism (Primi, Gabellieri and Moretti 2019), especially when showcasing eco-friendly accommodations or enabling concrete forms of social participation (Ossorio 2024). Moreover, digital platforms can be stepped into a moral agenda translating into technological affordances (Molz 2013) and provide viable alternatives to extractive digital intermediation, such as allowing local communities to retain control over tourism-generated value (Richter and Kraus 2022). Our work with Abruzzo community-based cooperatives exemplifies this approach: we were interested in understanding their experience with the ideation and prototyping of a tailored digital environment that would create more sustainable tourism ecosystems while enhancing social cohesion in local communities.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Platform-mediated (over)tourism in urban contexts

Overtourism mostly targets art cities and popular urban destinations (Liberatore *et al.* 2019) where "sectoral platforms" (Van Dijck, Poell and De Waal 2018) play a pivotal role in widening the ranks of the "temporary population" (Brollo and Celata 2022) while "selling off"

the cities and their local cultures (Stors and Baltes 2018). Urban communities experience a sense of disconnection from their environment, mostly due to increased noise, congestion, and the loss of shared spaces (Jover and Diaz-Parra 2020). Meanwhile, cities shape their own image according to digital users' expectations (Romano, Bonini and Capineri 2023), and are shrinked within the perimeters of zones identified as central by the interaction between users and algorithms (Celata, Capineri and Romano 2020).

In this regard, Törnberg (2022) speaks of "platform placemaking" to name how digital infrastructures mobilize user data to reshape urban spatial imaginaries in their favor. Cities become sites of temporary and transactional consumption rather than places for social interaction, thereby undermining local businesses and favoring international chains (Oluka 2024). Besides, the commercial nature of these platforms encourages users to continuously interact and create content that, in fact, serves their economic interests, thus consolidating a market-oriented social order in which popularity prevails over information reliability (Metzler and Garcia 2024).

Small towns, especially those in rural and high-altitude areas, are not exempt from these processes, where tourism flows are clustered in a limited number of highly attractive sites due to targeted promotion, pronounced seasonality, and limited infrastructure capacity (Boháč and Drápela 2022). Even in small-scale contexts the residents' quality of life and the tourists' experience deteriorate (Krajickova, Hampl and Lancosova 2022), with mountain areas recording infrastructure overload, environmental degradation, visitor congestion, conflicts between residents and tourists, and the loss of cultural authenticity (Boháč and Drápela 2022; Rogowski, Zawilińska and Hibner 2025).

2.2. Alternative tourism in marginalized areas

These socioeconomic and sociocultural dynamics are counterbalanced by the well-established strand of alternative tourism projects that excel in rural and semi-urban settings. This circuit adheres to a moral economy based on sustainable trade, fair labor, and ecological sensitivity (Gibson 2010), aiming at decommodifying the places' value (Wearing and Wearing 2014). According to Cohen (1987), "alternative tourism" can be understood both as a countercultural rejection of modern consumerism, where travelers seek authentic experiences outside of commercialized tourist circuits, and a reaction against the exploitation of marginalized areas , promoting ethical and equitable relationships between tourists and host communities. We choose to adopt the expres-

sion *"marginalized areas"* rather than *"marginal areas"*, as this terminology proves more consistent with both the theoretical framework underpinning our research and the empirical evidence emerging from the study. The areas under consideration are clearly not *per se* marginal or peripheral; rather, their condition of marginality results from historically and politically situated processes. Among these, the deliberate concentration of services and productive infrastructures in urban centers plays a central role, leading to demographic decline and socioeconomic vulnerability, often exacerbated by outmigration and the ageing of local communities; the marginalization of a geographical area is, in fact, a process that unfolds along spatial, symbolic, and relational dimensions. (Trudeau, McMorran 2011). In the Italian context, such areas are commonly referred to as *"inner areas"* (*aree interne*), a designation formalized by the National Strategy for Inner Areas. This policy framework highlights the need to enhance the cultural, natural, and social capital of these territories, also with a view to strengthening models of sustainable tourism (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2025, p. 137). However, the increasing popularity of such forms of tourism can lead to environmental damages and "staged" authenticity based on the commodification of local cultures (Gardiner *et al.* 2022).

The socially concerned variant of alternative tourism aims to foster mutual understanding between tourists and inhabitants, and fair economic exchanges through small-scale, community-driven initiatives. Building on this, the concept of "sustainable tourism" (Liu *et al.* 2013) has emerged to balance economic growth, environmental protection and social equity in the long term (Zolfani *et al.* 2015). Nevertheless, Bellato, Frantzeskaki and Nygaard (2023) critique this model for often prioritizing economic growth over environmental health and social equity. They advocate for "regenerative tourism" that emphasizes the importance of restoring and revitalizing ecosystems and communities affected by tourism, by valuing the specificity of places and promoting inclusive governance and transformative learning.

Another fruitful approach is the so-called "community-based tourism" (CBT), in which local communities directly manage tourism activities to ensure economic, social, and environmental benefits while preserving cultural and natural heritage (Goodwin and Santilli 2009; Candeloro and Tartari 2025), particularly in rural areas where it provides alternative livelihoods and keeps traditional lifestyles alive. The active involvement of local stakeholders in decision-making allows communities to align tourism development with their needs and values (Russell 2000). Economic benefits are equitably distrib-

uted, preventing wealth concentration among external investors; responsible tourism practices, such as homestays and cultural tours, minimize environmental and cultural degradation while enhancing cross-cultural understanding. Capacity-building programs in hospitality, business, and conservation are key to sustaining CBT (Scheyvens 2002), which, however, faces significant challenges, including limited access to markets, dependency on external funding, and internal governance issues (Butcher 2003).

Ultimately, these studies highlight the "moral economy of alternative tourism" (Molz 2013), which resists capitalist dynamics of mass tourism while catalyzing more intimate and meaningful social relations.

2.3. Cooperativism and digital platforms

In this scenario, community-based cooperatives play an essential role as they are cooperative societies providing local communities with goods and services that improve their well-being (Borzaga and Zandonai 2015). These enterprises precisely diverge from traditional cooperatives in that their services are not confined to their working members but intended for all citizens within the territory (Mori and Sforzi 2018). In this, community-based cooperatives are two-faced operators who look out for incoming tourists (as alternative tourism enterprises) while caring for the resident population (as mutualistic societies for local development).

In the wake of these experiences, the so-called "platform cooperativism" has recently taken hold, especially in the field of alternative tourism practices. Framed within the broader category of "digital commoning"– i.e., the collective production and management of digital resources (Henderson and Escobar 2024), this movement advocates for shared ownership and democratic governance of digital platforms (Scholz 2016) to counter the exploitation and precarity of "platform capitalism"– i.e., the use of online platforms to commercialize goods and services for profit maximization (Papadimitropoulos 2021).

Platform cooperativism can be intended as the combination between the traditional cooperative model, based on enduring ties, structured working relationships, trust, shared values and strong territorial bonds, and the sharing economy, originally considered as a driver of decentralisation and democratic participation. It leverages digital platforms as both relational and market spaces where to pursue social innovation, solidarity, and profit (Di Maggio 2019; Zhu and Marjanovic 2021). In doing so, platform cooperatives act as ideological resistors or challengers of the *status quo* (Wegner, Borba

Da Silveira and Ertz 2024), addressing the needs of their members and promoting autonomy and welfare. They enhance work conditions and job security while promoting human relations and caring for shared resources (Papadimitropoulos 2021), with cascading benefits for the territory (Rose 2021).

However, recent studies on platform cooperativism also highlight limitations and challenges: it is difficult to ensure truly democratic governance of the platform; customers are poorly informed about the social benefits of cooperatives; and insufficient funding limits the hiring of qualified personnel and the improvement of the platform (Philipp *et al.* 2021; Bunders and De Moor 2024). In the field of alternative tourism, these difficulties can be decisive in terms of the platforms' ability to convey the values of the moral economy that such projects aspire to promote.

2.4. Communal resistance between practices and identities

Alternative tourism and platform cooperativism can also be interpreted as practices of "resistance" enacted by marginalized communities against the hit-and-run tourism enabled by mainstream sectoral platforms. These experiences are different from those of the aforementioned urban movements that are rising up against overtourism, mostly because community-based cooperatives are organizations with a socioeconomic and sociocultural vocation that favor the propositional dimension of struggle before the contentious component (albeit implying both, as in any contemporary experiment of "commoning," Dyer-Witheford 2020).

"Resistance" is a useful concept to understand the politics of lived spaces (Massey 2012), and yet it is not frequently applied to interpret community-based forms of countering the bad impact of mass tourism (Duignan, Pappalepore and Everett 2019). A few exceptions are the conceptualization of "community resistance" by Doğan (1989), which accounts for how local people tactically cope with changes wrought by tourism based on their sociocultural characteristics, and the concept of "mediated, communal resistance" by Joseph and Kavoori (2001), which describes how local people can «transform an ambivalent and disempowered relationship into one that is culturally acceptable to the host community» (p. 999).

Without dragging in the concept of "biopolitics" – i.e., «the power of life to resist and determine an alternative production of subjectivity» (Hardt and Negri 2009: 57) – we can agree that communities engaged in the defense of material and immaterial goods they share (e.g., fields, waters, air, art, knowledge, traditions, etc.) can be identified as such precisely because of the social relationships they activate around the commons they protect (Belotti 2015). Defining the commons as all those natural or artificial resources shared and exploited by multiple users, where exclusion from use is difficult or costly (Ostrom 1990), we can recognize that any activity defending or promoting attentive behaviors with such goods operates as an actual commoning action (Aiken 2015). The production of a collective subjectivity comes into being thanks to what Foucault (1980) calls "devices," i.e., networks of material, social, cognitive elements organized by a strategic purpose (e.g., the commons' protection or promotion) around which subjectification based on interpersonal relationships occurs. As Hardt and Negri (2009) argue, in this case the experience of otherness aims at the constitution of the "commonwealth," understood both as the set of material resources that a collectivity shares and the network of relationships and the store of knowledge, languages and affects exchanged within it.

When it comes to defining proactive communities of this kind, several concepts have been mobilized, ranging from "rhizome"– i.e., heterogeneous entities with multiple entry points and routes, which grow through diverse connections (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) – to "multitude"–i.e. networks of singularities that assert the commonwealth from which they derive in social production and political engagement (Virno 2010). Sivanandan (1981)'s notion of "communities of resistance" effectively highlights the capacity of people in struggle to break down memberships into «a mosaic of unities» (p. 116). What matters to them is the "*being*-in-common" (Nancy 1991) – i.e., the shared commitment relationship springing from what that collectivity *has* in common, which also qualifies it politically (Rancière, 1999).

Communities of resistance are thus profiled from their practices of organization, reciprocal working, commoning and conviviality, representing perforations or disjunctures in the neo-liberal regime ruling any societal sphere (including the tourism sector and the technology industry). They are counter examples, at a micro level, of different ways of conceiving and doing things, including tourism projects enabled by digital platforms created for the purpose.

3. METHODS

In designing the research, we followed Lupton's (2018) proposal to employ digital design as a sociological method, conceiving design not merely as a means to realise technological solutions, but also as a method of analysis and reflection. Our approach is both critical and partici-

Table 1. Design Sprint workflow.

Workshop phases	Activity type	Activity description	Type of materials produced/ collected
1. Map	1.1 Long-term goals	Defining the long-term objectives of the platform	Posters; fieldnotes; photos
	1.2 Sprint questions	Identifying potential challenges to address	Posters; fieldnotes; photos
	1.3 Map	Mapping out the user journey in the forthcoming platform; creating a flowchart of the user-platform interaction	Maps; posters; fieldnotes; photos
	1.4 Ask the experts + "How Might We (HMW)" questions	Interviewing each other based on assigned areas of expertise and gathering insights on specific issues	Interview outlines; post-it notes; fieldnotes; photos
	1.5 Cluster and vote	Clustering and ranking "HMW" notes	Posters; fieldnotes; photos
2. Sketch	2.1 Divide or swarm + Lightning Demos	Scouting effective digital platforms and envisioning the forthcoming online journey (subscription, tourists services, community services, reviews, etc.)	Notes; posters; fieldnotes; photos
	2.2 The four step sketch	Sketching out the interfaces of the key interactions with the forthcoming platform (one group for each section of the online journey)	Notes; papers; fieldnotes; photos
3. Decide	3.1 Sticky decision	Choosing the best sketches after reviewing, critiquing, and voting them	Sketches; fieldnotes; photos
	3.2 Storyboard	Creation of a storyboard of key moments of the user-platform interaction	Storyboard; notes; sketches; fieldnotes; photos
4. Prototype	4.1 Assign roles	Prototyping of content, user interface, and interactions	Draws; screenshots; digital wireframes; notes; fieldnotes
	4.2 Stitch it together	Merging the outputs into a single platform prototype	First prototype (realised with FIGMA design tool)
5. Test	5.1 Show prototype	Refining the prototype and its features	Second prototype (realised with FIGMA tool)
	5.2 Evaluation	Collecting feedback on the prototype	Posters; final version of the prototype; fieldnotes; photos

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

patory, challenging values, norms, and power relations embedded in the platform-mediated tourism industry, while engaging typically excluded end-users in a collaborative and social process. It is intended not only as a space for ideating and testing solutions, but also as an opportunity for mutual learning, reflexive dialogue, and co-production of knowledge (*Ibidem*). Through this approach, we aimed to generate empirical insights that are grounded in lived experience, while simultaneously opening up alternative imaginaries for more inclusive and equitable tourism futures. In this context, people are considered not as mere sources of data, but co-creators capable of shaping both the content and direction of the research.

Concretely, we applied Design Thinking as a human-centered strategy aimed at creatively and collaboratively solving real problems within complex systems (Brown 2019). It involves empathizing, ideating, and testing user-centered solutions, and is increasingly applied to engage citizens in community-based innovation (Goi and Tan 2021). We followed the Design Sprint five-step workflow (Tab. 1), aiming at defining goals and challenges to address, generating innovative tech-

nological ideas, selecting the best solution, prototyping it, and validating it with real users (Knapp, Zeratsky and Kowitz 2016).

We involved the spokespersons of eight Abruzzo's community-based cooperatives (Tab. 2) that, at the time of the research, had already worked together and activated alternative tourism projects in their hometowns. The context in which they operate is doubly marginalized, both because of the (southern) region and the (internal) area to which they belong (Vendemmia *et al.* 2021).

During the workshops, we conducted ethnographic activities aimed at collecting and recording data that were inherently multimodal – i.e., referred to abstract resources of meaning-making such as writing, speech, images, gesture, facial expression – and multimedia – i.e., including sounds, objects, visualities, actions and any other mode materialization (Dicks, Soyinka and Coffey 2006).

All data produced by the participants, along with the fieldnotes taken by the researchers, were anonymized and processed in a single circular and iterative coding process, informed by an abductive logic. Afterwards,

Table 2. List of participating community-based cooperatives.

Name	Hometown (province)	Active tourism services	Active resident services
La Maesa	Aielli (AQ)	Visitor reception; guided tours of the town's street art pieces; social media marketing.	
Vallis Regia	Barrea (AQ)	Maintenance of green areas; managing an artist-in-residence program.	Snow road maintenance; cleaning services in public and private buildings.
Oro Rosso	Navelli (AQ)	Hostel and restaurant; production and harvesting of saffron; events and public activities.	Free rental of spaces for cultural events; agriculture and farmer support; brownfields recovery.
Vivi Calascio	Calascio (AQ)	Archaeological, nature and sports tours; souvenir shop and local crafts selling.	Green areas maintenance; telemedicine for elderly care; community cultural center.
La chiave dei tre Abruzzi	Popoli (PE)	Management of the community emporium for selling local products and handmade souvenirs.	Management of a coffee bar.
Tavola Rotonda	Campo di Giove (AQ)	Cleaning and sanitization services; management of local parks and campsites.	Green areas maintenance; community mill for flour production and educational workshops; recovery of abandoned agricultural fields.
Cuore delle Valli	Goriano Valli (AQ)	Management of a diffuse museum.	
Sette Borghi	Sante Marie (AQ)	Management of a local emporium for local food promotion; school tourism guidance in local naturalistic routes.	

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

we grouped and related the codes forming themes that would allow us to describe and interpret the phenomenon of our interest (i.e., "thematic analysis," Guest MacQueen and Namey 2011). In the next section we illustrate the two main themes that emerged from the analysis. Quotations are reported only by mentioning the cooperative's name (Tab. 2), the workflow activity number and the type of ethnographic medium (Tab. 1).

4. RESULTS

During the digital co-design process, community-based cooperatives came together to form a community of resistance – one that unites its members without erasing their differences (Sivanandan 1981). The co-designed platform, *AbiTerrò*, is intended to work as a "master key" for accessing the entire area covered by the cooperatives, making them "recognizable as a single entity" ("La Maesa", activity 1.1, researchers' fieldnotes). Yet, as we will see, this unified community is marked by internal tensions, reflecting the challenge and strength of accommodating diverse perspectives within a collective identity.

Here, we focus on the resistant vocation of such a community, which highlights the politics of both the space and the commitment that the cooperatives share (Massey 2012; Belotti 2015). Two key themes emerge from the analysis, referring respectively to the oppositional and propositional practices and stances that participants expressed in relation to dominant, extractive forms of tourism and the sectoral platforms that sustain them. These two dimensions of communal resistance are complementary and interconnected and end up embedded into the design of AbiTerrò.

4.1. The oppositional component of AbiTerrò

Since the first workshop, some participants expressed the cooperatives' intention to "give a makeover to the very conception of tourism," which in their areas is "still very much linked to second homes" and hence associated with "a privilege" ("Tavola Rotonda", activity 1.1, researchers' fieldnotes). Additionally, they aimed to move beyond the "economic subsistence vs. social care" dichotomy, identifying this as a key challenge for the forthcoming digital platform (activity 1.2, researchers' fieldnotes). Unlike mainstream platforms in the tourism sector, AbiTerrò is meant to reflect the cooperatives' dual mission – facilitating tourism that supports local economies while reinforcing local social cohesion (Molz 2013; Mori and Sforzi 2018).

This goal leads to two other contentious objectives. First, the co-designed platform is called upon to "overcome the e-commerce logic of local products", often adopted by digital tourism platforms, and must instead promote "agricultural and cultural specificities as participatory services", for example, by encouraging the

Figure 1. "Trusty", the AbiTerrò's virtual assistant. Source: https://tinyurl.com/AbiTerro.

engagement of schools or tourist groups in the harvest ("Tavola Rotonda", activity 1.4, researchers' fieldnotes). Second, the forthcoming platform must not slip into a folklorization of local culture, since this often reproduces sexist views of local communities, in which traditions are forcibly imbued with gender scripts and stereotypes, as when in many tourism websites "online images of traditional recipes zoom in on the woman with the traditional headscarf, rather than on the recipe itself" ("Vallis Regia", activity 1.4, researchers' fieldnote).

A particularly contentious issue that was effectively translated into AbiTerrò's design concerns the content curation mechanism (Van Dijck, Poell and De Waal 2018). The cooperatives wondered how to suggest additional services to the users based on their previous reservations, without resorting to invasive methods of notification or data capturing. During activity 1.4 one

of the participants clearly stated, "We shouldn't do like Amazon", referring to the e-commerce platform's advice system indicating similar preferences of other buyers or suggesting products like the one purchased ("Tavola Rotonda", researchers' fieldnote). Various solutions were suggested to avoid bulletins, alert systems, and impersonal avatars (activity 3.1, researchers' fieldnote). At the end, participants opted for providing an anthropomorphic virtual assistant that accompanies the user in online navigation and that can possibly start a videoconference with human members of the cooperatives (Fig. 1, activity 5.1, digital mockup). Its name is "Trusty" and he aesthetically resembles one of the participants. It serves to humanize the interaction with the users while bringing them closer to the territory in accordance with cooperatives' vocation (Rose 2021). The bot suggests additional activities or services that may be of interest to the

Figure 2. AbiTerrò registration page. Source: https://tinyurl.com/AbiTerro.

users according to typological, geographical or temporal proximity.

During the creation of the Storyboard, participants made clear that this type of curation mechanism by personalization on AbiTerrò can only take place after the user has created their account. The registration is, indeed, mandatory to request a reservation but it only appears as such when it is time to send such a request, rather than from the beginning as on mainstream platforms (activity 3.2, researchers' fieldnotes). The data requested to create an account is deliberately few and there is no possibility to log in via Google or Facebook accounts, as counter-hegemonic gestures against the collection of user information that mainstream platforms typically initiate upon access (Fig. 2, activity 5.1, digital mockup).

Even the space aimed at users' evaluation of the experiences and services is not designed based on a reputation logic as in mainstream platforms (Van Dijck, Poell and De Waal 2018), but as a way to collect feedback that helps cooperatives improve their service or activity while maintaining human bonds with visitors and other users. This page is not about curation, but care

(Papadimitropoulos 2021). Fig. 3 shows the sequential design as it emerged between the storyboarding and the prototyping stages (activity 3.2 and 5.1, hand drawings on paper and digital mockups).

In line with this approach, also the booking system differs from the automated processes of mainstream platforms. The cooperatives need to reach a minimum number of participants to cover the costs of activities and ensure their feasibility. For this reason, they cannot afford instant booking, but need to adopt intermediate solutions, such as requiring users to submit a booking request through the platform, which the cooperatives then review and respond to (activity 3.2, researchers' fieldnotes). Similarly, the scheduling of activities and services cannot be offered on a daily basis or year-round; therefore, the cooperatives have opted to organize their offerings on AbiTerrò using a seasonal calendar (Fig. 4, activity 5.1, digital mockup), which also strengthens the platform's connection to the natural rhythms of a territory, still deeply influenced by the cycle of the four seasons.

Notwithstanding the points raised so far, the oppositional dimension appears less prominent than the propo-
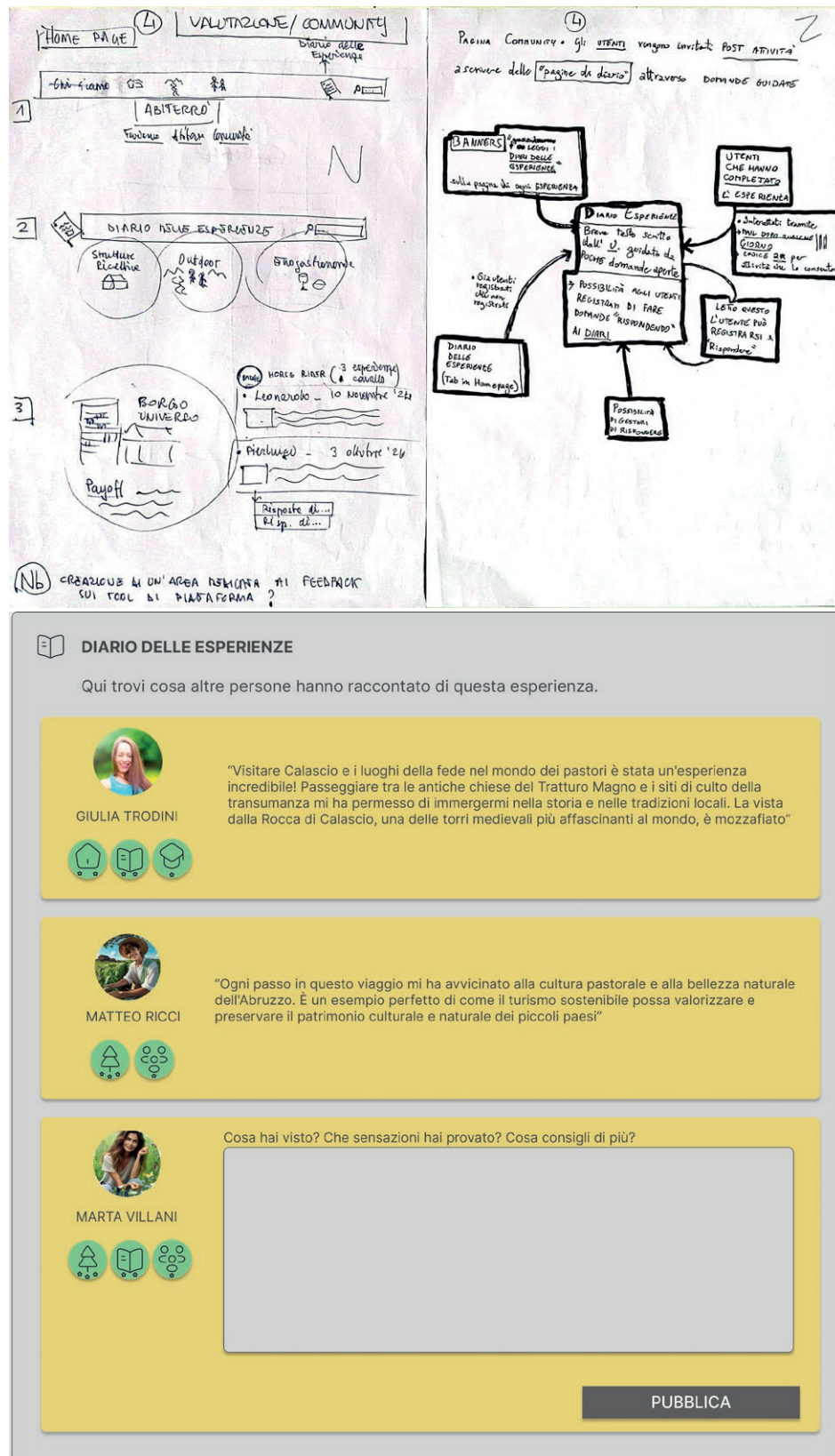
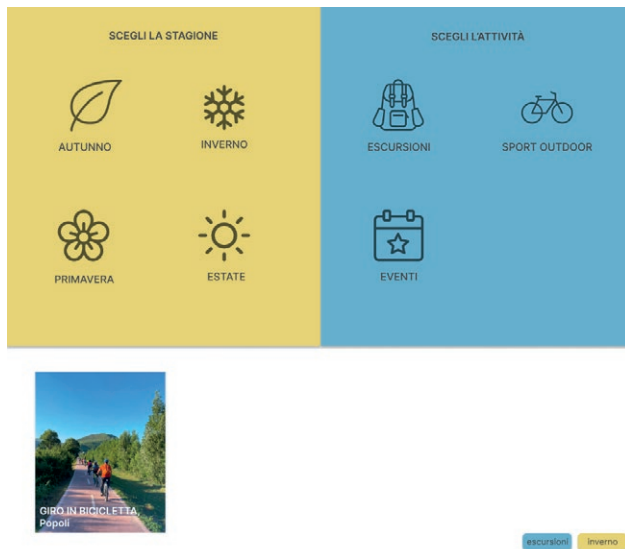**Figure 3.** "Experience Diary", the AbiTerrò's space for user reviews. Hand drawings by participants and https://tinyurl.com/AbiTerro.

Figure 4. The calendar of AbiTerrò services and activities. Source: https://tinyurl.com/AbiTerro.

Figure 5. The proposal of promoting AbiTerrò on social media. Source: Hand drawings by participants.

sitional one in AbiTerrò and the community behind it. The contentious aspect serves as a backdrop to the cooperatives' resistance practices, which are actively focused on building profitable alternatives. Their critique of the political economy of platforms is not antagonistic but proposes alternatives within both the tourism sector and the broader platform ecosystem. One participant remarked: "The content is alternative, not the format with which we present ourselves: books are all the same, they are made up of a cover and pages, then whether they are beautiful or not... Websites are like that, a cover and [buttons], then it is the content that distinguishes us" (activity 3.2, researchers' fieldnotes). Neither the design of a digital platform nor its presence in the contemporary platform ecosystem was questioned.

In this, AbiTerrò works as "ideological challenger" of the *status quo* (Wegner, Borba Da Silveira and Ertz 2024). This approach was already evident in the first workshop, where participants debated about "how to make the platform interoperable with others" such as mobility-sharing platforms, and during the "Storyboard" phase, when they debated how to engage with social media (activity 1.4, researchers' fieldnotes) and came up with promotional strategies on Instagram, YouTube, radio and tv (Fig. 5, activity 3.2, hand drawing on paper).

The badges and rewards dynamics, typical of mainstream platforms (e.g., Superhost on AirBnb and Genius on Booking), are not completely discarded either, but only partially redefined in a logic of adherence to the cultural practices of cooperatives (which still need to incentivize their activities for profit) and to the objec-
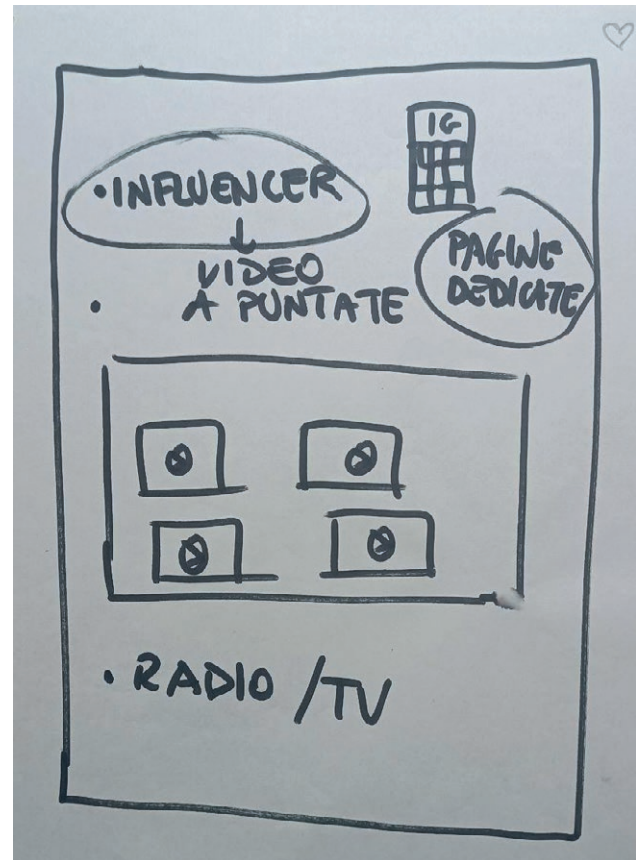
tives of social cohesion they pursue. Specifically, participants proposed a reward mechanism similar to those used by mainstream platforms to collect points (Fig. 6, activity 3.2, hand drawing on paper).

However, this approach seemed too commercial to most participants, who ended up preferring the adoption of a locally based cashback system. As for the badges, the participants kept the idea of recognizing user engagement through stamps like the ones in Fig. 7 (activity 5.2, digital mockup), which, for example, refer to the level of expertise gained in hiking, cultural visits, and neighborliness.

4.2. The propositional component of AbiTerrò

What most defines the political significance of the participating cooperatives and their co-designed platform is their propositional stance, i.e. the desire to rethink tourism based on "empathy and respect" for local communities ("Vivi Calascio", activity 1.1,
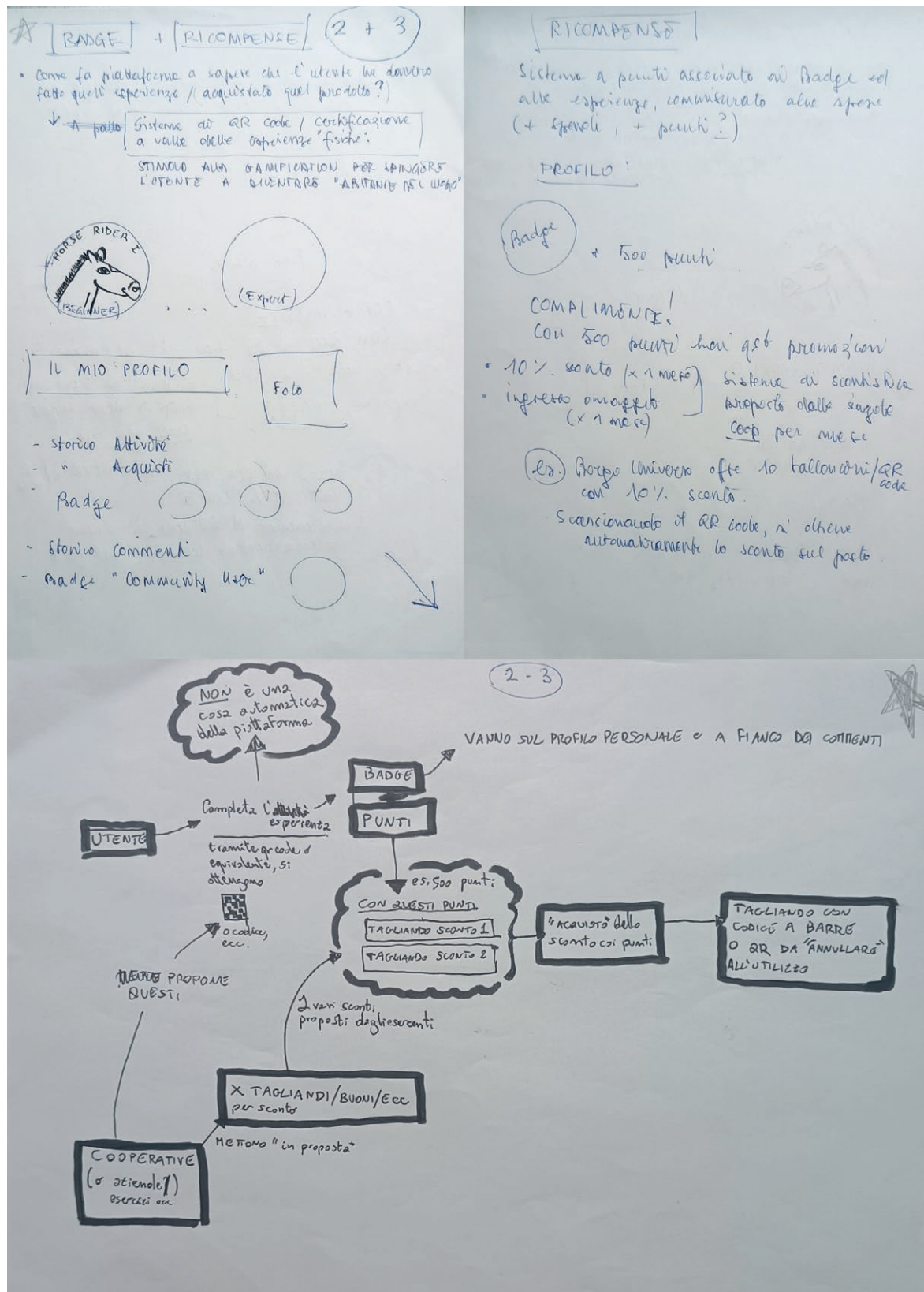
Figure 6. The imagined reward mechanism. Source: Hand drawings by participants.

Figure 7. Badges available in the user profile. Source: https://tinyurl.com/AbiTerro.

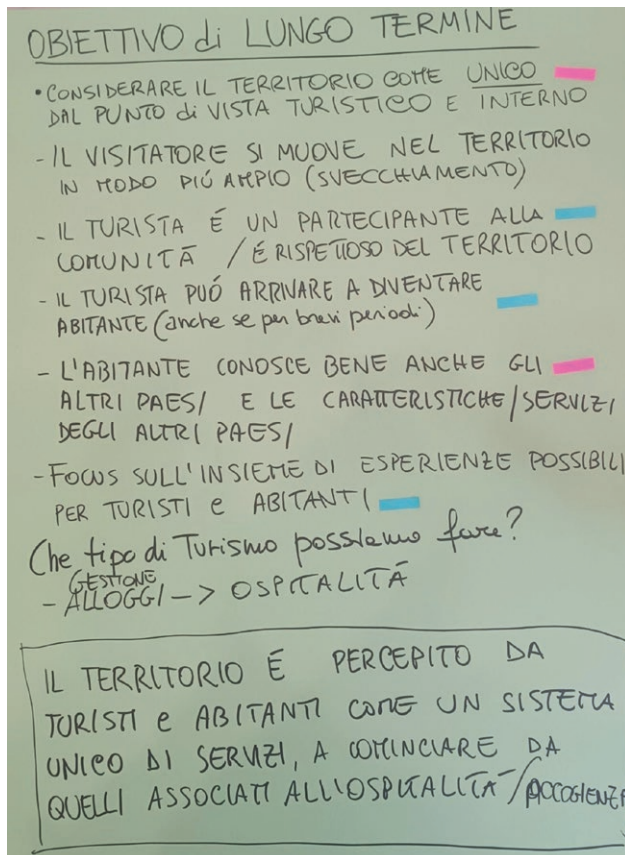**Figure 9.** Sprint Questions. Source: Workshop outputs.

Figure 8. Long-term objectives. Source: Workshop outputs.

researchers' fieldnotes), making it compatible with local ways of life (Joseph and Kavoori 2001; Butcher 2003). From the very first workshop, participants expressed a vision of hospitality that moves beyond the tourist vs. resident divide. Instead, they advocate for a third model: a person who stays in the area and connects with local communities (Giampiccoli and Saayman 2014), while engaging with the cooperatives' services and activities (see blue labels in Fig. 8, activity 1.1, poster).

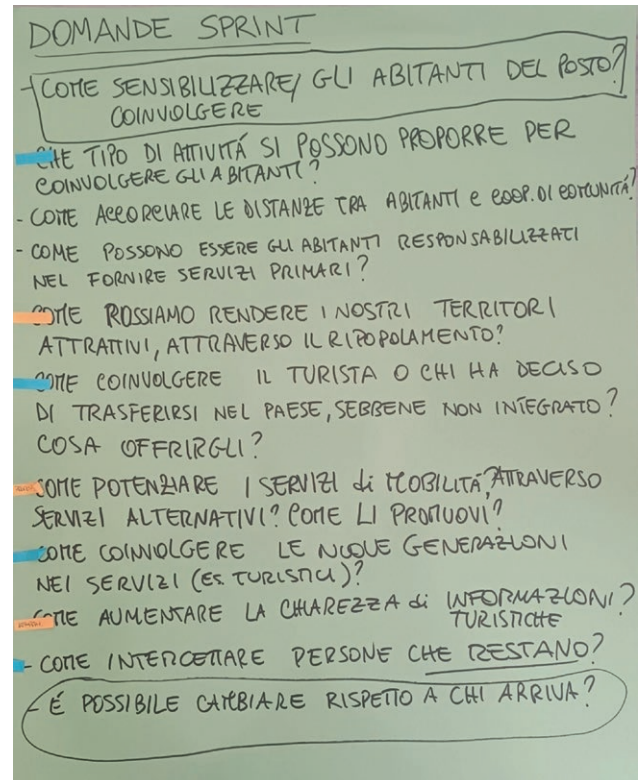In this sense, participants speak of "redefining the idea of tourists as temporary inhabitants" ("Oro Rosso", activity 1.1, researchers' fieldnotes), who "must align with [the cooperatives'] philosophy" ("La chiave dei tre Abruzzi", activity 1.1, researchers' fieldnotes). This vision opens up imaginative possibilities for the role of the co-designed platform. The "Sprint Questions" reveals that, since participants asked each other: "What kind of activities can be proposed to involve the inhabitants?", "How can tourists or new entries be included?", "How can younger generations be involved?", and "How can we engage those who stay?" (see blue labels in Fig. 9, activity 1.2, poster).

Albeit the co-designed platform serves the typical functions of digital tools in the tourism sector – management, promotion, and information (as exemplified by the Sprint Questions labeled in orange in Fig. 9) – these conventional roles are shaped by the community-based cooperatives' values, as in any experience of platform cooperativism, where the advantages of the sharing economy are leveraged for social cohesion (Di Maggio 2019; Zhu and Marjanovic 2021). This is why AbiTerrò is envisioned as accessible to users with limited digital skills, physical impairments, or living abroad – e.g., paid virtual tours for people who cannot visit in person, as proposed by "La Maesa" during activity 1.4. Digital inclusivity reflects and promotes an inclusive territory.
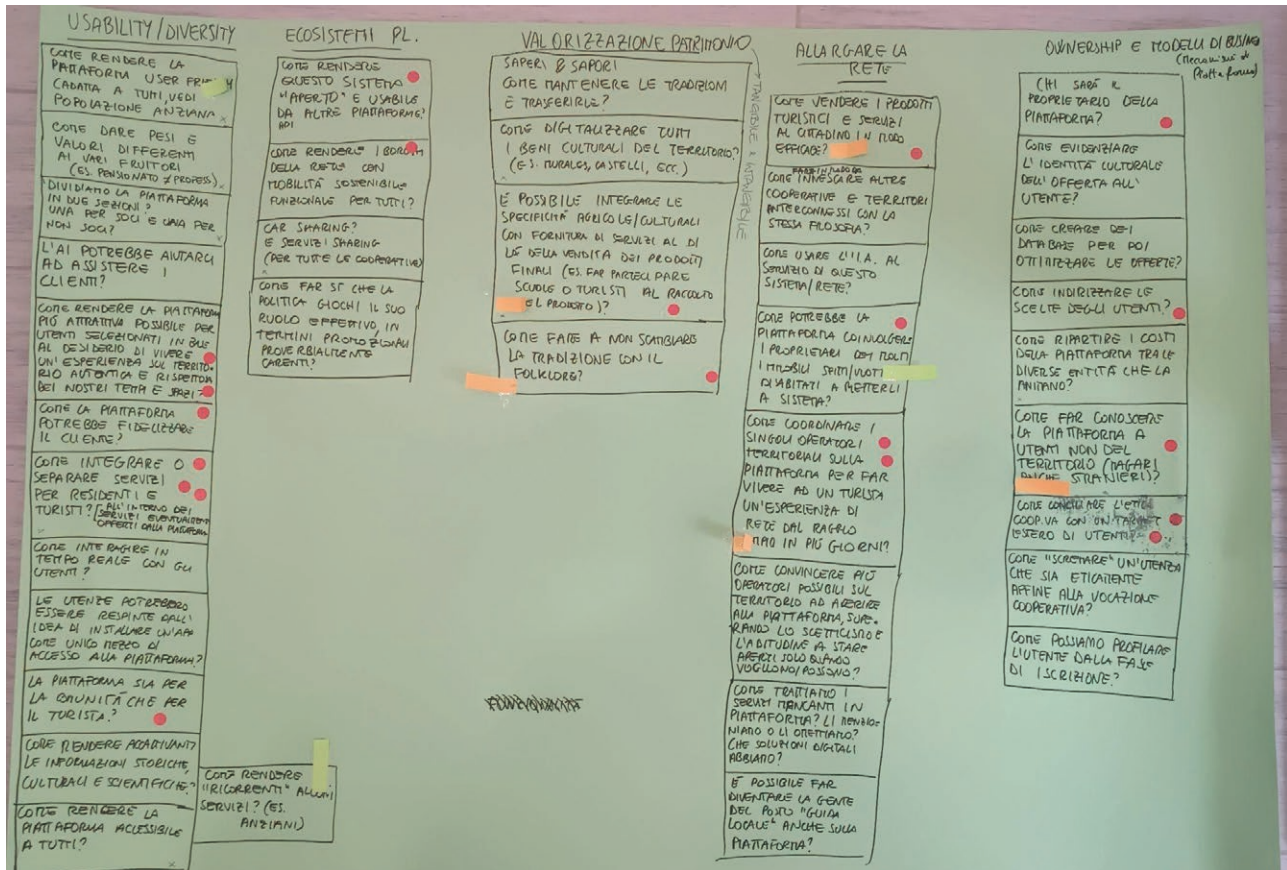
Figure 10. "Ask the Expert" session. Source: Workshop outputs.

Participants also envision the platform as a digital space that both attracts specific tourist flows and encourages residents to engage in service provision and activities, thus mirroring the dual vocation of community-based cooperatives and CBT (Liu *et al.* 2013; Mori and Sforzi 2018). This was especially clear during the "Ask the Expert" session, where usability discussions focused on how to reconcile this twofold goal. Participants raised questions such as "Should we integrate or separate services for residents and those for tourists?" and "How to design the platform for both the local community and visitors?" (Fig. 10, activities 1.4 and 1.5, poster and stickers). This dual-purpose paves the way for the hybridization of the ways in which participants imagine the visiting of their territory and hence the online navigation. Users are supposed to "move around" AbiTerrò by clicking on buttons that refer to both tourist experiences and community services, without having to declare if they are "tourist", "inhabitant" or "temporary resident".

As for the tourist-users, participants want to attract those "interested in authentic experiences that respect the rhythms and spaces of the territory" (Fig. 10, activi-

ties 1.4 and 1.5, poster and stickers). In this sense, AbiTerrò is expected to act as a filter, guiding access both to the digital platform and the local area it represents. This is why participants proposed that new users should be invited to "say something about themselves based on what they have understood about [the cooperatives]" as a way to create "a link between the person and the territory" ("Tavola Rotonda", activity 2.1, researchers' fieldnotes). This intention was later translated into a design feature opening a dedicated space for user self-presentation (Fig. 11, activity 5.1, digital mockup) (Molz 2013).

As for the inhabitant-users, the "Ask the Expert" session highlighted the need for AbiTerrò to be easily usable by all age groups, to facilitate the recruitment of disused house owners in the tourist accommodation circuit, and to encourage "local people" to act as "local guides" (Fig. 10, activities 1.4 and 1.5, poster and stickers). These goals place the citizen at the heart of the digital experience, as a bridge between visitors and the local social fabric. The idea is to "emphasize sociability and knowledge of the people who live in the area" ("La chiave dei tre Abruzzi", activity 1.4, researchers' fieldnotes) while

Figure 11. User profile page. Source: https://tinyurl.com/AbiTerro.

However, the creation of this online noticeboard has raised some tensions within the group. The spokesperson for Vallis Regia pointed out that local services are currently limited, while tourist services dominate the area. This imbalance, they argued, could be reflected on AbiTerrò's pages, potentially harming the public image of the cooperatives it represents (activity 3.2, researchers' fieldnotes). Conversely, representatives from Tavola Rotonda highlighted the value of opening this space regardless – both as a way to anticipate future services and as a potential hub for residents and temporary inhabitants (activity 3.2, researchers' fieldnotes). This discussion highlights a different conceptualization of the co-designed platform: to the former participant, it is a showcase that should make the cooperatives' proposals attractive to tourists and therefore cannot reveal their weaknesses; to the latter participant, instead, AbiTerrò is a space for strengthening social cohesion, where the weaknesses of the cooperatives can be faithfully displayed.

This contradiction also reveals that the resistance community formed around AbiTerrò is not a unified aggregate, but a collection of singularities that share goods and values without flattening their own worldviews (Sivanandan 1981; Virno 2010). With this lens we can also interpret another episode of internal discussion: some participants questioned if local businesses should join a cooperative – and thus share in its risks – in order to appear on the platform, or if they can be listed on AbiTerrò (and benefit from the consequent advertising) even if they are not members (researchers' fieldnotes, activities 1.3 and 1.4). No consensus was reached on this issue, but the discussion revealed the different conceptions of partnership and community at the basis of both the cooperatives' model and the platform cooperativism practices.

"turning the inhabitant into a tourist" inspired to rediscover their own territory ("Tavola Rotonda", activity 1.4, researchers' fieldnotes).

Moreover, AbiTerrò is envisioned as a tool to strengthen social ties within and around the territory, a hub for connecting with like-minded cooperatives and tour operators (activity 1.4, researchers' fieldnotes), redirecting part of the income towards local projects, and "building trust" (activity 2.1, researchers' fieldnotes). This overall vision aligns with the principles of community-based tourism, which emphasizes the active involvement of local communities to foster social cohesion and generate local economic development (Goodwin and Santilli 2009; Richter and Kraus 2022). In AbiTerrò, this is also reflected in the creation of a "notice board" where residents and cooperatives can post community service offers (Fig. 12, activity 5.1, digital mockup).

5. CONCLUSIONS

AbiTerrò emerges both as a sociotechnical infrastructure and as a medium understood in its strong sense, as an environment structuring relationships among subjects through specific representations of reality. The platform does not merely provide services and information for tourists, nor simply match supply and demand, as platforms based on private ownership and extractive control typically do. It rather embeds a grammar, and a vision rooted in practices of care, responsible hospitality, offering an alternative to commodified and decontextualized models of tourism.

Figure 12. The "notice board". Source: https://tinyurl.com/AbiTerro.

Following this perspective, the platform can be interpreted as an instance of situated digital commoning (Henderson and Escobar 2024), where the production and governance of digital resources are grounded in the lived experiences and relational practices of local communities. AbiTerrò thus valorizes the commons as constitutive, political elements of a community of resistance, marked by internal heterogeneity and differentiated trajectories. In this sense, it can be understood both as a device (Foucault 1980) and as a technology of subjectivation (Rose 2021), through which emerging collective subjectivities articulate material and symbolic forms

of resistance against the extractive logics of mainstream tourism and platform capitalism (Srnicek 2016; Van Dijck, Poell and De Waal 2018). Although it does not constitute a fully realized alternative to the hegemony of commercial platforms and dominant tourism models, it works as a relational space traversed by symbolic and political negotiation, discursive construction of collective subjectivities, as well as a site of tension where demands for economic sustainability, claims for social justice, and aspirations for cultural recognition intersect.

The co-design process also made visible a set of contradictory worldviews and identity practices that remain largely invisible within mainstream technological processes: this reflects the intrinsic political character of any commoning practice (Hardt and Negri 2009; Dyer-Witheford 2020). In this light, digital co-design emerges as a generative process, capable of fostering embryonic forms of communal resistance through commoning actions grounded in collective agency and social cooperation. Tourism itself may be reframed not simply as an economic sector or an opportunity for territorial growth, but as a conflictual and participatory terrain: a site of transformative potential for the situated production of collective subjectivities capable of transforming the extractive dynamics of contemporary digital capitalism.

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Spaces of Resistance of Participatory Arts in Cultural Welfare Initiatives. Insight of Italian Case Studies

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Abstract. This article explores the many challenges that arise when artistic practices are evaluated through the lens of social impact. Such an approach compels artists to engage not only with aesthetic considerations but also with social, community-oriented, and participatory dimensions. We aim to contribute to the understanding of how artistic practices are shaped by the growing emphasis institutions place on generating social outcomes across various policy areas. This occurs within a broader transformation of welfare systems toward models of community welfare, rooted in participatory and collaborative principles. Within this emerging paradigm, the cultural sector is playing an increasingly vital role, as reflected in the concept of Cultural Welfare. The insights shared in this article stem from a systematic analysis of findings gathered through three research that explored how participatory artistic practices take shape within processes of significant social relevance. The results presented show that artistic practices can indeed generate meaningful social effects. However, it is challenging to reconcile artistic creation, which may not always be inherently tied to community engagement or specific social goals, with efforts to involve communities and ensure the sustainability of such practices. This tension gives rise to an ambivalent dynamic: on one hand, it is consciously navigated by artists and cultural organizations within the art system but on the other, it opens potential spaces for creative resistance.

Keywords: participation, artistic practices, neoliberalism, resistance, cultural welfare.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the numerous challenges that emerge when artistic practices are assessed through the lens of social impact. Such an approach compels artists and artistic practices to engage with dimensions that are not only aesthetic and performative but also social, community-based, and participatory.

The close relationship between art and participation – particularly when shaped around a strong orientation toward care and the well-being of the communities involved – gives rise to a set of increasingly urgent and

nuanced criticalities especially when considered within the dynamics of contemporary society. In a context of polycrisis (Morin and Kern 1993) – economic, social, political, and environmental – these collective artistic experiences risk being misrecognized or co-opted, bending them to a reproduction of neoliberal logics (Riccioni 2018), as has often been the case with processes of "commoning" and the collective/shared management of local resources intended to promote community welfare (Allegrini, 2020; Bianchi *et al.*, 2022). Among all the potential risks, what seems to be most at stake is the creative autonomy of these practices, that embody experimentation and research in production processes processes, as well as a dimension of *politicality* (understood as the condition of something connected to politics – whether it derives from, is determined or inspired by, or serves as its instrument), and in terms of their material sustainability, long-term continuity, and capacity to foster alternative and counter-hegemonic imaginaries (Carroll 2010; Vannini, 2021). These imaginaries are not only vital to the communities directly involved but also have the potential to reach and transform adjacent publics and contexts.

The reflections presented here stem from a systematic analysis of research findings gathered through projects that, building on the debate surrounding the social impact of the arts (Matarasso 1997; Holden 2004; Paltrinieri 2022), explored how participatory artistic practices take shape within processes of significant social relevance. The article presents and discusses the results deriving from three research projects: the ongoing PRIN – PNRR 2022 project *Cultural Welfare Ecosystems for Wellbeing*[1], other two previously concluded initiatives, the European Creative project *Performing Gender – Dancing in Your Shoes*[2] and the project *Fammi Spazio!*[3] carried out in collaboration with Arci Bologna and funded by the Unipolis Foundation. This analysis therefore represents a systematization, a cross-cutting interpretation of the various challenges that arise in socially engaged artistic production, particularly within cultural production systems increasingly shaped by reduced public resources and the constraints of austerity policies (Vicari Haddock, Mingione, 2017). Given this political context we argue that it is interesting and urgent to explore how participatory artistic initiatives take shape and what practical responses they generate. This includes examining their ambigui-

ties, exploitative drifts, and potential to foster new forms of subjectivity, all within the ongoing interplay between ethics and aesthetics that defines them.

2. PARTICIPATORY TURN ON ARTS AND CULTURAL WELFARE

Since the 1990s, a dynamic debate has emerged around what is often referred to as the "social turn," "ethical turn," or "participatory turn" in the arts (Bishop 2011). The debate remains ongoing, particularly concerning the relationship between the ethical dimension of socially and politically engaged art and its aesthetic dimension (Bishop 2011; Rancière 2004). This tension between aesthetics and ethics is further mirrored in the divide between the autonomy of art and the relational (Bourriaud 1998), participatory nature of certain artistic practices and their social effects (Kester, 2005).

In the field of performing arts, the discussion on the ethical yet participatory dimension focuses also, among other aspects (Allegrini 2020a), on the distinction between community-based art practices that aim at the integration of social groups, not oriented towards questioning dominant social norms and values (Gielen 2013) – thus lacking a "disruptive" element– and practices of agonistic art (Mouffe 2008) or true artivism (Milohnić 2005; Gemini, D'Amico and Sansone 2021) that understand art as a form of public action (Verde 2007), capable of "instituting" processes of political subjectivation. The term artivism may refer to both the social and political engagement of artists/activists and the use of art as a device for organizing and expressing political positions by civil society (Oso, Ribas-Mateos and Moralli 2025; Salzbrunn 2019).

In participation studies, literature has long emphasized the importance of distinguishing between different gradients of participation. These include the distinction between minimalist and maximalist participation (Carpeniter 2011), as well as the divergence between "instrumental" and "substantive" participation (Sorice 2021). The former identified as a new neoliberal rhetoric or a resource for governmentality (Foucault 1991; Swyngedouw 2005), while the latter described as a potential new form of *politicity* (Allegrini 2020) and democratic innovation (Geißel and Joas 2013).

To understand how artistic practices can prefigure a space for civic and political activation (Allegrini, Izci and Paltrinieri 2025) and at the same time being part of governmental processes and neo-liberal logics, it is necessary to highlight certain socio-cultural processes specific to the participatory sphere today.

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[1] The project is implemented by the University of Bologna and the University of Urbino Carlo Bo: https://site.unibo.it/cultural-welfare-ecosystems-wellbeing/it

[2] https://www.performinggender.eu/

[3] https://arcibologna.it/fammi-spazio-la-partecipazione-culturale-giovanile-a-bologna-per-attivare-azioni-di-welfare-culturale/

On one side these practices effectively function as spaces for the generation of citizenship, not so much in formal legal terms, but as a practice (Isin and Nielsen 2008) of collectively constructing alternative knowledge and imaginaries (Appadurai 2004) that can give public shape to an idea of a "fair society" (Bauman 2011). They represent a space for an "art-based" community creation and for resistance (Blaske *et al.* 2020) offering alternative forms of relationships shaped by solidarity and reciprocal learning among subjectivities in a context of individualization (Beck 1992). In this sense, the space of participatory art becomes a potential political space in which resources, perspectives, and values are shared, where relational spaces are created to imagine counter-hegemonic futures (Vannini 2021).

On the other hand, the participatory turn in artistic practice should be also read as part of a broader transformation in public policy that began in the late 1990s, increasingly geared toward collaboration between institutions and citizens. This collaborative turn coincided with the neoliberal turn in the Anglo-Saxon world, a trend that later extended to Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In Italy, this period marked the consolidation of an "institutional offer" of participation (Moini 2012) across multiple areas of public policy, especially urban planning, but also within social and health sectors.

In Italy, a key milestone in this shift was the introduction of the principle of subsidiarity (Article 118 of the Constitution), which redefined the welfare system and the role of the third sector by promoting co-design among public bodies, private entities, and citizens. It should be emphasized that the paradigm of subsidiarity and collaboration, is the subject of an intense debate that contrasts two possible scenarios. On one side it is seen as a risk of privatization and outsourcing of public services, in line with the logic of New Public Management, which promoted a neoliberal orientation in governance models characterized by a triangular relationship between citizens, public administration, and service providers (Bobbio, 2003). On the other hand, it is interpreted as an opportunity for a radical and integrated rethinking of the service system, capable of producing innovative responses to complex needs.

In recent years, the cultural pillar of this paradigm of subsidiarity and collaboration has been increasingly studied, finding a systematic exemplification in the concept of Cultural Welfare (Allegrini *et al.* 2025), introduced into the Italian debate since the creation of the "Cultural Welfare Center" (CCW) in 2020. This conceptualization emphasizes the relationship between the arts and social impacts (Belfiore and Bennet 2007; Matarasso 1997; Paltrinieri 2022), particularly in terms of health

and wellbeing. This conceptualization is influenced by an Anglo-Saxon tradition which, since the 1990s, has developed projects and programs under the banner of "Art on Prescription" (AoP), grounded in a salutogenic perspective on the role of the arts. In Italy, following this perspective, cultural welfare is defined as an integrated model for promoting the well-being and health of individuals and communities through practices based on the visual and performing arts and on cultural heritage (Cicerchia *et al.* 2020). Alongside this "salutogenic" focus, there is also an emphasis on revitalizing the social fabric and rebuilding networks of local solidarity through participatory artistic practices and by encouraging the integration of social, cultural, and economic services (Manzoli and Paltrinieri 2021).

From this perspective, artistic practices can play a vital role. They can serve as key tools within social intervention models grounded in a community-based welfare logic, aimed at creating collective well-being (Ponzo 2014; Maino 2023). It is precisely at the intersection of the participative turn of the arts, of the growing attention to their social impacts and the emergence of collaborative institutional approaches that the concept of cultural welfare has gained traction.

3. FIELD OF INVESTIGATION AND METHODOLOGY

Considering what has been outlined, this contribution aims to address, rather than the relationship between artists and community in participatory art in broader sense, how artistic practices are affected by the growing attention given to the social impact of arts at policy level, within the wide scenarios described above.

The research focuses on the following analytical questions: a. How can the autonomy of artistic production processes – the aesthetic dimension – be combined with the participatory and the increasing institutional demand for the generation of social effects– ethical dimension -? b. How can this complex combination be maintained in a way that is sustainable in terms of the material aspects of these practices, without burdening either the work of the artist or the meaning of the practice itself? c. In what terms do participatory art practices run the risk of being co-opted as resources for a neoliberal agenda, and do they represent a transformative space for creating counter-hegemonic imaginaries?

The qualitative systematic review of the critical topic outlined is based on a stratification of research conducted across various contexts. As such, the material analyzed draws from a diverse range of sources and investigative techniques, following qualitative and participatory

methodologies (Hennink 2010; Stake 2010; Decataldo and Russo 2022).

Specifically, the review presents and discusses findings from two research projects. The first is the ongoing PRIN – PNRR 2022 project *Cultural Welfare Ecosystems for Wellbeing*. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the semantics of cultural welfare and examine its associated practices, with the aim of identifying key challenges and opportunities for social innovation. The research involves a review of international literature, a mapping of relevant projects across Italy, and interviews with artists and cultural practitioners, conducted using a case study methodology (Yin 2003; Priya 2021). Data collection is ongoing, started in March 2024, and includes 2 focus groups and 10 semi-structured background interviews with key informants (artists, cultural operators and professionals) exploring topics such as the language, practices, critical issues, and funding mechanisms related to cultural welfare. The University of Bologna Unit conducted 7 addition interviews for the in-depth Emilia Romagna case-study.

The second study was conducted as part of the *Fammi Spazio!* project, developed in collaboration with Arci Bologna and funded by the Unipolis Foundation, concluded in December 2024. This project aimed to explore ways to enhance adolescents' cultural participation, focusing particularly on the role of cultural spaces within broader cultural welfare initiatives. The research involved 2 focus groups and 17 interviews with educators, cultural workers, artists, and managers in the cultural and educational sectors. The interviews covered a range of topics, including the dynamics and forms of youth cultural participation, the design of cultural spaces with and for adolescents, challenges in assessing social impact, and reflections on cultural policy. One of the cultural spaces that have been investigated – DAS Dispositivo Arti Sperimentali – is today the subject of a more in-depth study within the PRIN project, with a follow-up analysis on specific artistic initiatives with adolescents.

These two research projects are put into dialogue with the key reflections that emerged in the research within the European Creative project *Performing Gender – Dancing in Your Shoes* from now on PG: DIYS. The project took place between 2021-2024 and involved a collaboration between the research team and 11 cultural organizations, 21 dancemakers, and 9 non-professional communities from eight European countries. The research focused on two main fields of action: the first explored themes of gender, sexuality, identity, power dynamics, and the creation of collective imaginaries through bodily expression and dance practices. The second examined the dynamics of encounters among diverse identities, aiming to support shared, intersectional senses of belonging, as well as spaces of solidarity and community. Unlike the other two projects, PG: DIYS was not situated within the framework of Cultural Welfare. Nevertheless, it offered a valuable opportunity to critically reflect on the role of artists in participatory artistic practices, serving as a heuristic tool that helped shape several of the analytical categories presented in this study.

This paper explores the ambivalences and spaces for resistance that emerged from material collected in research processes mentioned above. Through the words of the participants, processes of self-representation (Hall, 1997; Hall, Du Gay, 1997) are analyzed in relation to the lived experiences of artists, cultural operators, and artistic directors.

4. PARTICIPATORY ARTISTIC PRACTISES BETWEEN AMBIVALENCES AND TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECTS

The findings discussed in this section shed light on the key factors that shape both the potential ambivalence and the inherent political dimensions of artistic practices in generating social impact within the framework of cultural welfare policies. Broadly speaking, the tensions outlined in the first part of the essay unfold across two interconnected and complementary levels, which align with the questions posed in the methodological section.

The first level concerns the relationship between artistic practices and the production of social impact, and how this relationship is understood and put into practice by various actors in the arts sector, including artists and cultural workers. The second level focuses on the dynamics between artists, communities, organizations, and cultural institutions within the broader context of cultural welfare policy.

4.1. *Art practices, communities and social effects*

The voices and experiences collected provided insight into how the relationship between artistic practices that involve participation and social impact is understood and enacted. The first aspect concerns the relationship between art and imagination. This relationship is viewed as a potential space for envisioning the future and imagining oneself in an 'elsewhere', which evokes Appadurai's concept of the capacity to aspire.

In contexts where certain communities are marginalized, it is essential to have arts-based awareness processes that help people connect more deeply with their self-imagination

– who they are now and who they could become. It's about understanding how I position myself as an individual within a collective, and about cultivating a closeness to desire (Artist, FG-PWC, March 2024).

It's very difficult because people's needs are so diverse. There's a strong class dimension among young people, especially in their ability to form desires and imagine a future for themselves.' There's a massive class constraint when it comes to imagining the future. The idea of doing something different means being able to take risks – and who can afford to do that right now? Especially when it means asking their parents, who are already struggling, to take those risks too (Cultural practitioner, INT-FS, November 2024).

Imagination is understood here as a framework within which to situate cultural welfare itself – conceived not through a neoliberal lens, but rather in connection with the grassroots construction of demands that give form and voice to the needs and desires of those "at the margins".

There is a driving force behind imagining something new that doesn't yet exist. We must build on the edges, on the periphery, to imagine what is not yet there – together, if we are able. It begins with a need for dreams and desires where none currently exist [...] We must build within the margins, in the outskirts, where we're not expected to be, starting from needs and necessities, from a revolutionary bottom-up impulse [...] beginning with a desire and a revolution (Artistic Director, FG-PWC, February 2025).

The dimension of imagination is directly linked to the normative dimension (Foucault 1991; Butler 1999), where desire occupies a marginal and threatening position (Butler 2009), deeply rooted in the body and in the experience of pleasure. In this regard, within the context of the performing arts, research participants highlight the role of the body and of embodiment processes in producing counter-hegemonic imaginaries – establishing new "fields of appearance" (Allegrini 2025) driven by the capacity to become subjects through the awareness gained in artistic practice.

My work consists in activating the bodies of those who participate. The workshop space is an alternative space to the dominant social dynamics that act upon bodies. I often observe that many participants go through daily life without being aware of their own bodies, and when they are asked to engage in body-based practices, fear and shame are the first emotions that emerge. [...] Society defines an 'efficient' body as one that feels shame and fear. [...] What's unique about artistic and creative processes that involve people is that they deepen experiences which—without the pressure of a performance goal—can become, in the words of the participants themselves, a breath of fresh air, a source

of renewed energy for facing the world (Artist, FG-PWC, March 2024).

The transformative effects are seen as not limited to the specific relationship between artists and the communities they engage with, but more broadly concern the territory in which cultural organizations operate. It considers the unique social, relational, and geographical characteristics of each context (addressing dynamics between center and periphery), as well as the needs and narratives that arise from those territories. The role of artists and cultural workers can emerge through a practice of listening and approaching the local context, in a circular exchange that builds spaces of mutual recognition.

We need to give some context: we're working in a village of 1,100 inhabitants, which opens a broader reflection on the relationship between center and periphery. [...] Creating the right conditions in a small-town means listening, acting based on that listening, and valuing differences as part of the process rather than focusing on the product. It means avoiding pedagogical or educational pressure. [...] it means opening windows and letting children in, not to teach or instruct them, but simply by exercising the power of wonder and amazement (Art Director, FG-PWC, February 2025).

A metaphor that we often use is: stage, audience, city, periphery. [...] At some point, we started looking out from the stage into the audience [..] we thought, wow, look at these people watching us. [...] Theatres that are lived by artists, even when they host artists from outside, have a completely different atmosphere, a different ritual. There's a whole other way of welcoming both the audience and the visiting artists. And there's room for dialogue. [...] In our audience, people don't just look at the stage, we like it when they look at each other too. And sometimes, we come down from the stage and look at them as well. [...] Just like we want the city to come to us, we chose to do this. And outside the city– metaphorically speaking– there's the periphery. On the outskirts there are the "non-people", those who have no rights (Artist and Curator, INT-PWC, May 2025).

Although not the central focus of this analysis, it is important to mention that physical spaces, such as theaters, rehearsal rooms, and venues hosting shared artistic experiences, serve as vital points from which these practices can foster a sense of belonging and community. These places become active platforms for exploring accessibility, experience, and discovery, where the relationships sparked by creative acts produce effects that reverberate in the development of both individual and collective capabilities. This is especially evident when artistic and cultural initiatives are directed at young people and adolescents, as seen in some of the cases examined:

We have a space that's very adaptable—we like that it's quite bare, and that it offers the possibility for someone to leave their mark on it, precisely because it's empty. And it's empty so that it can serve a purpose—before becoming a 'place', it needs to be a blank canvas, something that can be played with, moved around, within the limits of our technical abilities (Artist, INT-FS, November 2024).

The experiences described reveal a clear awareness of the important role that artistic practices play, from the individual to the collective level, in terms of empowerment and "resistance," particularly through the creation of imaginative spaces that foster active citizenship. As highlighted in the first part of this essay, these are practices that attempt to move beyond the risk of using the arts in a merely "digestive" or normalizing way.

It is useful to emphasize the findings from PG: DIYS, which analyzed artistic practices across different geographical, cultural, and political contexts over a long period of time (Allegrini, Izci and Paltrinieri 2025). The transformative potential of these practices emerges in the co-constructed space formed through the relationship between artists and communities, producing effects not only for the communities involved – which are often seen as the sole beneficiaries of social impact delivered in a paternalistic way – but also for the artists themselves and their artistic practices. This in turn opens a space for cultural and artistic innovation.

It was fascinating to discover how all of this became a source of ideas, of artistic innovation. So [...] we discovered the impact our actions had on people, and at the same time we discovered the impact that people had on us—as artists. This dual track was extraordinary for us. It was incredibly stimulating, enriching, and full of new ideas (Artist and Curator, INT-PWC, May 2025).

I enter the process with a technical skill set that can support co-creation, but that can also be challenged. Each time, it's necessary to define a framework for that operation with a community. It's not my own auteur-driven workshop—it's a we (Artist, FG-PWC, March 2024).

Cultural and artistic innovation is supported by a holistic relationship between organizations, artists, and communities – particularly in contexts that foster dialogue between artistic practices and sites of intervention where space and time are shared, such as artistic residencies, which were frequently referenced in the research:

The place [...] was built in several phases. First, there was an in-depth exchange with the artist to understand their research interests. Then came a contextual analysis, which allowed us to guide the artist toward experiences and encounters with relevant people and realities. [...] On the university side, we tried to connect the artist with scholars from various fields such as anthropology and pedagogy. This only strengthens the artistic creation. So, the most interesting work the artist does is within the context of the residency (Artistic Director, INT-PWC, December 2024).

While the actors involved often identify meaningful and positive impacts within these practices, the ability to navigate the delicate boundary between "normalizing" art and "transformative" art must be situated within the broader system that links the arts to the social sphere, particularly through the lens of cultural welfare. One of the most evident risks is placing undue responsibility on cultural welfare to compensate for shortcomings in explicitly social domains—effectively delegating to culture the task of mitigating or solving broader and more complex social issues. This can reduce the artistic and aesthetic dimensions to secondary or supporting roles.

When do I, as a practitioner and curator, realize that my work is replacing what someone else should be doing—and that, in a way, what I'm doing contributes to dismantling the work of social services? [...] It happens when conflict is erased. When we try to normalize processes that are dangerous, difficult, sometimes traumatic—by making them inclusive, simplified (Practitioner and Curator, FG-PWC, February 2025).

These funding calls are designed to make up for gaps in other sectors [...]. You can't ask culture or art to compensate for the work of social services—because we are not social services (Artist, INT-FS, November 2024).

It is within the shadows and ambiguities of these tensions that collective artistic practices can either function as tools of pacification and conflict neutralization (Benesayan and Del Rey 2018), aligning with neoliberal logics of cultural production, or alternatively contribute to building resistance against exploitative and privatizing dynamics – exposing the contradictions generated by austerity policies and the erosion of public investment in culture and social welfare (Festa 2016).

This makes it essential to break down and examine the processes at play, shifting from an internal analysis of artistic practices and their social effects to a broader perspective, viewing them as part of an ecosystem composed of interconnected factors and relationships.

4.2. Between "autonomy and sustainability": production and participation

Research brought up some interesting dimensions that help to understand the processes at play and

the related strain concerning the relationship between artistic practices, participation, and social impact. Taken together, these dimensions illustrate how autonomy – on the artistic side, in the "moment of production" – and participation – understood as a focus on the social dimension – interact with the critical themes of sustainability on one hand and institutionalization on the other. A first crucial element concerns the actors within this ecosystem and how their roles are interpreted.

This is particularly significant because it relates to processes of subjectivation, not only within the field of the arts but also in the emerging space between artistic practices and the welfare system.

Well, let's say our position—because it's not just mine, it's something truly shared by the artistic direction—is that everything we do, we do as artists [...] Meaning that, even if we wanted to, we don't have the qualifications to be social workers or educators. We are not educators, we are not social workers, we are not psychologists, and we're not drama therapists either (Artist and curator, INT-PWC, May 2025).

The issue of roles and how they are interpreted also emerges in relation to the link between production and participation, which, although connected as part of a continuum, represent distinct segments of the process that each require full and separate legitimacy.

When it comes to production, I've seen many experiments, and I don't entirely agree with involving the community in the artwork itself [...] I've never seen a production project that goes beyond the meaning and value it holds for the community. For me, a work of art that draws from fieldwork must then take a step away to speak not only to those who participated in the experience, but to the world at large. If it doesn't make that leap, it's not a work of art. [...] That's a big risk because otherwise it turns into a mess—an artistic or cultural offering that has no meaning for those who weren't involved in its making (Artistic director, INT-PWC, December 2024).

We must not confuse the moment of artistic production with its functionality or treat it as merely instrumental. There must be a mediating space, where professional intermediary roles are activated to facilitate a genuine process of cultural welfare (Artist, FG-PWC, February 2025).

What has been said is closely tied to the issue of skills and professional profiles activated within participatory artistic practices, to trigger meaningful transformative processes. It also highlights the need to develop a shared language that can be used to articulate and communicate these practices. Different perspectives emerge on this point: on one hand, there is a call for the development of new hybrid professional figures:

A dual competence is needed – both cultural and social. Probably [those working in this field are] hybrid figures specifically needed to activate these kinds of processes. I don't know, this is what comes to mind when I think in terms of skill sets. Anyway, we have a problem that is mostly about language and tools, because the wall of mistrust is not easy to overcome (Artist, INT-PWC, June 2024).

On the other hand, some stress the importance of collaboration between diverse professionals who can contribute complementary skills to support an integrated approach that enables inclusive and meaningful participation:

We don't need to invent a new professional profile; the alchemy works best when there's a social or health-related competence working hand in hand with a cultural one. That's when the machine really starts running smoothly, because the added value is the dual perspective. In this case, we're not creating a new figure, but a new form of professional synergy and a strengthening of existing competencies that are already well established (Artist, INT-PWC, June 2024).

From the perspective of the risks associated with neoliberal logics, it is particularly interesting to highlight that one of the key terms used to describe the development of shared languages is "alliances":

The idea of alliances is really resonating with me. I struggle with it, also because the theater sector is very competitive. If someone puts on shows but works in prisons or with people recovering from comas, then for some, that's no longer considered 'theater.' Yet, some of the most beautiful and artistically innovative projects I've seen were born out of collaborations—not just across artistic disciplines, but also across different sectors. Sure, we ended up producing performances, but they were enriched by these trans-sectoral alliances (Artist and curator, INT-PWC, May 2025).

These alliances aren't limited to different sectors but also involve artists and cultural organizations in the co-construction of projects with social or educational purposes. This requires engaging artists at the outset, rather than at the end of the process, starting from their own artistic questions about the world, and gradually connecting those to the intervention contexts:

That's how the [Media Dance] program was designed [...] It was no longer about choosing an artist based on their position within the artistic and cultural ecosystem but rather choosing the artist who could help us address a specific theme. At the time, we reached out to S.G. and asked

her, 'We know that Lo Spettacolo Rosa isn't a performance designed for young audiences, but would you be willing to adapt it for them instead?' [...] We asked what question had inspired her research and creative path. Her question was: 'What do you see when you look in the mirror?' and we posed that same question to the young participants, who explored it using the Philosophy for Community method [...] This transformed the theater space into a place of dialogue among teachers, the artist, and the young people (Artistic director, INT-PWC, December 2024).

In this case, the resulting project took shape through a transdisciplinary dialogue – between the world of art and that of education – recognizing that the work's central question «could not be answered or resolved solely by the cultural sector» and that «these different actors were facing the same challenges, but a language barrier prevented them from recognizing their shared struggle».

In the PG: DYS project, the idea of building alliances emerged as part of an artistic production process that transformed the very paradigm of production (Allegrini and Paltrinieri 2022). In that context, the notion of a "human-centered approach" was developed, grounded in horizontal relationships between organizations, artists, and communities. At its core is the idea that programming is a specifically human activity, which, when it replaces economic "transactions" with a value-driven dimension, can question the very conditions that define the act of programming. Time is the key element of this approach—both in terms of programming and production. On the programming side, this means dedicating time to building meaningful questions, understanding contexts, and creating a "conversational-dialogic" space for exchange between cultural and social actors. On the production side, it means valuing the process, rather than focusing solely (or always) on the final product. At a systemic level, these elements enable the construction of alliances and the practice of solidarity instead of competing for market positioning – acknowledging that the arts sector today finds itself in a vulnerable condition: economically, in terms of professional legitimacy, and at times, even politically.

Two things: time and place are fundamental. We need to build spaces where the memory of these processes can take root. That's the starting point. Time is political, administrative. We would need at least three years (Artistic Director, FG-PWC, February 2025).

This outlines the idea of a necessary timeframe for caring for "listening to differences", for the communities involved, and for the conflicts that the territory expresses. It affirms the type of relationship one aims to build with the local context and ties it to strengthening com-

munity bonds. It is crucial to have time to "stay in the process", experiment experiences, and allow them to settle into memory. This includes allowing for "failure" or non-productivity, which is understood not in performative terms but in formative and creative ones.

I find it problematic when people approach the outcomes of these projects from the perspective of the product rather than the process. When we carry out work with communities, I firmly defend the possibility of failure, of changing course, of preparing the audience along the way (Artist, FG-PWC, February 2025).

The dimension of time has repeatedly been linked to the very real need to allow sufficient space both for artistic production and for community participation – alongside the need to rethink these as two distinct "moments" in a process. A key issue is the role of funding mechanisms. Currently, the most widely used method for financing these initiatives is through calls for proposals, which have proven inadequate in meeting this temporal challenge. Funding based on the call-for-proposals model generates a double bind: on the one hand, it limits the ability to achieve truly measurable social impact; on the other, the rigid deadlines and procedural constraints compress and overlap the time needed for both production and participation – causing confusion around roles, process phases, and even the very function of art.

If we take it [cultural welfare] as a totalizing label, then everything becomes "the project". But if we use it as a lens, it legitimizes our focus on certain aspects of a project that relate to cultural welfare, while recognizing that others concern artistic production. As a lens, it helps to ease the friction between participatory processes and artistic creation. [...] If we treat this term as a focusing tool that highlights specific components of a project, then we can hold together participatory projects and artistic production (Artistic Director, FG-PWC, February 2025).

The evaluation of social impact, a central element in the artistic process, reveals all its ambivalences when it becomes the sole criterion on which continued funding depends. This is particularly problematic because the demand for evaluation tends to focus almost exclusively on quantitative indicators (such as the number of tickets sold), which often fail to capture the complexity and depth of the social effects generated, that frequently emerge long after the artistic project has ended. A more appropriate form of evaluation would require the introduction of qualitative tools, capable of recognizing and valuing the processual dimension of such initiatives. Another critical issue is the increasing fragmentation of funding streams, which jeopardizes not only the conti-

nuity of projects, but also the stability of the professionals involved, whose positions are increasingly precarious, and the overall economic sustainability of artistic processes aimed at participation and social impact.

Space and time are expensive: working in a neighborhood of 10,000 people means having staff who are in daily contact with various local actors, each with different skills from our own. [...] To do this, we need to work with what we might call mediators—people who prepare themselves, train daily, and require time. [...] In order to take root in a place and carry out activities that, as artists, allow us to activate relationships with communities and territories, we need staff stability. [...] We need highly trained personnel who stay over time (Cultural operator, FG-PWC, February 2025).

Not everything must, nor should, have a measurable impact on the community or participants. Art also involves research... Activities like these aren't immediately profitable or results-driven; they require non-standard timelines and outcomes that don't fit neatly between a defined start and end (Artists, INT-FS, November 2024).

We try to separate evaluation from the product. It's easier to avoid giving space to my participants by handing it over to professional actors, just so the sponsor sees the final product and says 'well done'? We need to go deep into the processes, assuming they will be recognized for their depth, and that the outcomes remain open. Otherwise, these Cultural Welfare calls risk creating a new form of patronage. [...] What is the role of banking foundations in all of this? Is it truly a form of local engagement, or is it just patronage? (Artist, FG-PWC, February 2025).

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we aimed to contribute to the understanding of how artistic practices are influenced by institutions' increasing focus on generating social effects in various policy areas. We have framed this emerging trend within the context of a complex reconfiguration of welfare systems towards community welfare, based on a participatory and collaborative paradigm. Within this paradigm, the cultural pillar is playing an increasingly important role. As the results presented here have exemplified, artistic practices can truly generate significant social effects. In the context of cultural policy, the concept of cultural democracy (Hadley 2021) has emerged to emphasize the cultural sphere's importance in "making" democracy, primarily considering artistic practices as tools for creating and redistributing cultural capabilities and fostering citizenship and social cohesion.

However, combining artistic production that is not necessarily tied to community involvement and the achievement of specific social goals with community participation in artistic practices and the sustainability of these practices is challenging and an ambivalent process that artists and cultural organizations often experience consciously within the art system. Critical issues such as time, financial instruments and the role of evaluation deeply affect this combination. At the same time, potential spaces for resistance emerge within the narratives we have collected. Firstly, alliances between cultural organizations, artists and communities help to make sense of artistic participatory processes, supporting the work of artists and valuing time and artistic labor beyond the extractive logics of neoliberalism (Caleo 2021; Ruggiero and Graziano 2018). This approach also acknowledges the importance of allowing for failure and the necessity of evaluating the qualitative effects produced in the long term. Secondly, in terms of creation of social spaces where the conflict, differences and normativity issues are not neutralized with digestive practices. Instead, they are the core of artistic practices in the territory in which they operate. We argue that these several issues open a terrain of subjectivation not only of communities involved in artistic practices, but also of cultural organizations and artists together.

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Gender-Sensitive Learning Communities: A Case Study

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Abstract. This article presents a case study of the course "The Third Sector Facing Gender Issues", conducted between 2023 and 2025 as part of FQTS, a training project for leaders and volunteers in the Third Sector of Southern Italy. The course is analyzed as an experiment in a gender-sensitive learning community: an educational space involving both women and men, aimed at promoting a transformation of gender cultures within organizational cultures, power dynamics and society at large. The theoretical references include the concept of 'community' as interpreted by Bauman in relation to that of organization, and pedagogy as a tool for individual and social emancipation, as proposed by hooks. The study highlights how the course enabled the emergence of certain issues that participants – especially women – found difficult to address within their organizations. The investigation was carried out through two main actions: fostering public dialogues among participants during various in-person meetings across different cities, which were treated as a qualitative corpus and subjected to thematic analysis; and conducting interviews with key informants. This article focuses on the results of the first action, which brought to light the prejudices and silent resistances that oppose gender equality, as well as various elements useful for planning future training activities.

Keywords: community, gender gap, organizational cultures, Third Sector, critical pedagogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article presents a case study of the course "Third Sector Facing Gender Issues" (TSFGI) developed and implemented within the broader framework of the FQTS[1] project, an initiative that since 2007 has provided training for leaders, professionals and volunteers operating in the Third Sector in Southern Italy. The course is examined as an emblematic example of a gender-sensitive learning community, designed to foster awareness, critical

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[1] FQTS is the acronym for the Italian expression "Formazione Quadri del Terzo Settore", which means "Training of Third Sector Leaders".

reflection and organizational transformation regarding gender issues within civil society.

Founded in 2007 and promoted by the Forum Nazionale del Terzo Settore[2] and CSVnet[3], with the support of the Fondazione Con il Sud[4], the FQTS initiative has emerged as one of the most extensive and influential training programs for Third Sector professionals and volunteers in Italy (Peruzzi and Lombardi, 2018a, 2018b). Its objectives include strengthening organizational capacities, enhancing civic leadership and fostering a culture of democratic participation and social innovation across the southern regions of the country. Over the past fifteen years, FQTS has involved more than 4,000 organizations, delivering upwards of 10,000 hours of training and engaging over 30,000 individuals[5].

While one of the distinctive features of the FQTS project has always been its strong connection to the territory – offering training tailored to the specific needs of local contexts, particularly in Southern Italy – since 2021 this objective has been explicitly redefined around a central concept: that of community. In fact, the community dimension becomes the pivot of the project: it is the ideal that must inspire the transformation of the territories, and at the same time the practice in which all the project actors are called upon to organize and coordinate. As can be read in the opening pages of the 2021-2024 Executive Project document,

The relational, political, organizational training commitment of the FQTS project is developed within the community dimension. A "community" understood as a multiform network of relations between people, organizations and institutions. A dynamic and inclusive community, transforming and in permanent transformation, not closed within rigid and impenetrable geographical boundaries but full of relational, economic, social possibilities, aimed at change, possibilities and why not also positive and innovative imagination directed at the personal and collective wellbeing of people[6].

To try to meet the "new didactic complexity" of the project, different types of field and online classrooms are integrated, and subject areas are renewed. The latest editions of the project are structured along 13 thematic axes, each addressing a key area of intervention within the Third Sector – ranging from welfare systems and governance to ecological transitions and gender equality. Since 2023, then, one of these axes has been dedicated specifically to gender issues, through the course "Third Sector Facing Gender Issues", made in collaboration with Sapienza University of Rome. This course was conceived as a response to a social issue that is now unavoidable in Italy, and that even the Third Sector is beginning to perceive as critical: gender inequalities, and especially the gender gap in top positions.

The country's backwardness is attested by various international rankings (e.g., World Economic Forum 2024; World Bank 2024; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024). On the other hand, there is a lack of censuses and detailed monitoring in national institutions, but a serious contradiction is now also evident in the Third Sector, as well as in other national institutions: while women constitute the majority of the volunteers and the workforce and often play central roles in service delivery, they remain underrepresented in strategic decision-making and leadership positions (EIGE 2024; ISTAT 2021).

The training program TSFGI thus seeks to interrogate and challenge the structural, cultural and symbolic mechanisms that sustain this inequality. The pedagogical model that inspired these classrooms, obviously readapted to the context of the project, is the one narrated by hooks (1994).

This article is a study of the first two editions of the TSFGI course, interpreted, as mentioned above, as an emblematic case of gender-sensitive learning community.

The aim of the study was to identify the perceptions and reactions of the men and women involved in the project, in order to provide new insights for scientific and public debate on training policies for gender equal-

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[2] The National Forum of the Third Sector is the main unified representative body of the Italian Third Sector. Established in 1997, it is a non-profit body, made up of several national associations. Formally, it is a social partner recognized by the Government. In 2024, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies confirmed the Forum as the most representative Third Sector association in the country in terms of member organizations. It acts as the coordinator and political representative of the Italian non-profit world.

[3] CSVnet is the National Coordination of Volunteer Support Centers, the network that brings together 49 Volunteer Support Centers (CSV) throughout the country. The CSVs were established in 1991 by the Law on Volunteering (and confirmed in 2016 by the Reform of the Third Sector), to organize, manage and provide technical, training and information support services to Italian voluntary associations, and to promote the presence of volunteers and the culture of volunteering in all Third Sector entities and society.

[4] Fondazione con il Sud is a non-profit organization set up in 2006 by the alliance between foundations of banking origin and the world of the Third Sector, to promote the social infrastructure of Southern Italy, by financing projects on social cohesion paths and good networking practices.

[5] All the data on the FQTS project and the TSFGI course referred to in this paper were kindly made available by the National Forum of the Third Sector, which organized a monitoring and evaluation system, also for formal certification purposes, of all the courses and activities implemented by FQTS.

[6] Access to the unpublished document was granted exclusively for research and project purposes.

ity, as well as food for thought and stimulus for change for Third Sector organizations.

The research was carried out through the thematic analysis of various empirical materials produced and collected by the authors during the course: in particular, transcripts of public dialogues, stimulated and recorded during 8 training events, attended by over 400 people; and transcripts of interviews with privileged witnesses.

The results illustrate and comment on the most original themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the first part of the corpus, relating to the participants' voices during the training experience.

The next section is dedicated to reconstructing the theoretical framework in which the definition of gender-sensitive community is situated. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the characteristics of the object of analysis and the research method, and then the main results that emerged from the study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND THE CHALLENGE OF GENDER CHANGE

This paper takes as its object of study the TSFGI course, identified as an exemplary case of gender-sensitive learning communities, that is as an educational context where gender is not only a subject of instruction, but a lens through which social structures, power relations and collective identities are critically re-examined.

To explore this phenomenon theoretically, we draw primarily from the sociological reflections of Bauman on the concept of "community" and from hooks' writings on critical pedagogy and the classroom as a space for collective empowerment and social change.

It is important to note that this decision stems not only from the aspiration to establish robust theoretical underpinnings for this study, but also from the recognition that empirical analyses of educational pathways leading to women's empowerment, particularly in Western countries, are conspicuously absent from the sociological literature. The limited case studies that are available in Italy pertain to preschool and primary education (for a review, see Scarcelli and Selmi 2025), and there is a paucity of examples involving adults (Peruzzi, Bernardini and Lombardi 2022), with the consequence that interventions often risk sounding somewhat ideological. For this reason, we have elected to examine two authors who are capable of providing background elements.

In classical sociology, "community" has long been positioned in opposition to "society", often evoking images of organic, cohesive bonds and shared values. Over

time, the concept has become overloaded with meanings and has been the subject of various theorizations. For the purposes of our discourse, we will refer, as we said, to Bauman's perspective, which has provided a critical examination of it that is as concise as it is effective.

For Bauman, the concept of "community" must be placed in relation to that of "organization". He defines community and organization as opposite poles of a continuum along which all human aggregates can be positioned. Whereas organizations are functional assemblages oriented towards clearly defined goals, which hold their members together through instrumental rationality and formalized procedures, communities, by contrast, are grounded in affect, tradition and a sense of existential rootedness (Bauman 2000: 69-75). Obviously, the continuum is an ideal analytical tool: in reality, every human group can see elements of both structure and sentiment, formality and spontaneity combined, and its position towards one pole or the other depends on the type of interaction that prevails among its members.

What makes Bauman's theory particularly interesting for our purposes is his reframing of community as both a nostalgic ideal and a mobilizing metaphor. He emphasises that the notion of community often invokes a sense of natural belonging – an imagined unity that is spiritual, bodily and affective. As he notes, the term itself shares etymological roots with "communication", connoting communion and cohesion. But, as the German sociologist rightly points out, this unity is frequently aspirational rather than descriptive; community, he argues, functions as a "postulate of desire" (Bauman 2000: 71) – an ideal invoked to produce emotional resonance and political alignment. In this sense, it can serve as a powerful "mobilisation device" (*Ibidem*), persuading individuals that they share a common destiny and that their interests are best pursued collectively.

Within this framework, the TSFGI course – beyond the declarations of intent by the promoters, which we read above – seems to be characterised by several elements that refer to the community aspect. While it is true that the participants represent the associations in which they operate, it should be noted that they join the project on a voluntary basis: therefore, the projects they develop are not limited to their own organisations, but aim to become a resource for a wider context: the local area and, indeed, the community. In other words, the participants were involved as subjects within a broader, common project of transformation. The training environment invited them to move beyond their organisational roles, to reflect on deeply embedded cultural norms and to experiment with new modes of collective identification and action. In essence, to make community.

This pedagogical configuration resonates strongly with hooks' conception of the "classroom" as a space of possibility. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) insists that education must not be confined to the transmission of knowledge, but must engage students as whole persons – bodies, minds and histories. For hooks, the classroom is inherently political: a site where identities are negotiated, hierarchies contested, and social imaginaries reshaped. She argues that narrative and self-disclosure – what she calls "confessional narratives" – can be powerful tools for deconstructing hegemonic assumptions, especially in relation to gender, race and class (hooks, 1994: 9). These narratives reveal the illusion of shared origin and perspective, allowing difference to become a generative rather than divisive force. hooks also foreground the classroom as a "community of learners" – a space where all voices are recognized and valued, and where emotional safety enables risk-taking and growth. This emphasis on mutual recognition and dialogical learning aligns closely with the mission of the TSFGI training and dialogical aims.

In both Bauman's and hooks' accounts, community is not a static entity but a "project" – something constructed, contested and continuously reimagined by learning processes. In the context of gender training, this means confronting not only external inequalities, but internal resistances, ambivalences and contradictions, because sexism is a deep and widespread cultural background, especially in southern Italian societies (Cavagnoli and Dragotto 2021; Peruzzi, Bernardini and Lombardi 2022), and no one, men and women, of all backgrounds and ages, is immune to harmful stereotypes.

hooks warns, for instance, that feminist politics in educational settings may provoke discomfort or fear – not only among men, but also among women, who may worry about how such engagement will affect their relationships with fathers, sons or partners. Similarly, participants may enter the space with differing levels of awareness, or with entrenched beliefs about gender roles that resist easy transformation.

Despite these challenges, the classroom remains, in hooks' words, a «location of possibility» (hooks 1994: 10) – a space where pain can be acknowledged, privilege confronted and new ways of being envisioned. This is particularly vital in the Southern Italian context of our research, which is characterized by what Antonucci, Sorice and Volterrani (2024) describe as "liminal communities" – spaces caught between tradition and transformation, where cultural change is ongoing but contested. Within such liminal terrains, educational initiatives like TSFGI can function as prefigurative spaces – not yet fully emancipatory, but fertile ground for planting the seeds of change.

3. OBJECT OF STUDY, GOALS AND METHODS: A RESEARCH ON GENDER-SENSITIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Between 2023 and 2025, the object of our study, the course TSFGI, has reached over 450 participants across 6 regions – Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Puglia, Sardinia and Sicily[7].

In each event, the training followed a bifocal structure: a first segment dedicated to theoretical framing, led by the authors, and a second part centered on public participatory dialogues. The latter provided the primary source of data for this study. While participant numbers varied slightly across events, all forums shared the same goal: to create a public space for critical reflection on gender within organizations and society, mediated by collective dialogue. We refer to these diverse but structurally comparable moments as "public dialogues" insofar as they represent spaces of interaction, open confrontation and shared meaning-making (van der Velden, 2004).

The authors consider it important to note that the participation of both men (28%) and women (72%) was a very relevant fact, given the almost always monocolored (women only) nature of the courses dedicated to women empowerment. The participants were selected by the Third Sector associations (mostly voluntary and social promotion associations, but also cooperatives and foundations), based on the organizations' sensitivity to the topic and the interest of the participants. To some extent, all participants therefore had a political mandate from the associations to explore the topic and then report back within the associations.

As FQTS was a training project created for the organizations' executives, the classrooms, as well as those of almost all the other courses in the edition, were mostly (at least 80%) made up of adult and senior women. From an organizational point of view, the TSFGI course unfolds across multiple formats, included in regional and interregional training events.

Based on the theoretical references we have just outlined, we can identify the course TSFGI as an exemplary case of a gender-sensitive learning community.

TSFGI is a 'community' in the sense that: both members of associations (volunteers, operators, man-

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[7] Precisely, for the regional events of 2023: Bari (April 1st); Palermo (April 22nd); Cosenza (May 5th); Potenza (June 10th); Avellino (July 7th); Nuoro (November 18th). For the interregional events of 2024: Cosenza (September 20th-22nd); Palermo (December 6th-8th).

agers) and representatives of institutions and committed citizens take part in the learning process; all participants share a sense of belonging, both to their own associations and to the Third Sector, and more generally to the territory of Southern Italy; the classrooms are experiences of dialogue and confrontation in which the experiences of people, associations, institutions are interwoven; the community builds its own history through the training course, in the sense that the experiences of the classrooms are recalled and interwoven over time, with regional and national level associations signaling guests and experiences for subsequent meetings, and interregional meetings creating further opportunities for exchange.

In particular, TSFGI is a 'learning' community because: the main activities consist of classroom experiences; the primary objective is to trigger processes of change, through participation, growth of awareness and skills, and the critical method; the desired change is that which starts from individuals and spreads to associations (of the Third Sector in the first place, but also to institutions) and to territories.

Finally, TSFGI is a 'gender-sensitive' learning community because: one of its distinguishing features is the mixed classrooms of female and male participants, whereas we know that women empowerment courses are generally attended almost exclusively by women; its main objective is to produce innovation and change in gender cultures and dynamics (of the associations involved, but especially in the lives of the participants and on the territories), in order to solve discrimination and imbalances, first and foremost between men and women.

The objectives of our study are as follows:

a) to identify emergent and underexplored themes related to gender and organizational culture that arise from women-men interaction in dialogical learning contexts, with the aim of enriching public debate, and informing future gender policies.

b) to analyze communicative strategies employed by both men and women when addressing gender-related issues, particularly in group and public settings and to understand how these strategies could inform the design of future training initiatives.

c) to extract actionable insights for Third Sector organizations, and more generally of all organizations acting in the name of the public interest, that may inform their internal development, culture or policy orientation.

These objectives were pursued through the thematic analysis (Guest *et al.* 2012; Saldaña 2016) of two corpora:

(a) dialogical and discursive materials collected from training events, containing the interventions of women and men who participated in the learning community.

b) a series of interviews with privileged witnesses (women leaders of organizations), identified during the two years of work, thanks to the meetings and networking activities of the learning community[8].

For reasons of space and time, in this article we will focus only on the analysis of the data that emerged from the first corpus. It consists of a total of 8 full transcripts, comprising 6 public dialogues from the 2023 Regional Events and the two 2024 Interregional Events. As said, approximately 450[9] participants were involved in the training activities (28% men – 72% women). Most participants (80%) were aged 40 or above, with the highest representation from the 50-54 years age group (16%), followed closely by participants in the 55-59 years range (14%) and the 40-44 years category (13%). This demographic composition highlights a strong representation of individuals in mid-to-later stages of their life paths and careers, which is relevant for understanding the perspectives and experiences shared during the forums.

All dialogues were fully transcribed and analyzed using a coding strategy inspired by the framework of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This process involved highlighting recurring themes and concepts, emotionally charged narratives and significant expressions. The emphasis was on preserving the richness of participants' language and allowing themes to emerge organically from the data, without imposing predefined categories. Particular attention was paid to the linguistic registers used by men and women, as well as to the moments of alignment or tension in their perspectives on gender, leadership and organizational life.

For the identification of the most relevant topics, we relied on 3 criteria of significance: The first was novelty – themes that introduced unexpected or under-discussed dimensions of the gender question, compared to what is known in the literature. The second was diffusion – topics that were widely shared or frequently mentioned across different events and territorial contexts. The third was divisiveness – issues that generated conflict, ambivalence, or clearly differentiated perspectives between male and female participants. This third criterion allowed the study to highlight the plural and sometimes opposition-

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[8] The interviewees (10 in total) were selected based on a minimum number of years of experience (at least 4) in top-level or leadership positions, as well as the territorial scope of their organization's activities, with preference given to those operating at the national level. All interviewees were over 40 years old.

[9] While this reflects the number of attendees recorded, the number of voices represented during the public dialogues does not necessarily correspond to this same count.

al ways in which gender is understood, negotiated, and enacted in civic spaces. In any case, the aim was always to bring to light the issues that offered insight into collective representations of gender, perceived inequalities and potential strategies for change. While the coding was conducted manually, the researchers maintained analytic memos to ensure transparency and consistency.

Throughout the work of surveying and categorizing the topics, as the method of understanding sociology teaches, the researchers endeavored to reconstruct the point of view of the participants in the community learning activities, and to reconstruct the meanings that men and women in training attributed to the experiences narrated, the judgements made, the power dynamics in the associations, in particular the causes of gender inequalities and the undervaluation of women's roles.

Finally, a brief note to conclude the methodological explanation. It seems appropriate to specify that the two authors both participated throughout the entire series of events, in the roles of lecturers of the introductory seminar part and as stimulator-regulators of the public dialogues. In all the meetings, discussions arose spontaneously in the classroom after the author had presented data on the gender gap at international level and on the presence of women in top positions in Italian organizations. Obviously, the roles played during the public dialogues was deliberately minimal in terms of direct intervention; our primary task was to facilitate the flow of conversation, using the relaunch technique when necessary, ensure that the core focus of the discussion was maintained, and avoid cases of talk over. In any case, the continuous presence enabled us to contextualize the voices of the transcripts, which might otherwise have sounded very fragmentary, and to reconstruct the intentions and meanings of the interventions, as understanding sociology teaches.

4. RESULTS: EMERGENT THEMES FROM PUBLIC DIALOGUES

The following section analyzes the most significant themes that emerged from the public dialogues. For reasons of space, we have chosen to focus only on a few themes that emerged from the analysis, and always linked to the male-female relationship, but this paper does not exhaust the restitution of the reflections suggested by the corpus.

The presentation of the themes was organized in 3 parts: first, the themes considered most significant by the women participating in the course; then, the themes that emerged as characterizing the male positions; finally, in the third subsection, always in response to the first objective of the analysis, the differences between male and female perspectives on various recurring themes were summarised, drawing on the fact that the dialogues were fuelled by the comparison between men and women.

4.1. Women's Issues: Strategic Practices and Cultural Repositioning

Women participants in the public dialogues brought forward a complex articulation of critique, aspiration, and pedagogical strategy. Their contributions were marked not only by a heightened awareness of structural exclusion but by a creative effort to reshape gender discourse and practice from within civic and educational spaces. Rather than positioning themselves solely as victims of inequality, many women articulated proposals for cultural change and emphasized the value of personal and professional experiences as tools for collective empowerment. This aligns with Fraser's (2013) claim that emancipatory movements today must blend recognition and redistribution, working simultaneously on symbolic and material fronts.

The themes we have selected as particularly significant from the female perspectives are the following.

We called the first 'glass ceiling awareness: between presence and exclusion'. Despite their numerical majority in many Third Sector organizations (ISTAT, 2021), women consistently highlighted their exclusion from positions of executive power. This issue – often assumed as a starting point in the training sessions, where quantitative data were presented to illustrate gender disparities in Italy – was not only confirmed but deeply internalized in participants' reflections. The persistent absence of women from decision-making roles touches the core of gender imbalance in organizational hierarchies. This phenomenon is commonly described as the "glass ceiling": an invisible yet persistent barrier that prevents women from reaching top leadership positions, despite having the qualifications and numbers to do so. The term captures the contradiction between formal inclusion and actual exclusion, between visibility and powerlessness (Eagly and Carli 2007; Cotter *et al.* 2001). From the very beginning, the formation acknowledged this gap as a structural issue. Yet what stood out was the extensive awareness among participants: the theme resonated powerfully, not because it was new, but because women explicitly said that the course was one of the few occasions where one could explicitly talk about this. As one woman put it, «We're the majority, but the key decisions still come from above, and it's usually not us». This aligns with Acker's (1990) theory of "gendered organiza-

tions", in which workplace structures invisibly reproduce inequality through implicit norms and assumptions. It also reflects Bourdieu's (2001) concept of "symbolic capital": even where formal access is granted, women often lack legitimacy in leadership roles. What emerged is not simply a problem of underrepresentation, but of structural exclusion deeply rooted in organizational cultures.

The second selected theme is 'denunciation of the old language of organizations'. Numerous women denounced the outdated, stereotypical, and often exclusionary language still widely used in both Third Sector organizations and public institutions. While the testimonies did not always differentiate clearly between these two domains, revealing what could be called "a widespread unease" with discursive practices that are perceived as lagging behind a society in transformation. The main target of critique was the persistence of a rigid binary framework. Participants highlighted how language remains anchored in masculine-default forms (e.g., the systematic use of the masculine plural to refer to mixed-gender groups) and binary oppositions such as male/female or man/woman – distinctions that were often intuitively questioned but not always conceptually clarified. This confusion may underscore a cultural lag in organizational environments, where gender issues are increasingly perceived as relevant but still insufficiently understood. The reflection of one participant – «Language creates reality, and ours is still too binary to be truly inclusive» – captures a widespread sentiment: that without a linguistic shift, inclusive practices risk remaining superficial. Some women with specific activist backgrounds[10] pointed to the importance of considering not only gender, but also disability and migration status in organizational discourse. In a few cases – especially among younger participants – there emerged calls to refine language further, embracing vocabulary attentive to queer and non-binary identities. However, these voices were often isolated and revealed a deeper generational gap: younger people appeared more fluent in contemporary gender discourse, while older participants seemed largely unprepared to engage with such complexity.

Another thread of the discussion was identified in the formula 'pedagogical innovation as a transformative strategy.' A strong current among participant women proposed the use of imaginative pedagogy – emotional storytelling, experiential learning and art-based practices – as key vehicles for fostering social change. This orientation often stemmed from the practical experience that several organizations had accumulated while

conducting gender awareness events in local schools, to engage younger generations in inclusive dialogue. What we observe here is twofold. First, there is the ongoing societal transformation towards gender equality – many of these actions are part of this broader shift. Second, specific pedagogical strategies – those that engage emotions, creativity and interactivity – are particularly effective in making such change more accessible and impactful. This reflects hooks' (1994) pedagogical framework, which positions education as a practice of freedom. Interventions such as school workshops and film screenings were not framed as peripheral but as central to reshaping social imaginaries. For instance, a participant recounted how «showing "The Danish Girl" changed the way students looked at gender overnight». These initiatives aim not only to inform but to cultivate empathy, emotional literacy and intersubjective awareness – elements often overlooked in traditional civic education. The relevance of this issue is particularly salient in the context of the FQTS structure, which draws upon the network (both horizontal and vertical) of numerous associations, and could implement novel training cascade experiences across various territories, thereby engendering long-term change processes.

'Embodied experience' as pedagogical capital' is the fourth theme we propose from the women's side. Several women emphasized the value of their personal experiences – particularly as mothers, educators or members of marginalized communities – as tools for advocacy. This aligns with standpoint theory (Harding 1991), which argues that marginalized perspectives generate unique epistemic insights. For instance, one participant explained how narrating her own gender transition helped create an environment of trust among adolescents: «Telling my story helped others open up. Suddenly, we weren't just talking about gender, we were living it together». In this sense, embodiment becomes both a source of knowledge and a pedagogical strategy, validating lived experience as a site of social learning.

4.2. Men's Issues: Cultural Distance, Ambivalence and Reframing of Inequality

Male contributions, while less frequent and at times less reflective, provided critical insights into how gender discourse is received, negotiated or resisted by men. Their narratives revealed ambivalence: a mixture of awareness of structural inequalities and discomfort with gender-sensitive reforms. Unlike the narratives from women, which emphasized agency and proposals, men often focused on perceived constraints, loss or competitive disadvantage.

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[10] Typically, these were women who had previously received gender-focused training or had led inclusive education programs in schools through the organizations they operate in.

The first theme is 'traditional gender culture as a normative frame'. Men participants often referred to gender roles in normative terms, suggesting a deep internalization of culturally prescribed binaries. Professions and roles were frequently described in gendered ways, without critical reflection – for instance, one man stated, «I've never seen a woman cobbler». Such statements illustrate what Connell (2005) defines as "hegemonic masculinity": a dominant and idealized form of masculinity that legitimizes the subordination of women and marginalizes other forms of masculinity. These perspectives also echo Ridgeway's (2009) notion of the "frame of expectation" – a set of culturally shared mental shortcuts and narratives that guide how people unconsciously assess competence, authority and suitability in gendered terms. In this framework, women occupying positions of leadership, technical skill, or authority often appear as 'exceptions', whereas men are presumed to naturally belong. The effect is not necessarily overt exclusion, but a subtler, routine reproduction of inequality through everyday perceptions and assumptions. This normative frame seemed to form the prevailing cultural background of many men who participated in the training sessions. Its traditional and rigid nature stood in stark contrast to the more critical and transformative perspectives often voiced by women. Notably, these representations were not only individual opinions but often echoed within organizational discourses. In many cases, men participating as representatives of Third Sector organizations reproduced these views during public dialogues, especially when reflecting on their workplace cultures and leadership dynamics. This suggests that such gendered assumptions are not only personally held but embedded within the institutional environments of the organizations involved.

'The family as cultural regulator' is another label well representing recurrent men's voices. Unlike women, who often emphasized institutional asymmetries in discussing gender issues, men frequently identified the family as the primary force enforcing what they described as 'proper' gender norms – norms which, in their narratives, clearly aligned with traditional gender cultures. The family was portrayed as a mechanism of social conformity and pressure: «If you do that, I'll disown you», shared one man participant, reflecting the emotional and symbolic weight of familial approval in shaping gender expression. This perspective aligns with West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender", where gender is understood not as a fixed trait but as a set of practices continuously performed and reinforced through social accountability. Although this theory was formulated nearly four decades ago, the dynamics it describes remain highly relevant today: familial and domestic contexts continue to function as powerful spaces where traditional masculinity is both reproduced and policed. In the accounts collected during the training, the family often emerged as a site where deviation from gender norms was met with sanction rather than support, especially for men.

'Denial of inequality' is another theme that emerged on the men's side. Some men not only appeared unwilling to acknowledge the discrimination of women, but even reversed the perspective by claiming that in certain spheres women today have an advantage over men. The participants aligned with this position are objectively few, but their perspective is in our opinion very interesting because it brings to light the resistance that attempts at social change face. The authors' impression is that such resistance is generally acted upon in a subterranean and silent manner, because in an era when the discourse on women's empowerment has become mainstream, expressing such positions can be difficult. Some male expressed the view that women were now advantaged in certain spheres – a discourse reminiscent of the "male victim" rhetoric observed in parts of contemporary public debate (Kimmel 2013). Statements such as «They privilege women now» or «It's almost harder for us» reflect a sense of status threat, wherein equality measures are interpreted as favoritism. This perception mirrors what McRobbie (2009) describes as post-feminist backlash: a narrative that portrays feminism as overachieved and unjustly benefiting women at men's expense.

Finally, 'geographic distance as a strategy of displacement'. Men frequently cited Northern Italy as a space of progress, contrasting it with the stagnation of their own territories. «In the North, gender equality is taken more seriously», one noted. In our opinion, his externalization of responsibility functions as a rhetorical displacement that absolves local actors of agency. Such symbolic geographies are often deployed to construct a dichotomy between modernity and tradition, enabling resistance to change through the logic of "not here, not yet" (Adam 2024).

4.3. Women and Men Facing Gender Issues: Thematic Convergence and Gendered Divergences

On many issues in the corpus, the positions of men and women revealed different perspectives. Schematically, we can say that women framed gender equity as a collective, pedagogical and transformative endeavor, whereas men more often adopted a reactive, displaced or ambiguous stance. This divergence underscores the importance of dialogical processes that do not merely

Table 1. Comparative Thematic Axes: Gendered Perspectives from Public Dialogues.

Thematic Issues	Perspectives from Women	Perspectives from Men	Novelty	Diffusion	Divisiveness
Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes	Push for deconstruction of binary categories; Inclusive childhood education	Gender roles taken as normative and unchallenged (e.g., male-coded jobs)	✓	✓	✓
The Role of Institutions in Gender-Sensitive Social Change	Family less central as barrier; Emphasis on institutional change	Family viewed as primary enforcer of gender conformity		✓	✓
Leadership and Representation	Gender gap (despite women are the majority in the workforce)	Rarely addressed; Symbolic authority not problematized	✓	✓	✓
Educational Strategies	Advocacy for emotional storytelling, inclusive pedagogy, intersectional tools	Focus on logistical constraints (lack of trainers) rather than content transformation	✓	✓	
Women's Role in Gender-Sensitive Social Change	Women as a discriminated category, and as possible advocates, educators and innovators	Women as a discriminated category, but also as new privileged group			✓
Geographic Narratives	National or global framing of change	Regional framing of immobility/change (North/modernity *versus* South/tradition, geographic displacement of responsibility)		✓	✓
Emotional Expression	Emotionally rich, embodied narratives tied to identity and pedagogy	Emotion expressed through generalized suffering or symbolic "sacrifice"	✓		
Language	Strong attention to a gender-sensitive and inclusive language	Language issues rarely problematized, often underestimated	✓	✓	✓

Source: Antinelli & Peruzzi 2025 (authors' elaboration).

include voices but cultivate shared epistemologies of change (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Below is a comparative table summarizing key thematic differences and their analytical value.

The comparative perspective of our analysis, even if carried out in the form of a simple juxtaposition of themes, reveals with immediate evidence the existence of fractures in the perceptions and representations that men and women have of the gender order, and of the prospects for change.

These fractures reveal the persistence of binary logics and cultures. Moreover, they explicitly evoke Raewyn Connell's concept of the "arena" (1995), understood as an area of tensions and confrontation of positions, which is one of the most powerful images introduced in literature to describe the relationship between men and women in society.

The criteria of novelty, diffusion and divisiveness further allow for the strategic identification of themes most relevant to designing inclusive policies and interventions. While some issues (e.g., leadership gaps, binary norms) were widely diffused and divisive, others (e.g., imaginative pedagogy) represented original contributions capable of reshaping the conceptual terrain of education on gender issues.

In conclusion, these dialogues underscored that gender cultures are not merely a matter of identity or representation, but also of narrative agency. As women advanced grounded proposals for equity rooted in affective, relational and pedagogical labor, male narratives frequently revealed structural distance, emotional constraint and discursive ambivalence. Bridging these asymmetries will require not only more inclusive participation, but deeper engagement with how different gendered experiences construct divergent realities, responsibilities and pathways for change. Obviously, this awareness has interesting implications for the design of future women empowerment policies, first and foremost on an educational level.

5. DISCUSSION

This study has explored the potential of gender-sensitive learning communities to act as transformative educational environments within the Italian Third Sector and society. The course TSFGI, implemented under

the FQTS project, has demonstrated the effectiveness of participatory pedagogies in generating critical reflection, raising awareness and catalyzing organizational and social change around gender equity and inclusion.

The findings affirm that the participatory model adopted has effectively surfaced tensions, cultural resistances and possibilities for transformation. This confirms that the learning community, especially when designed with a gender-sensitive lens, is not merely a space for knowledge transfer but a crucible for beginning to reimagine social relations. The co-presence of men and women, rarely encountered in similar training contexts, further enriched the dialogues, allowing the emergence of contrasting worldviews, shared concerns and intergenerational gaps. For reasons of space, the results presented here are limited to issues that most directly concern gender relations; however, it is important to emphasise that tensions also exist around LGBTQ+ issues.

The Third Sector appears as a uniquely fertile terrain for such experimentation. As a liminal space operating between the public and private spheres, and oriented toward social innovation, it provides a critical site for prefigurative practices.

Notably, regional dynamics and territorial inequalities – especially those linked to Southern Italy – were not strongly brought up in the dialogues. Participants often framed gender issues as national or even universal challenges, potentially flattening important differences in cultural context and policy landscape. Although a full impact evaluation exceeds the scope of this article, early indicators suggest that a process of change has been initiated. These include internal requests for continued training on gender issues within participating organizations, new collaborations with academic institutions and replication of the training format by other associations. Such developments point to a consolidation of gender-sensitive networks, as well as to a growing recognition of the need for cultural innovation in civic education.

However, this study has some limitations. The predominantly female and senior demographic of the participants may have skewed the representation of perspectives, particularly those of younger participants or men. Furthermore, the social desirability bias inherent in public dialogues may have constrained the expression of other dissenting or controversial views.

Future research should address these limitations by incorporating longitudinal designs, exploring intra-organizational dynamics and integrating intersectional analyses that consider class, nationality and geography alongside gender, to fill a gap that, as has been said, is serious in the literature.

In this direction, we are currently working on the development of a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) tailored specifically for Third Sector organizations, co-designed in collaboration with the organizations themselves. In particular, a deeper investigation into the silences around internal inequality within Third Sector organizations could yield valuable insights into the barriers to institutional change. Additionally, studying the processes through which dialogical training translates into organizational practices would enrich our understanding of how learning communities function as engines of democratic transformation.

In conclusion, the TSFGI case demonstrates that gender-sensitive learning communities can serve not only as educational interventions but as cultural laboratories – spaces where civic actors rehearse and reimagine the norms, narratives and relationships that structure collective life. Their potential lies not simply in the content they convey but in the participatory processes they enact, which, if adequately supported, can lead to more inclusive, reflexive and equitable social institutions.

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Anti-Violence Centres and Shelters in Italy: Between Resistance and Institutionalization

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Abstract. Anti-Violence Centres (AVCs) are conceptualised as feminist communities of resistance, capable of generating counter-hegemonic knowledge and relational practices oriented toward social transformation. However, this configuration is neither given nor homogeneous: it unfolds within a heterogeneous field shaped by growing processes of institutionalisation and bureaucratisation. Drawing on feminist epistemologies and Bourdieu's field theory, and based on qualitative research – including 35 interviews with practitioners and two focus groups with representatives of feminist networks – this article examines how performance-oriented pressures and administrative standardisation threaten the epistemic and political autonomy of AVCs. The article highlights the strategies enacted by feminist grassroot centres to sustain transformative practices, assert alternative interpretive frameworks, and build alliances within territorial contexts increasingly shaped by institutional actors operating under divergent paradigms. It argues that the survival of AVCs as feminist communities of resistance depends not only on their capacity to counter marginalisation from decision-making processes, but also on their ability to build cross-sectoral solidarities grounded in an intersectional perspective.

Keywords: Anti-Violence Centres, feminism, institutionalisation, situated knowledge, communities of resistance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist movements have historically played a pivotal role in raising public awareness of violence against women (VAW), combining strategies such as mass mobilisation and the development of concrete responses to the needs of survivors (Htun and Weldon 2012). Rather than delivering services through top-down, expert-driven interventions, feminist social work positions survivors as active agents, validating their experiential knowledge and centring their autonomy and self-determination (Shah and Mufeed, 2023). This relational and participatory approach restores dignity and value to care, reclaiming it from its historically devalued and feminised status (Glenn 2010), and reconfiguring it – through the principles of cooperation, mutuality, reciprocity, and joint decision making – as a space of resistance

to patriarchal culture (Eyal-Lubling and Krumer-Nevo 2016). Moreover, by situating women's personal experiences of violence within broader structures of gendered oppression, this form of caring refuses to pathologize survivors, instead linking private pain to public injustice (Dominelli 2002).

In Italy, these responses materialised in the late 1980s with the establishment of the first anti-violence centres (AVCs), conceived as safe and supportive spaces where women can process trauma and regain control over their lives (Pietrobelli *et al.* 2020; Creazzo 2016). Caring labour in grassroots feminist AVCs are conceived to be inherently political, because it embodies a feminist praxis that challenges dominant patriarchal norms and hierarchical professional-client dynamics (Veltri 2018; Creazzo 2016). Not only AVCs have filled the historical void left by the state, but have also generated situated knowledge that challenges patriarchal culture and the social and institutional complicities that perpetuate the victimisation of women (Guarnieri 2018). To this end, over time Italian AVCs have progressively organised into networks, both to exert pressure on institutions for the recognition of male violence as a structural issue and to promote social change at the territorial level (Demurtas and Misiti 2021).

The extent to which feminist movements have been able to influence national anti-VAW policies has been widely discussed in the literature (Weldon 2002; Corradi and Stöckl 2016). In the Italian context, Corradi and Bandelli (2018) attributed historical delays in state policies to the difficulty experienced by extra-parliamentary feminists in forming alliances with institutional feminist actors – difficulties that were partly due to the rigid configuration of the party system under the First Republic. While such conditions have historically limited institutional responsiveness, international moral suasion has been instrumental in accelerating the development of anti-VAW legislation (Pietrobelli *et al.* 2020). A more coherent and coordinated national strategy only began to take shape after the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Demurtas and Misiti 2021). Since then, legal measures have expanded – though increasingly framed through a security-oriented lens (Curti 2024; Cagliero and Biglia 2016) – and both central and regional administrations have progressively developed measures to prevent and combat VAW, alongside increasing public funding for AVCs.

Complementing analyses of feminist movements' ability to influence national policies, this article shifts the focus to the consequences that the state's intervention to prevent and combat VAW is having on AVCs. As observed in international literature, the state's appropria-

tion of the anti-violence feminist agenda, and its reconfiguration in line with a neoliberal logic, can lead to the co-optation of feminist organisations, influencing their practices and compromising their transformative and political scope (Bumiller 2008; Lehrner and Allen 2009).

Focusing on the national context, this article investigates how the progressive institutionalisation of AVCs risks reshaping their operational practices and explores the forms of resistance enacted in response to processes of professionalisation, bureaucratisation, and integration into multilevel governance mechanisms. As discussed elsewhere, since the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the Italian government has gradually increased public funding (Demurtas 2022), leading to the expansion of AVCs, including those lacking the political commitment that has historically characterised feminist grassroots centres.

While rejecting a simplified representation that flattens the internal tensions and strategic ambivalences in feminist organisations, reducing them to monolithic entities (Martin 1990), this article explores how feminist knowledge and practices are defended in the face of neoliberal governance regimes. Conceptualising grassroots feminist AVCs as "communities of resistance" highlights the strategies employed to preserve their situated knowledge and safeguard their ability to counter the oppression of women inherent in patriarchal culture.

2. ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRES AS COMMUNITIES OF RESISTANCE

Framing AVCs as "communities of resistance" enables a critical reframing of their struggle for recognition (Fraser 2008; Fraser and Honneth 2007) as sites of collective feminist knowledge production, oriented towards social transformation and the contestation of gendered structures of oppression, in clear opposition to their reduction to mere service providers for survivors of male violence.

Drawing on the traditions of Black and intersectional feminism, it is possible to emphasise how shared experiences of male oppression can provide a foundation for collective resistance. bell hooks describes the margin as the place where oppressed subjectivities have historically been relegated, but also as a creative space. It is precisely through supportive relationships – "one needs a community of resistance"(1989: 19) – that the margin can be transformed into a generative space for situated knowledge and counter-narratives. In this regard, Collins (2019) highlights that oppressed subjectivities and the activists who advocate for them are key players in

the production of resistant knowledge. These forms of epistemic resistance challenge dominant frameworks by contesting who has the authority to define what counts as legitimate knowledge, who is entitled to produce it, and under what conditions it can be recognised.

In light of these theoretical contributions, framing AVCs as communities of resistance entails recognising them as spaces where the struggle against male domination (Bourdieu 1998) takes shape through opposition to the dominant symbolic order. This resistance is grounded in feminist practices of caring labour and in the relationships between women. Thus, the fact that they are conceived as "places created by women and for women" does not imply self-referential closure; rather, separatism should be understood as an enabling condition for the collective reactivation of women's empowerment at both individual and social levels.

It is worth recalling that Sivanandan (1989) developed the concept of "community of resistance" in explicit opposition to the excesses of identity politics which, by emptying the slogan "the personal is political" of its collective meaning, risked turning struggles for social justice into demands centred on individual affirmation. Similar concerns have been extensively addressed within feminist scholarship. Numerous authors have pointed to the limitations and ambivalences of identity-based politics, particularly when reframed through the lens of neoliberal rationality. Brown (1995), for instance, critiques the construction of political subjectivities grounded in trauma, arguing that such configurations can give rise to forms of protest that are readily absorbed into the very logics of governance they seek to resist. To counter these tendencies, Fraser emphasises the need to link struggles for recognition with demands for redistribution, thereby restoring attention to the material structures of oppression (Fraser 2008; Fraser and Honneth 2007). Building on this perspective, this understanding of AVCs highlights their transformative potential as spaces where collective action, ethical commitment and situated knowledge converge. Drawing on Welch's (2017) reflection, it should be emphasised that knowledge based on feminist praxis is not limited to naming and contesting the power/knowledge apparatuses that reproduce gendered oppression. It also encompasses relational forms of solidarity that enable the development of alternative "epistemes", rooted in lived experience and ethical responsibility. At the core of this vision is the belief that collective practices of solidarity are key to feminist resistance, and that defending the critical, practice-based nature of feminist knowledge is an active form of opposition to the forces of co-optation and depoliticization of dominant thought.

In this sense, defending the epistemic integrity of AVCs – understood as laboratories of counter-hegemonic epistemologies, where feminist critiques of structural gender violence are not only articulated but also embodied and enacted through everyday relational practices – entails resisting the fragmentation, abstraction, and bureaucratisation of feminist knowledge brought about by processes of institutional co-optation shaped by neoliberal rationality.

2.1. AVCs in the Context of Neoliberal Governance

To address this risk, it is useful to adopt a perspective that foregrounds the tensions generated by the institutionalisation of AVCs. Through Bourdieu's analytical lens, these centres can be situated at the core of an anti-violence field, conceived as a social space historically shaped by grassroots feminist activism and the accumulation of symbolic capital. From this perspective, the transformative potential of AVCs depends on their ability to safeguard a specific form of capital (Bourdieu and Santoro 2015), rooted in a structural analysis of gender-based violence, feminist working methodologies, a practice-based training and an ethic of care and collective responsibility.

However, it is precisely the institutional recognition of this capital that exposes the anti-violence field to dynamics of heteronomous regulation by the state, operating through an administrative rationality. This intervention materialises through mechanisms such as funding, accreditation, professionalisation, and the standardisation of practices (Bourdieu 2021). While these mechanisms may ensure the survival of AVCs, they also tend to reshape the field by redefining internal hierarchies and subordinating access to resources to compliance with technocratic logics.

What is at stake, therefore, is not only the allocation of material resources, but the legitimacy of feminist knowledge itself. Resistance, in this sense, is not a given condition but a situated practice, continuously renewed in order to assert epistemic autonomy against the normalising pressures exerted by the state "meta-field" (Bourdieu 2021).

Bumiller (2008) clearly illustrates these dynamics, showing how, under neoliberalism, state intervention has progressively redirected the feminist agenda on violence against women towards security-oriented, therapeutic, and performance-based approaches in the North American context. According to the author, knowledge rooted in grassroots feminist practices has been gradually supplanted by expert, technical, and psycho-medical forms of knowledge centred on risk management and outcome assessment. This shift has been facilitated by the sector's

increasing professionalisation and by the involvement of institutional actors – such as the judiciary, law enforcement, healthcare, and social services – whose discourses and priorities often prove incompatible with feminist perspectives. As Hester (2011) argues, the *habitus* of the various actors involved in supporting women and children affected by violence diverge so radically that they appear to operate on entirely separate planets. In everyday practice, the clash between these divergent rationalities produces perverse effects, often resulting in secondary victimisation and ultimately undermining survivors' safety.

These theoretical contributions offer an analytical framework for examining how feminist grassroots AVCs operate within an increasingly regulated and fragmented field. The following analysis focuses on how these organisations navigate the tensions generated by increasing institutionalisation. Particular attention will be paid to how practitioners negotiate their epistemic positioning, how bureaucratic and administrative logics shape working conditions and professional practices, and how feminist knowledge is defended or marginalised. The final part of the analysis examines the case of the State–Regions Agreement as a site of symbolic and political struggle, where conflicting understandings of anti-violence work are negotiated. Together, these dimensions help to understand how the transformative potential of feminist practices is sustained, constrained, or reconfigured within the institutional contexts in which AVCs operate.

3. METHODOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL MATERIALS

The data presented in this article were collected within the framework of the VIVA project, an ongoing national research project launched in 2017 to analyse and evaluate interventions addressing male violence against women. The project has been carried out under an agreement between the CNR-IRPPS (National Research Council – Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies) and the Department for Equal Opportunities of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, and has been supported through institutional funding provided within the framework of the National Plans against VAW.

Of the various activities planned by the VIVA project, particular attention has been paid to AVCs. The dual objective is to analyse practitioners' perceptions of their working practices and to investigate the role of AVC networks in defining national policies for preventing and combatting gender-based violence.

With regard to the first objective, data were collected between 2019 and 2020 through in-depth, in-person interviews with practitioners from 35 AVCs selected nationwide. The aim of this research was to explore how they represent and carry out their work. The sample was selected using purposive criteria informed by a national mapping (Demurtas and Misiti 2021), which took into account the legal status of the managing body (public, specialised private, or non-specialised private) and the centre's historicity (historic centres established before 2000; consolidated centres established between 2000 and 2013; and more recent centres established between 2014 and 2017). The interviews were conducted using an ethnographic and dialogical approach, conceptualising the research encounter as a space for co-producing knowledge (Haraway 1988).

As for the second objective, the article draws on preliminary findings from a research activity conducted in April 2025, consisting of two online focus groups with representatives of feminist networks and third-sector organisations managing AVCs. This research activity is part of a broader evaluation study of the National Plans against VAW and focuses on the revision process of the State–Regions Agreement on the minimum standards for AVCs and shelters[1]. The aim was to provide an in-depth analysis of both the processes of institutionalisation and the strategies of feminist resistance articulated within this regulatory framework. Given that the revision process is still underway, the findings presented here should be understood as partial and situated within a specific phase of institutional negotiation.

All materials were recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), with the aim of identifying recurring patterns, tensions, and criticalities in participants' narratives.

4. INSTITUTIONAL TENSIONS AND FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN THE ANTI-VIOLENCE FIELD

This section explores how feminist AVCs navigate institutional tensions and defend their epistemic positioning, while confronting bureaucratic pressures and clashing rationalities.

4.1. Self-representation and epistemic positioning

Challenging a unitary and reductive representation of AVCs, the analysis of practitioners' narratives

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[1] The State-Regions Agreement establishes the national requirements that AVCs and shelters must fulfil to access public funds transferred from the central government to the regions. This instrument explicitly aims to harmonise financing methods and intervention practices of anti-violence centres.

reveals the existence of heterogeneous interpretative frameworks, reflecting significant differences in how the nature and function of the centres are understood. These positionalities unfold along a continuum, with one pole represented by the notion of the "women's house" and the other by the idea of a "specialised service".

In certain contexts – particularly within historically rooted feminist AVCs – the centre is described as a relational and non-hierarchical space, shaped by feminist mutualism, where non-judgmental listening to the survivor and the rejection of symbolic asymmetries are actively valued. «We are a women's house, not an anti-violence centre: that means no one will ever be denied the chance to be heard here. We listen to all women in their struggles. No woman is boxed in» (AVC2). Other practitioners simultaneously adopt the formal definition of AVC while simultaneously asserting a political identity and feminist militancy, consciously positioning themselves within the field as agents of cultural and social change. «The anti-violence centre is not just a place of support – it is a political tool [...] The goal is to change the world» (AVC16).

While both are feminist centres, they articulate their identity through different symbolic and discursive registers. In particular, the term *women's house* is used to challenge the neutrality associated with the word *centre* and to explicitly affirm these as spaces by and for women (Baeri and Parisi 2016; Campani and Romanin 2015). Regardless of the terminology adopted, in both cases practice is inseparable from political action: the AVC is envisioned as a laboratory space, where reflexivity encourage the ongoing development of situated knowledge. « It's a constantly evolving lab, always questioning what we do, what we care about» (AVC2).

On the other hand, a more technical-functional perspective is in place. This view is more prevalent in public services and centres managed by multi-service NGOs, where AVC identity is defined by performance and organisational efficiency. Here, legitimacy is derived primarily from professionalism, outcome evaluation and managerial effectiveness.

> To me, an anti-violence centre should be a service in the truest sense of the word. It must be accessible and useful; it must not be self-referential and it must produce results. But yes, it's a service. Without a service structure, passion can easily turn into personal gratification or freelance activism. The etymology of 'service' is 'to serve': I am here to help someone with a temporary, solvable problem. I need an organisation to ensure this service can be delivered. (AVC10)

This perspective reflects a process of field heteronomisation (Bourdieu 2021), whereby the symbolic capital originally shaped by feminist practices is subordinated to administrative, standardising and evaluative logics. This process is reflected in the marginalization of relational and experiential feminist knowledge, which in some cases is displaced by specialist expertise legitimised through bureaucratic standards and performance metrics. As a consequence, the symbolic capital of the field is redefined, and its epistemic autonomy increasingly constrained.

These models are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they often coexist within the same organisation, revealing the complex nature of an anti-violence field shaped simultaneously by feminist genealogies and by logics linked to its ongoing institutionalization. «We're lucky to have integrated what I'd call the dual soul of anti-violence centres: they're partly a service [...] and partly an ideology» (AVC7).

These self-representations are not merely semantic nuances. While they reflect different strategies of positioning, they also reveal internal tensions that challenge the idea of a unified and cohesive community of resistance.

In this context, invoking the notion of a community of resistance entails critical scrutiny. Regardless of whether practitioners' positioning takes the form of explicit opposition to the performance-oriented logic that characterises welfare services, or of critical negotiation aimed at reconciling divergent logics, what defines a feminist community of resistance is its capacity to assert the political and epistemic autonomy of feminist care work, as well as its ability to forge alliances oriented toward the transformation of oppressive social structures.

4.2. Bureaucratic co-optation and the neutralisation of feminist practice

International literature has shown that state pressures to professionalise feminist social care work often entail processes of bureaucratisation and standardisation that risk neutralising its transformative potential (Bumiller 2008; Burnett *et al.* 2016; Lehrner and Allen 2009). The narratives of the interviewed practitioners provide concrete insight into the mechanisms through which this dynamic unfolds at the organisational level.

A central tension emerges between the formal recognition of AVCs and the conditionality that accompanies it. Regulatory instruments – such as accreditation procedures and minimum requirements for accessing public funding – impose a symbolic hierarchy that privileges what is measurable and reportable according to bureaucratic standards. «Having to calculate everything in advance is difficult. On the one hand, we're bound by the strict requirements of the State-Regions Agreement

[...] On the other, there's no sense of 'giving' in relation to the depth of the situation» (AVC27).

In a funding landscape marked by fragmentation and instability, AVCs face growing challenges in ensuring continuity and strategic planning. Short-term cycles and fluctuating resources generate precarious working conditions for practitioners and increase the risk of burnout. At the same time, funding criteria increasingly promote the homogenisation of intervention models: rigid templates, predefined indicators and timelines can be viewed as incompatible with the non-linear, relational, and processual nature of women's pathways out of violence.

This institutional dynamic not only constrains the practical organisation of care work, but also contributes to its symbolic devaluation. Practitioners report a widespread tendency to reduce feminist care practices to generic support functions, erasing its complexity, relational depth, and political significance.

There's this belief that our work is just about listening and providing emotional support. But it's important to understand that it's much broader than that. It involves risk assessment, sharing lived experiences and building a project, as well as an empowerment goal. (AVC2)

As clearly illustrated by a publicly managed AVC, within an institutionalised framework the practitioner–survivor relationship tends to be reframed as a performance, with outcomes subject to institutional evaluation. Survivors are increasingly expected to conform to externally defined expectations and to achieve formalised, measurable objectives. This is exemplified by the implementation of bureaucratic tools such as the Individualised Support Plan:

With the signing of the Individualized Support Plan, the woman must face her decisions [...] Even if she has no children and doesn't want to report, I still file the report [...] I write that despite repeated advice to file a complaint, the woman refuses, and I have her sign it. [...] In the end, it's also a form of protection for us. (AVC15)

Within this logic of control, an intensifying injunction to individual responsibility displaces the burden of change onto the woman herself, while leaving the structural conditions that sustain violence unchallenged.

4.3. Divergent Rationalities and Operational Compromises

Further risks of neutralising the feminist perspective emerge from the increasing involvement, promoted by the state, of institutional actors and other service providers who do not share the interpretative frameworks through which feminist AVCs understand gender-based violence. Hester (2019) describes the incongruity between divergent perspectives, rooted in different professional habitus, as a "clash of planets" – a dynamic that can produce harmful effects and compromise the safety of women and their children.

A significant fracture emerges in the relationship between feminist AVCs and social services. Here, the feminist emphasis on the woman's centrality – her needs, desires, and agency – often clashes with a logic oriented toward preserving the family unit. The consequences of such an approach are clearly perceived by practitioners in feminist AVCs, who report pressure to promote family reunification: «Social services often ask us to convince women to go back home, even in very serious situations» (AVC11).

Interaction with the healthcare system also proves to be complex. As Bumiller (2008) notes, the progressive involvement of the health sector in the State-led "war" against violence has facilitated the spread of professional discourses and practices that medicalize survivors, reducing them to clinical subjects whose access to support is conditional on institutional protocols: « We had problems with the emergency room: they told us that if there's no medical report, the woman cannot be taken in charge» (AVC9)

As van der Velden (2004) emphasises, the hierarchy between professional and grassroots knowledge generates deep epistemic asymmetries, hindering the formation of transformative alliances between institutional actors and communities. This hierarchy is reinforced through mechanisms of symbolic exclusion that deny legitimacy to knowledge forms not recognised as "professional." Some AVCs practitioners, for instance, reported offering to act as trainers in an attempt to address the critical issues encountered within healthcare and welfare pathways.

However, these proposals were routinely rejected on the grounds of formal eligibility criteria, public procurement regulations, or rigid authorisation protocols: « The local health authority told us that to provide training you need a public call. [...] They don't understand what networking means» (AVC7).

Structural tensions profoundly impact the relationship with law enforcement. A key concern raised by some practitioners from feminist AVCs is their struggle to be recognised as legitimate interlocutors in a context that is often dominated by hierarchical logics. «Not all police departments recognize us as interlocutors. Some shut us out» (AVC24).

In particular, some practitioners criticise the police for lacking the conceptual tools necessary to interpret

domestic violence, which is often downgraded to a mere family conflict (Johnson, 2006). This interpretive gap not only denies the experiences of survivors but also undermines the legitimacy of AVC practitioners accompanying them, whose knowledge is dismissed as partial: « The police sometimes tell us: it's just a family quarrel. [...] They belittle us» (AVC21).

To this devaluation is added a paradoxical demand: while law enforcement claims it is unable to intervene in the absence of a formal complaint, it simultaneously offloads the responsibility onto the AVCs. This puts pressure on the AVCs to persuade women to file charges, which directly contradicts the feminist relational methodology grounded in respect for women's self-determination and timing. «They say that if the woman doesn't report, they can't do anything. [...] But then they criticize us if we don't convince her» (AVC13).

Of all the institutional domains, the judicial system appears to be the least open to feminist knowledge. In their daily operations, courts and public prosecutors tend to apply a formal legal rationality based on the supposed neutrality of laws and the measurability of evidence. However, feminist legal struggles have long demonstrated that patriarchal representations and mechanisms of secondary victimisation lie beneath the surface of legal formalism – a phenomenon that is still evident today in judicial decisions (Senato della Repubblica 2022). The result is a form of re-victimisation, whereby women are expected to behave 'reasonably' within an inherently unreasonable context. «A judge once told us: if there's only one report, it's not violence» (AVC23), «Judges always ask: why didn't she leave him sooner? [...] They don't understand how violence works» (AVC3).

In this configuration, the situated knowledge of practitioners is systematically excluded and devalued in favour of technical expertise, which, by contrast, can contribute to secondary victimisation within judicial proceedings. «In the expert assessments, women are described as manipulative, hysterical, unstable. [...] It's institutional violence» (AVC10).

As Hester (2019) has underscored, judicial practices are often driven by a reconciliatory rationality aimed at preserving the father-child relationship – even at the cost of ignoring violent dynamics: «Family courts want the woman to cooperate with the father. Even if there's violence» (AVC16).

These practices reveal the persistence of a normative hierarchy that prioritises family unity over the physical and emotional safety of women and children. In the name of a false neutrality, the justice system displaces responsibility onto the woman, who is required to "step back" in order to ensure coexistence – even in the presence of severe violence: « It's a total burden on the woman: she's the one who has to leave with the kids, change cities, reinvent her life» (AVC9).

The findings highlight how the tension between practitioners' situated knowledge and dominant forms of expertise – legal, medical, and administrative – can result in the progressive marginalisation of the feminist perspective. Territorial networks involving AVCs and other actors do not simply function as neutral spaces for technical coordination, but rather as arenas where cognitive and symbolic asymmetries are reproduced. Within this context, the participation of AVCs can be understood as a form of epistemic resistance aimed at preserving situated knowledge, relational practices, and structural understandings of violence – making institutional recognition a crucial stake in the struggle for epistemic and political legitimacy.

While this paragraph has focused on the criticalities emerging from collaboration within institutional networks, it is equally important to stress that AVCs actively engage in overcoming these tensions. Field research highlights the central role they play in promoting awareness and providing training to institutional and territorial actors – an effort that constitutes a key strategy for transforming operational cultures and fostering more effective and feminist-informed responses to violence. From this perspective, AVCs' work extends beyond the provision of individual support for women: it entails the construction of contextual conditions that encourage prevention and systemic change through sustained engagement with local networks (Cannito and Torrioni 2024; Demurtas and Misiti 2021).

5. THE STATE–REGIONS AGREEMENT AS A FIELD OF REGULATION AND CONFLICT

This section examines the State–Regions Agreement on minimum standards for AVCs and shelters as a paradigmatic site of institutional regulation and epistemic struggle, based on findings from two focus groups. Initially adopted in 2014 and revised in 2022, the Agreement marks a turning point in the institutionalisation of the anti-violence field. It reflects the state's attempt to govern AVCs through standardised criteria linked to public funding.

This has prompted resistance from feminist AVCs seeking to defend situated practices and safeguard the field's political autonomy from managerial logics. The original version was criticised for its bureaucratic language and failure to acknowledge the political identity of AVCs (Demurtas and Toffanin 2024). While the 2022

revision introduced some improvements, it also revived tensions with public institutions.

Far from being a neutral policy tool, the Agreement has become a site of symbolic struggle over competing visions of anti-violence work. At stake is the definition of the field itself: who holds epistemic authority, which practices are legitimised, and how anti-violence interventions are publicly defined.

5.1. A Subterranean Process

The revision of the State–Regions Agreement is formally presented as the result of a dialogue between institutions and feminist organizations engaged in the fight against violence against women (Busi *et al.* 2022). However, feminist associations have described the process leading to its revision as opaque, fragmented, and lacking in genuine participation. Rather than functioning as spaces for dialogue, the institutional roundtables, which have been held intermittently since 2017, were perceived as mere platforms for presenting established positions, rather than as spaces for meaningful deliberation or negotiation over the significance of key concepts.

> *The construction of positions on a chessboard that does not allow for relationality or the pursuit of shared objectives is not a debate; it is merely positioning.* (Intersectional feminist association).
> *The regions worked in complete autonomy with selected actors, without involving all organisations operating in the territory.* (National AVC network 1)

Despite a formal openness to dialogue, feminist AVCs experienced the so-called "participatory" process as a limited consultation, highlighting what they perceived as the State's substantial closure. In their view, the discontinuity of decision-making and the lack of transparency pointed to a political rationality impermeable to relational logic and unable to acknowledge the epistemic value of those working on the ground. «At a certain point, the process became subterranean – it disappeared, and then re-emerged with the outcomes [the 2022 Agreement], but without the participation of those who had originally promoted the process» (National AVC network 1).

From the perspective of feminist networks, the process that led to the revision of the State–Regions Agreement was not simply a missed opportunity for participatory governance, but a mechanism through which epistemic hierarchies are reproduced. In their view, the situated and relational knowledge developed by feminist practitioners was systematically excluded from the insti-

tutional grammar of deliberation, relegating them to the margins of the decision-making process.

5.2. Semantic Neutralization

One of the main criticisms levelled at the 2014 State–Regions Agreement concerned its definition of professional roles within AVCs, particularly the exclusion of reception workers (*operatrici di accoglienza*) – a figure central to the feminist methodology. Although not affiliated with formal professional bodies, reception workers embody the woman-to-woman relational practice at the core of feminist interventions. Their expertise, developed through internal training and experiential knowledge accumulated in the field, was disregarded by a text that recognised only roles tied to academic credentials or professional registers. This exclusion has been seen as emblematic of a broader trend towards depoliticization and professionalisation.

The 2022 version of the Agreement introduced an explicit reference to the reception practitioner, thereby partially acknowledging the demands raised by historic feminist AVCs during the revision process. However, the adopted definition remains only partially accepted.

> *The only thing we focused on is this expression 'reception practitioner'; maybe something could be added, because 'reception practitioner' is a bit... not very politically or culturally grounded [...] It's a bit vague.* (National AVC network 2)
> *The anti-violence practitioner has a specificity that goes beyond reception.* (AVC manager 1)

From the perspective of feminist networks, this constitutes a clear example of the appropriation of feminist language. In the absence of any meaningful participatory process, key terms are stripped of their original meaning and reduced to technical-administrative categories. This process of "semantic neutralisation" is particularly evident in the definition of the approach required for AVCs – the feminist methodology based on the relation between women (*metodologia della relazione tra donne*) – which several associations describe as vague, tautological, and disconnected from its feminist roots. In this context, the symbolic capital accumulated by feminist AVCs is rearticulated through a technocratic lens, deprived of its transformative potential and stripped from its situated epistemology.

> *By removing that part [on feminism], what remains is a vague articulation of certain concepts – like the reception methodology. [...] Without the underlying political and cul-*

tural reference, they lose effectiveness in relation to reality. (Intersectional feminist association)

5.3. The Injunction to Perform as a service

By their very nature, the texts of the State–Regions Agreement introduce structural and organisational requirements that AVCs must meet to access public funding. Among these, however, are several criteria typical of public service provision, which are fundamentally misaligned with the nature of AVCs. As a result, AVCs risk being reconfigured as generic service providers, subject to compliance requirements, time-bound procedures, and standardised training metrics.

The introduction of the 24/7 requirement (H24) for the availability of a dedicated phone line is particularly emblematic in this regard. Many associations interpret it as a sign of the ongoing reconversion of AVCs into emergency outposts, functionally and conceptually assimilated to health or crisis response services. «Anti-violence centres do intervene in emergencies, but they are not emergency services – so the emphasis placed on 24/7 operation is something we absolutely do not agree with» (National AVC network 1).

Given that services dedicated to 24/7 support or emergency protection already exist, AVCs instead assert their role as structures that accompany women along their path out of violence and toward autonomy. This accompaniment requires practitioners, on the one hand, to adapt to each woman's timing, needs, and choices; and on the other, to build local alliances with civil society actors, institutions, and services – thus reinforcing the transformative function of AVCs through relational and political proximity to the territory.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This article has argued for the analytical relevance of conceptualising feminist AVCs as *communities of resistance*. In line with international debates, it has examined the risk of neutralisation inherent in the institutionalisation of a field that originated in grassroots feminist practice and is increasingly subject to pressures of professionalisation.

A key area of resistance concerns the nature of AVCs. Since their inception, feminist care practices have had an explicit political significance, because supporting survivors is closely linked to the broader goal of social transformation. However, the process of heteronomisation of the anti-violence field has brought significant

shifts. The analysis has revealed the coexistence between symbolic capital rooted in feminist genealogies and performance-oriented logics promoted by institutionalisation. This tension generates organisational and epistemic conflicts that affect the definition of care, the configuration of professional roles, and the criteria for institutional recognition. The field thus appears heterogeneous, marked by divergent positionalities: on one side, AVCs committed to feminist and transformative politics; on the other, services shaped by efficiency, measurability, and bureaucratic accountability. Between these poles lie hybrid attempts at reconciliation, not without friction.

The neutralisation of feminist knowledge should not be understood merely as a top-down imposition, but rather as the effect of a broader systemic process tied to the state's appropriation of the feminist agenda on violence. This has led to the involvement of an increasing number of institutional actors, who operate through professionalised perspectives. As a consequence, epistemic hierarchies have emerged, whereby institutionally recognised forms of knowledge tend to marginalise the experiential and relational knowledge developed within feminist AVCs. Faced with the risks of marginalisation and conflicting paradigms, AVCs adopt differentiated strategies. On the other hand, many AVCs invest in building territorial alliances aimed at transforming the interpretive frameworks of other actors. Through training, awareness-raising, and dialogical engagement, they work to shift professional cultures and institutional approaches, while also fostering broader societal change. These efforts require sustained commitment and represent concrete strategies for disseminating feminist perspectives and reinforcing the political and educational role of AVCs.

Framing AVCs as communities of resistance also necessitates a more rigorous analysis of their capacity to forge alliances with other insurgent political subjectivities. Several practitioners interviewed for this study explicitly articulated intersectional and transfeminist commitments, demonstrating a nuanced awareness of the complex entanglements of gender, sexuality, race, class, and citizenship that shape experiences of violence. While many AVCs already confront these interlocking systems of oppression in their everyday practice, the articulation of broader, transversal alliances emerges as a critical political horizon. In this regard, Bourdieu (1998) underscores the subversive potential of alliances between feminist and queer movements. Though historically and politically distinct, these movements share a structural marginality within the dominant symbolic order, a positionality from which collective mobilisation can more effectively resist political ghettoisation and activate

transformative processes. Within the field of anti-violence work, this insight suggests that the continued vitality of AVCs as communities of resistance increasingly hinges on their ability to serve as spaces of convergence, dynamic platforms that interweave plural, situated struggles, united by a shared rejection of patriarchal, heteronormative, and neoliberal domination.

Such an orientation toward intersectional solidarity does not dilute the feminist genealogy that grounds AVCs; rather, it affirms and radicalises it, extending their political and epistemic project across multiple, interconnected fronts of resistance. The transformative potential of AVCs thus lies not only in safeguarding feminist memory, but also in their capacity to activate strategic solidarities across difference, grounded in a shared horizon of social justice.

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La produzione sociale del sapere scientifico tra razionalità e questioni ultime: un'analisi del discorso applicata a testi di genetica e neuroscienze

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Abstract. This article examines whether and how scientific knowledge, in its public and reflexive moments, engages with ultimate questions understood, with Weber, as existential inquires that exceed formal rationality. The study applies a qualitative discourse analysis to a corpus of 85 monographs written by geneticists and neuroscientists for a non-specialist audience, identifying three recurring configurations: the circularity between scientific knowledge and ultimate questions; the recognition of the epistemic limits of science; and the articulation of moral implications within an «expanded view» of science. In this framework, public scientific discourse does not merely inform or persuade, but becomes a reflexive space in which science addresses ultimate questions by interweaving scientific rationality, existential perspective, normative reflection, and symbolic imagination. In doing so, it also interrogates its own epistemic status, cognitive limits, and social implications. The article concludes by discussing the implications for the sociological study of the social production of scientific knowledge, and invites reflection on the public role of science – and of sociology itself – as a form of knowledge that contributes to the collective construction of meaning in a context marked by fragmented symbolic frameworks and the centrality of formal rationality.

Keywords: social production of scientific knowledge, STS, discourse analysis, ultimate questions, formal rationality.

1. INTRODUZIONE

A partire da Weber, la scienza moderna è stata descritta come un sapere disincantato, orientato alla spiegazione causale, alla verifica empirica e all'efficacia tecnica, ma strutturalmente incapace di rilevare o affrontare interrogativi ultimi di senso. Come afferma lo stesso Weber in un celebre passo de *La Scienza come vocazione*, citando Tolstoj, la scienza è priva di significato «perché non risponde alla sola domanda importante per noi: che dobbiamo fare? come dobbiamo vivere?» (Weber 1966 [1919]: 21). In questa prospettiva, questioni come il significato della vita e della morte, la sofferenza o la libertà

risultano estranee alla sfera del sapere scientifico, rivolto al raggiungimento di «successi tecnici» (Ivi: 26), e vengono ricondotte ai domini religiosi, filosofici o morali. Tale separazione tra sapere scientifico e domande ultime è divenuta uno dei nodi centrali degli studi sociologici su modernità e secolarizzazione, che hanno teorizzato una progressiva erosione di tali preoccupazioni a favore dell'espansione di una razionalità formale (Berger e Luckmann 1966; Bruce 2002).

Negli ultimi anni, tuttavia, questa concezione dicotomica e oppositiva è stata progressivamente messa in discussione. Numerosi studi hanno mostrato che, anche in contesti sociali altamente razionalizzati, la ricerca di senso non si estingue ma si riconfigura in forme nuove, pluralistiche e differenziate e non necessariamente religiose (Joas 2014; Taylor 2007, 2024; Berger 2003; 2014; Cadge 2011: 441).

Allo stesso tempo, la crescente centralità della scienza nella definizione dell'identità e delle condizioni di esistenza ha reso più visibili, all'interno del discorso scientifico stesso, elementi che chiamano in causa interrogativi su cosa significhi essere umani, quali siano i confini della conoscenza e quale statuto assegnare alla libertà, alla coscienza, alla responsabilità. Contrariamente all'idea di una scienza intrinsecamente disincantata, alcuni autori (ad es. Clayton *et al.* 2002; Midgley 1992) hanno mostrato come in alcuni ambiti della ricerca contemporanea – in particolare quelli che si occupano dell'origine della vita, della coscienza o della struttura dell'universo – sembri farsi strada un rinnovato interesse per interrogativi radicali, riguardanti ad esempio il significato profondo della vita e della morte, l'infinitamente grande e l'infinitamente piccolo e le dimensioni trascendenti la realtà empirica. Per questi autori, tali domande esprimono un'esigenza conoscitiva profonda, di natura non esclusivamente intellettuale ma anche filosofica e spirituale, che rimanda ai significati ultimi dell'esistenza. Non necessariamente questo interesse per i «significati del mondo», citando di nuovo Weber (1966 [1919]: 38), si esprime mediante un atteggiamento scientista che riduce tali significati a spiegazioni razionali ed empiricamente rilevabili. Al contrario, alcuni autori hanno rilevato come le trasformazioni scientifiche del Novecento abbiano favorito un passaggio da prospettive materialiste e deterministe verso spiegazioni più probabilistiche e controintuitive (Saler 2006: 714). La fisica quantistica, in particolare, contribuendo a sfumare distinzioni un tempo nette tra soggetto e oggetto, materia e spirito, vivente e non vivente ha stimolato una visione «relazionale» ed «ecologica» (Griffin 1988), «cosmologica» – nel senso bergeriano di una totalità coerente e intrinsecamente significativa (cfr. Laszlo 2006) – e persino «mistica» (Wilber 1984). Come argomenta Wilber (1984: 13):

Quando questi fisici si resero conto che la teoria fisica dava loro solo ombre e simboli della realtà, piuttosto che la realtà stessa, essi si liberarono dalla visione materialistica del mondo e quindi si aprirono a considerare la propria esperienza cosciente come reale e rivelatrice.

Da una prospettiva storica, altri studi hanno evidenziato che, lungo tutta la storia della conoscenza umana, l'indagine scientifica si è articolata «nella scia» di domande ultime, riflettendo «il bisogno di dare un senso al mondo nella sua totalità» da un punto di vista «metafisico» (Wagner e Briggs 2016: 53, 411). Come ha mostrato lo storico Harrison (2015: ix), «le questioni relative al significato e al valore ultimi [sono] raramente separate dalla comprensione della natura dell'universo».

Questo contributo intende affrontare il nesso tra razionalità e questioni ultime nella produzione sociale di conoscenza scientifica applicando un'analisi del discorso qualitativa a un corpus di 85 monografie pubblicate da genetisti e neuroscienziati autorevoli tra il 1975 e il 2018 e rivolte a un pubblico non specialistico. L'obiettivo è indagare e comprendere se e come la scienza contemporanea, nei suoi momenti pubblici e riflessivi, si confronti con questioni ultime e quale posizione epistemica ed etica adotti rispetto ad esse.

La domanda che guida la ricerca è dunque: la scienza, nel momento in cui si apre al pubblico, affronta anche questioni ultime che eccedono la razionalità formale? E se sì, essa si limita a tematizzare tali interrogativi per finalità comunicative, o queste entrano a far parte di una più ampia riflessione sul senso, sui limiti e sulle implicazioni del sapere scientifico stesso? Detto altrimenti: i riferimenti a temi esistenziali nei testi scientifici pubblici rappresentano solo una strategia retorica per conquistare attenzione, o rivelano una forma di riflessività capace di interrogare la natura e i confini della conoscenza?

Il contributo si colloca nel campo della sociologia della conoscenza scientifica, in dialogo con le prospettive degli Science and Technology Studies (STS) che hanno mostrato come la produzione scientifica sia inscindibile dalle condizioni socio-culturali in cui essa si realizza (Knorr-Cetina 1999; Latour e Woolgar 1979; Jasanoff 2004). Gli STS hanno aperto la strada a uno studio della scienza come pratica situata, attraversata da linguaggi, metafore e dispositivi che contribuiscono a costruire significati e forme di soggettività. Collocandosi in questo solco, il presente lavoro indaga un aspetto ancora poco esplorato: il modo in cui questioni esistenziali si intrecciano con la produzione di conoscenza scientifica nei momenti in cui questa prende la parola pubblicamente su di sé.

Sul piano teorico, l'articolo intende contribuire alla sociologia della conoscenza scientifica mostrando come,

in alcuni suoi momenti discorsivi, la scienza non si esaurisca nella razionalità formale ma incorpori prospettive esistenziali e normative che ne espandono i confini. Sul piano pubblico, si propone di interrogare il ruolo che la conoscenza scientifica – compresa quella sociologica – può assumere in una società in cui il bisogno di senso non è venuto meno e che continua a cercare, anche attraverso il sapere scientifico, linguaggi simbolici per nominare la propria condizione.

2. INQUADRAMENTO TEORICO: LA RAZIONALITÀ SCIENTIFICA E IL PERSISTERE DELLE DOMANDE DI SENSO

Nel corso del XX secolo, molte letture sociologiche della modernizzazione hanno associato il progresso scientifico e tecnologico a un graduale declino delle preoccupazioni esistenziali e ultime. Secondo tali prospettive, la razionalizzazione del sapere avrebbe sostituito i tradizionali quadri simbolici di orientamento, relegando le domande ultime a margine della vita pubblica e istituzionale (Acquaviva 1961; Berger 1967; Luckmann 1967; Martin 1978; Wilson 1966; Bruce 2002). In questo quadro, la scienza è stata interpretata come sia prodotto sia motore del disincanto moderno: una forma di conoscenza fondata sulla quantificazione, sulla osservazione empirica e sulla neutralità assiologica, che svuota il mondo di un senso del mistero, di una profondità morale e dei significati ultimi. Max Weber ha espresso con chiarezza questa visione nel saggio *La scienza come vocazione*, riprendendo l'affermazione di Tolstoj secondo cui la scienza non può rispondere alle domande fondamentali: «Che dobbiamo fare? come dobbiamo vivere?» (Weber 1966 [1919]: 21). Per Weber, questa impossibilità non è una lacuna superabile, ma il tratto distintivo del «destino della nostra epoca», segnato dalla frammentazione dei valori e dalla fine dell'unità metafisica.

Questa concezione della scienza come disincantata e disincantante è stata ampiamente ripresa nella sociologia classica e post-weberiana, che ha evidenziato la tensione tra razionalità scientifica e autorità religiose o metafisiche (Berger 1967; Wilson 1966). Secondo Bruce (2002), ad esempio, l'autorità epistemica della scienza risiede nella sua capacità di offrire spiegazioni coerenti e verificabili, contribuendo alla razionalizzazione delle istituzioni e alla delegittimazione di interpretazioni simboliche non fondate empiricamente.

La cosiddetta tesi o «narrazione del disincanto» (Landy e Saler 2006; Bennett 2001) si è consolidata anche sulla base di osservazioni empiriche e analisi sociologiche che hanno evidenziato la crescente formalizzazione, specializzazione e autonomia funzionale del sapere scientifico. In questa prospettiva, la scienza moderna viene descritta come operante all'interno di un regime epistemico fondato su rigore metodologico, accuratezza predittiva e falsificabilità, che tende a escludere esplicitamente ogni coinvolgimento etico o esistenziale (Lyotard 1979; Gieryn 1983). Questa visione è coerente con gli approcci della sociologia della conoscenza che, a partire da Merton (1973), hanno tematizzato la scienza come sistema normativo autoregolato, fondato su criteri di oggettività, universalismo e disinteresse. Allo stesso tempo, numerosi studi (ad es. Stichweh 1992) hanno descritto la crescente specializzazione della conoscenza scientifica come un processo che ha rafforzato la differenziazione funzionale, contribuendo a consolidare la separazione tra scienza, etica e religione. Tale approccio è coerente con i modelli funzionalisti della modernità, che concepiscono la scienza come un sottosistema autonomo, orientato alla risoluzione tecnica dei problemi e alla produzione di controllo (Parsons 1951; Luhmann 1990).

Negli ultimi decenni, tuttavia, questa narrazione è stata profondamente riconsiderata. La sociologia della scienza e, in particolare, gli Science and Technology Studies (STS) hanno criticato l'idea della scienza come pratica neutrale e distaccata, mettendo in luce la sua natura situata, relazionale e socialmente co-prodotta (Jasanoff 2004; Latour 2004). In questa cornice, la conoscenza scientifica non è separabile dai contesti sociali, normativi ed esperienziali che la plasmano (Latour 1991; Haraway 1988; Knorr-Cetina 1999; Harding 1991) e il confine tra sapere scientifico e preoccupazioni esistenziali appare molto più permeabile di quanto ipotizzato dalla tesi del disincanto.

Questa riconcettualizzazione ha aperto la strada a una visione della scienza come pratica non solo cognitiva, ma anche discorsiva e riflessiva, in cui possono emergere – soprattutto nei momenti pubblici – configurazioni simboliche, implicazioni etiche e visioni dell'umano (Midgley 2002). Quando si rivolge a un pubblico non specialistico, il discorso scientifico non si limita a veicolare modelli predittivi o dati empirici, ma può articolare, anche implicitamente, domande sul significato della vita, sulla vulnerabilità, sulla dignità o sulla responsabilità. In particolare, nelle scienze della vita e della mente, affermazioni su identità biologica o funzionamento cerebrale non si presentano mai in forma neutra, ma contribuiscono – già nel piano del discorso – a delineare antropologie implicite, categorie morali e orizzonti di senso (Yearley 2005). Anche quando formulate in linguaggio tecnico, tali affermazioni incorporano strutture simboliche che rinviano, in modo più o meno esplicito, a interrogativi esistenziali fondamentali (Fleck 1983; Star *et al.* 1989).

In questa prospettiva, la comunicazione pubblica della scienza (CPS) rappresenta un ambito privilegiato per osservare come il discorso scientifico, nei suoi momenti riflessivi, possa articolare interrogativi che eccedono la mera spiegazione causale. Oltre alla sua funzione informativa, essa si configura come una pratica discorsiva in cui il sapere scientifico prende posizione su se stesso e sui propri limiti e veicola, inoltre, implicazioni morali, politiche o spirituali, contribuendo a strutturare discorsivamente i contorni simbolici dell'esistenza (Bucchi *et al.* 2008; Felt e Fochler 2010; Wynne 1992; Jasanoff 2005; Davies *et al.* 2016). In questo spazio di esposizione e autoriflessione, il discorso scientifico può assumere dunque un carattere performativo e interpretativo, incorporando immagini dell'umano, della libertà o della vita buona (Evans 2016; Chan 2018). Più che strumenti di legittimazione o narrazioni rivolte alla società, queste configurazioni discorsive possono essere lette come momenti interni alla scienza in cui si formula – anche implicitamente – una riflessione sul senso, sui limiti e sulle condizioni del sapere stesso. In questo senso, i riferimenti a ciò che Midgley (2002) ha definito «miti moderni» non vanno intesi come costrutti culturali esterni, ma come strutture simboliche inscritte nella pratica epistemica, attraverso cui la scienza, almeno in alcune occasioni, tenta di dare voce a interrogativi ultimi.

Parallelamente, anche il concetto stesso di disincanto è stato oggetto di una profonda revisione teorica. La sociologia contemporanea rifiuta sempre più l'idea che si tratti di un processo lineare e irreversibile. Sociologi, storici e filosofi sociali – tra cui ad esempio Taylor (2007, 2024), Berger (2014), Landy e Saler (2006), Bennett (2001) e Curry (2023) – hanno mostrato come la ricerca di senso non si estingua nelle società secolari e pluralizzate, ma possa anzi intensificarsi proprio in virtù della loro frammentazione e riflessività. Gli individui, in questo quadro, non interiorizzano passivamente una visione puramente razionale del mondo, ma mobilitano attivamente repertori simbolici per riorganizzare l'esperienza, negoziare il senso e affrontare le incertezze della condizione umana (Houtman *et al.* 2007; Cornelio *et al.* 2021; Giordan 2016; Woodhead 2012). Il disincanto, dunque, non segna la fine della preoccupazione per i significati ultimi ed esistenziali, quanto piuttosto una trasformazione delle condizioni in cui tali significati possono emergere ed essere tematizzati. Ciò non implica, tuttavia, che questa ricerca sia oggi più semplice o stabile: al contrario, l'erosione delle grandi narrazioni e delle strutture condivise di plausibilità rende tali tentativi spesso più fragili, intermittenti e precari, esponendoli al rischio di rimanere individuali, effimeri o marginali. Inoltre, in assenza di ancoraggi culturali forti, questa stessa tensio-

ne verso il senso può essere facilmente assorbita o neutralizzata dalla razionalità formale dominante (cfr. ad es. Magatti e Giaccardi 2022; Stiegler 2010).

Il presente studio si inserisce in questa linea di ricerca, assumendo la comunicazione pubblica della scienza come uno spazio in cui si intrecciano dimensioni epistemiche, normative ed esistenziali. In particolare, si esplora l'ipotesi che la CPS costituisca un punto di interazione potenziale tra un sapere analitico e tecnico e una forma intuitiva, narrativa e simbolica del conoscere, che include una dimensione esistenziale legata alle preoccupazioni ultime – ciò che Panikkar (2009) definisce rispettivamente «logos» e «mythos» (cfr. anche Midgley 2003; Han 2024).

3. METODO

Questo studio intende rispondere a una domanda centrale: in che misura la comunicazione pubblica della scienza nei campi delle neuroscienze e della genetica si confronta con questioni esistenziali e ultime che eccedono la razionalità formale, e in che modo tali questioni vengono articolate e inquadrate?

Data la natura esplorativa e interpretativa della domanda di ricerca, è stata adottata un'analisi qualitativa del discorso, volta a produrre approfondimenti ricchi, contestualizzati e non statisticamente generalizzabili. L'analisi si è concentrata in particolare su un campione ragionato di 85 monografie, pubblicate tra il 1975 e il 2018 da genetisti e neuroscienziati di riconosciuta autorevolezza nelle rispettive comunità scientifiche, e rivolte a un pubblico non specialistico. La raccolta e l'analisi dei dati sono avvenute tra il 2016 e il 2019.

Genetica e neuroscienze sono state selezionate tra altri campi disciplinari poiché considerate due domini che plasmano in maniera particolarmente forte le concezioni contemporanee dell'identità e dell'azione umana (cfr., ad esempio, Nelkin e Lindee 1995). La scelta di due discipline diverse risponde all'obiettivo di comprendere se vi siano differenze o analogie nel modo in cui le preoccupazioni esistenziali e i riferimenti extra-scientifici vengono tematizzati all'interno del discorso scientifico.

Gli scienziati sono stati selezionati in base ai seguenti criteri: posizione accademica o di ricerca di alto livello (ad es. direttori di istituti di rilievo, professori ordinari), premi prestigiosi (ad es. Premio Nobel), alti indicatori bibliometrici (ad es. H-index) e l'autorialità di almeno una monografia destinata a un pubblico non specialistico.

La selezione del corpus di testi scritti da questo campione di scienziati è avvenuta consultando gli archivi di

biblioteche internazionali, tra cui la Library of Congress e la Hesburgh Library dell'Università di Notre Dame (IN). La maggior parte dei testi è stata pubblicata originariamente in lingua inglese, principalmente da editori statunitensi o britannici, a testimonianza della centralità di questi contesti sociali e geografici nel panorama scientifico contemporaneo. Sono state incluse nel campione solo le monografie in cui il gene o il cervello rappresentavano il tema centrale, garantendo così coerenza tematica all'interno del corpus.

L'analisi si è svolta in due fasi. Nella prima fase, le monografie sono state codificate sulla base di riferimenti espliciti o impliciti a temi esistenziali o normativi (ad es. natura umana, libertà, morte). Particolare attenzione è stata riservata a marcatori retorici quali l'uso di termini filosofici o spirituali (ad es. "essenza", "destino", "libertà", "anima"), i cambi di registro e i riferimenti a tradizioni letterarie, filosofiche, spirituali o religiose (Fairclough 1992, 1995a, 1995b).

Nella seconda fase, i segmenti così codificati sono stati analizzati attraverso una lente metodologica principalmente ispirata a Laclau e Mouffe (1985) e a Fairclough (1992, 1995a, 1995b). Questo approccio ha utilizzato strumenti analitici quali le strategie di inquadramento (framing), i «punti nodali» (nodal points), i «significanti fluttuanti» (floating signifiers) e le «articolazioni» (ad es. i significati generati da accoppiamenti linguistici quali "gene/destino", "malattia/male", "corpo/anima", "materia/spirito").

Sono stati integrati anche strumenti teorici provenienti dagli STS (ad es. Latour e Woolgar 1979; Latour 1984) e dal filosofo della scienza Sini (2004), che si è occupato specialmente di analizzare il linguaggio scientifico e la sua contaminazione con elementi normativi. Particolare attenzione è stata dedicata alla funzione «generativa» delle metafore, intese come dispositivi discorsivi capaci di ridefinire significati consolidati e produrre nuovi quadri semantici (Hesse 1966; Bucchi 2000). Sono stati inoltre considerati elementi visivi, strutture narrative e modalità discorsive, incluse espressioni come "credo che" o "ritengo che", l'uso della prima persona e l'uso del condizionale al posto dell'indicativo.

Laddove possibile, l'analisi è stata contestualizzata attraverso fonti biografiche, al fine di distinguere tra strategie meramente retoriche e un coinvolgimento più profondo e autentico rispetto alle questioni esistenziali e ultime – ovvero quei casi in cui le preoccupazioni esistenziali non vengono semplicemente citate per rendere più attraente il contenuto scientifico, ma contribuiscono in modo sostanziale al senso complessivo del discorso. Questo approccio ha permesso di individuare configurazioni ricorrenti in cui la PCS non funge solo da veicolo di divulgazione, ma si configura anche come luogo di costruzione simbolica e negoziazione normativa.

4. RISULTATI

4.1. Circolarità tra conoscenza scientifica e questioni ultime

L'analisi ha rivelato una ricorrente interazione tra conoscenza scientifica e domande fondamentali dell'esistenza. I testi esaminati mostrano che oggetti o fenomeni scientifici fungono frequentemente da punti di accesso per un'indagine più profonda su temi esistenziali quali la vita, la morte, la sofferenza, la natura umana e la libertà. Piuttosto che trattare queste preoccupazioni come periferiche rispetto al discorso scientifico, gli autori tendono a incorporarle nel cuore stesso delle proprie narrazioni, illustrando una relazione ricorsiva tra il ragionamento scientifico e i processi di attribuzione di significato. Come illustrato nelle sezioni seguenti, le questioni ultime sono inquadrate in una cornice narrativa e simbolica ricca di dispositivi retorici – come metafore e personificazioni – e di riferimenti alla letteratura e alla mitologia. Questa circolarità indica, dunque, anche un intreccio reciproco tra l'indagine epistemica e l'immaginazione simbolica.

Un esempio paradigmatico si trova nel discorso relativo a gravi malattie genetiche, come il cancro o la malattia di Huntington. Queste condizioni non sono rappresentate unicamente come fenomeni biologici, ma sono spesso caricate di significato esistenziale, morale e metafisico. Il cancro, ad esempio, nei discorsi dei genetisti, assume un peso simbolico talmente rilevante da rappresentare, in diverse circostanze, tutti i mali del mondo, anche a livello metafisico e ontologico. Alcune caratteristiche rendono queste malattie assimilabili a rappresentazioni archetipiche del male nell'immaginario collettivo. Una di queste è la loro natura ereditaria, che evoca temi come la maledizione trasmessa tra generazioni – che rimanda alle rappresentazioni della tragedia greca – o, in contesti religiosi, il concetto di peccato originale – che rimanda invece a quelle dei testi sacri. Tali associazioni simboliche ricorrono nei testi analizzati con una certa sistematicità e coerenza interna[1].

Il genetista Collins (2010: 134), ad esempio, descrive il cancro nel modo seguente:

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[1] Si ricorda che queste espressioni sono utilizzate entro un approccio di tipo qualitativo e non quantitativo, senza alcuna pretesa di generalizzazione in termini statistici.

Tra le molte malattie che incutono timore a noi e alle nostre famiglie, il cancro è in cima alla lista. Come un ladro nella notte, questo colpevole deruba regolarmente le sue vittime della speranza di una vita lunga e felice, affliggendole con perdita di forza, perdita di appetito, dolori lancinanti e morte prematura.

La personificazione del cancro assegna alla malattia un'intenzionalità malevola, una simbologia che viene ripresa da molti altri autori. Assael (2016: 12-13), ad esempio, usa l'espressione «il male si insinuava attraverso ogni generazione» per descrivere la trasmissione ereditaria di una malattia genetica, evocando una figura diabolica. Boncinelli (2001b: 68) attribuisce alla malattia di Huntington «una particolare perfidia», suggerendo che agisca con crudeltà intenzionale. Descrive la huntingtina, la proteina codificata dal gene HTT, come dormiente fino a quando non scatena «tutta la sua terrificante potenza» (ivi: 71). Simili costruzioni simboliche si trovano anche in Jones (2000: 69), che evidenzia il «sinistro colpo di scena» della malattia, che lascia le persone incerte sulla propria condizione fino alla comparsa dei sintomi. Mukherjee (2016: 343) descrive le fasi terminali della malattia come «macabre», segnate da «una danza involontaria che sembra seguire la musica del diavolo». Boncinelli (1997: 14) e Bodmer (1994: 70) riportano descrizioni della malattia di Huntington come «la più demoniaca tra tutte le malattie».

Il cancro al colon è descritto facendo riferimento all'immaginario mitologico (Jones 2000). Tali costruzioni simboliche trasformano anomalie biologiche in siti di significato etico e metafisico, una dimensione che non è accessoria ma costitutiva dei quadri epistemici e culturali attraverso cui il discorso scientifico acquisisce significato. Il significato simbolico delle malattie genetiche, in particolare, spesso costituisce la motivazione fondamentale dell'impegno scientifico, infondendo alla ricerca un senso di urgenza e uno scopo morale. Gros, ad esempio, articola chiaramente questa convergenza tra scienza ed etica quando scrive: «Sebbene mossi da una ricerca disinteressata e vincolati dalla condizione umana, possa questa nuova genetica darci forza per combattere il flagello del cancro! Sto dalla parte di coloro che credono questo.» Allo stesso modo, Murgatroyd (2010: 187), citando Lance Armstrong, invoca un imperativo etico netto: «Abbiamo due opzioni... arrenderci o combattere come dannati.» Boncinelli (2014: 77) colloca la missione della biologia contemporanea in termini bellici, descrivendola come l'affilatura «delle nostre armi contro ogni tipo di malattia».

All'interno di queste configurazioni discorsive, la genetica assume una duplice funzione simbolica: da un lato, come forza quasi apotropaica che cerca di esorciz-zare «gli spettri della nostra epoca» (*Ibidem*); dall'altro, come veicolo per sublimare la condizione umana, posizionando gli scienziati non solo come esperti tecnici, ma come agenti impegnati in un'impresa morale ed esistenziale. L'indagine scientifica, in questo contesto, non si limita a produrre soluzioni tecniche, ma si fa anche dispositivo simbolico per elaborare l'esperienza umana della vulnerabilità e della morte. Infatti, sebbene tali elaborazioni possano talvolta rafforzare la legittimità del discorso scientifico nello spazio pubblico, ciò che emerge dall'analisi non è semplicemente una strategia comunicativa, ma una forma di riflessività epistemica. Le ricorrenze discorsive, la coerenza interna degli argomenti e la ricchezza simbolica con cui vengono affrontate le questioni esistenziali indicano che questi scienziati non si limitano a comunicare contenuti scientifici, ma si confrontano attivamente con le questioni esistenziali e di senso.

4.2. *Limiti della conoscenza scientifica*

L'associazione emersa dall'analisi tra conoscenza scientifica e questioni ultime indica una logica circolare, in cui ciascun ambito arricchisce e informa l'altro all'interno dei discorsi presi in esame. Ciò suggerisce che tali discorsi esprimano un approccio integrativo tra questi due domini, piuttosto che uno basato sul conflitto – nei termini delineati dalla nota tipologia di Barbour (1990) sull'interazione tra scienza e religione. Questa dinamica è ulteriormente rafforzata dal riconoscimento esplicito dei limiti intrinseci della conoscenza scientifica e da un netto rifiuto di prospettive riduzioniste, in particolare quando gli scienziati affrontano il tema della natura umana.

Ad esempio, il genetista Rutherford (2017) sottolinea che «siamo infinitamente più del nostro DNA», mentre il neuroscienziato Braitenberg (1989) afferma che «sarebbe del tutto sbagliato dire che io sono solo un pezzo di materia». Queste affermazioni riflettono uno sforzo costante di andare oltre il riduzionismo e concepire la scienza come uno strumento per esplorare, piuttosto che delimitare, la condizione umana. Il genetista Danchin (1998) contesta esplicitamente l'idea che gli esseri umani siano semplicemente automi biologici. Il neuroscienziato Eagleman (2011) illustra vividamente questo punto con l'immagine di una telecamera inserita nella gola di una persona che declama una poesia d'amore: questo strumento, sottolinea l'autore, non riuscirebbe a cogliere alcuna traccia di significato, emozione o soggettività e dunque la sua funzione sarebbe inutile. Questa metafora sottolinea dunque l'insufficienza di spiegazioni puramente fisiche per afferrare la ricchezza dell'esperienza umana, spesso articolata, nei discorsi degli scienziati

esaminati, attraverso riferimenti intertestuali a letteratura, mitologia, religione e arte.

Analogamente, la collega Greenfield (2000) sostiene che «pensare a me stessa come a una macchina biochimica è profondamente sbagliato» (cfr. anche LeDoux 2003). Gazzaniga (2015), citando Einstein, osserva che «una descrizione puramente scientifica della vita è priva di significato, come spiegare le sinfonie di Beethoven attraverso onde di pressione.» Le metafore musicali sono frequentemente utilizzate dagli scienziati come dispositivi retorici per trasmettere la complessità dei sistemi biologici, che resistono a una lettura riduzionista. Allo stesso tempo, tali metafore mettono in evidenza gli aspetti estetici e creativi dell'organizzazione biologica, costruendo un ponte tra descrizione scientifica e senso di bellezza e armonia. McGilchrist, ad esempio, paragona la coscienza a uno strumento che «ha molte melodie da suonare» e suggerisce che «più comprendiamo, più ricco diventa il concerto» (McGilchrist 2010: 321; cfr. anche Eagleman 2015: 178; Greenfield 2000: 23).

4.3. Questioni morali entro una «visione estesa» della scienza

Il rifiuto esplicito del riduzionismo e l'adozione di una «visione estesa» della scienza (Nicoli 2024) che integra dimensioni materiali e simboliche, oggettive ed esistenziali emergono chiaramente dai testi analizzati e danno luogo, in questi ultimi, a riflessioni morali all'interno del discorso scientifico. In diversi casi, infatti, il riconoscimento dei limiti della conoscenza scientifica e l'integrazione di narrazioni orientate al senso forniscono un quadro per valutare cosa costituisca una vita buona o piena di significato. Quando il discorso scientifico tocca temi come la sofferenza, la morte, la libertà o l'unicità dell'umano, esso si confronta simultaneamente con preoccupazioni di natura morale ed etica. La scienza emerge così non solo come uno strumento per comprendere il mondo, ma anche come un'impresa che contribuisce a riflettere su – e a delineare – idee di dignità, agire e responsabilità umana.

Un esempio significativo è la trattazione della mortalità non semplicemente come un dato biologico, ma come una condizione antropologica ed esistenziale carica di valore. Il neuroscienziato Damasio (2003: 318-320), ad esempio, definisce la coscienza e la memoria – entrambe capaci di rendere l'essere umano consapevole del tempo e della propria finitudine – come «due doni della biologia», generosamente elargiti alla specie. Lungi dal rappresentare la morte come un semplice punto finale, queste riflessioni suggeriscono che la mortalità costituisca la condizione stessa per rendere la vita uma-

na sensata. Una linea simile si trova in Tononi (2014: 317-318), che mette in scena un dialogo immaginario tra Galileo e un interlocutore misterioso sull'eventualità di ottenere l'immortalità attraverso copie infinite della propria coscienza. In questo scambio, Galileo osserva:

> *Con tutte queste copie potrei essere al sicuro, ma non si ridurrebbe il valore di ognuna? Se la mia stessa forma – la forma della mia coscienza – può essere replicata, se mille Galilei identici a me possono essere prodotti, come orde di guerrieri cinesi, allora potrei davvero essere immortale, ma non sarei né prezioso né unico.*

Queste rappresentazioni sottolineano che significato e valore non emergono malgrado i limiti umani, ma proprio grazie ad essi; in questa visione, i limiti sono celebrati. Su una linea simile, il genetista Danchin (1998) afferma che l'imprevedibilità dell'essere umano – la sua apertura alla contingenza e alla libertà – rappresenta una «visione ottimistica del futuro». L'autore scrive: «Sì, c'è ancora spazio per l'umanesimo, perché l'uomo non può essere ridotto a nessun'altra specie vivente, e certamente non a una macchina automatica. C'è persino ancora più spazio per la moralità» (*Ibidem*). In questa prospettiva, il rifiuto di visioni deterministiche o meccanicistiche non è solo di natura epistemica, ma anche etica: afferma l'unicità e la capacità di agire morale dell'essere umano.

Vi sono anche alcune eccezioni, rappresentate da autori che adottano un approccio riduzionista e scientista. Si tratta di genetisti nati negli anni Dieci e Venti del Novecento – nello specifico Cavalli Sforza, Buzzati-Traverso e Watson – le cui opere analizzate sono state scritte e pubblicate negli anni Settanta e che si dichiarano apertamente atei e antireligiosi – l'analisi non ha invece rilevato posizioni riduzioniste tra i neuroscienziati. Come i loro colleghi genetisti, anche questi scienziati offrono una definizione dell'umano basata su valori, che li porta a formulare riflessioni morali ed etiche su cosa renda una vita degna di essere vissuta, seppure con conclusioni molto diverse. In particolare, Cavalli Sforza (1976) e Watson (2002) descrivono la vita delle persone con sindrome di Down come «non normale» e caratterizzata da «infelicità» sia per gli individui stessi sia per le loro famiglie. Tali affermazioni li portano ad argomentare esplicitamente che alcune vite potrebbero non essere degne di essere vissute, sollevando importanti implicazioni eugenetiche.

Queste posizioni sono tuttavia rare all'interno del corpus e in netto contrasto con la sensibilità morale più diffusa tra gli altri autori. Più nello specifico, tale impostazione è largamente assente tra i ricercatori più giovani, molti dei quali sostengono apertamente un'integrazione tra scienza, filosofia e persino la religione. Questa

cesura storica suggerisce che il modello conflittuale tra scienza e dimensione morale possa essere destinato ad attenuarsi, almeno nel contesto della comunicazione pubblica della scienza, come rilevano in effetti alcuni studi (cfr. ad es. Midgley 2002; Zwart 2014).

È importante sottolineare che molti scienziati sostengono l'idea che l'impresa scientifica sia inevitabilmente intrecciata a considerazioni di tipo morale e che gli scienziati abbiano la responsabilità di confrontarsi apertamente e riflessivamente con tali dimensioni. Il genetista Mukherjee (2016), ad esempio, invita i lettori a considerare le implicazioni morali dell'editing genetico. Il neuroscienziato Nicolelis (2011), come già menzionato, critica le concezioni dell'intelligenza artificiale come «moralmente vuote», sostenendo che ridurre il comportamento umano ad algoritmi o codici neurali cancella ciò che è più essenziale nell'esperienza umana: empatia, compassione e discernimento morale.

Anche l'uso di riferimenti letterari e filosofici, già discusso nella sezione precedente, serve non solo ad approfondire il significato antropologico ed esistenziale, ma anche a evocare una dimensione morale. Il richiamo alla compassione descritta da Omero nella scena della morte di Ettore (Nicolelis 2011) e le allusioni alle figure tragiche shakespeariane come quella di Calibano (Mukherjee 2016), ad esempio, aiutano a costruire una visione etica dell'essere umano come essere capace di empatia, bellezza e responsabilità. Tali allusioni suggeriscono che l'esplorazione scientifica dell'umano non possa rimanere eticamente neutra, ma debba rendere conto di cornici più ampie.

Il rifiuto del riduzionismo e l'adozione di una visione simbolicamente densa della scienza, pertanto, non favoriscono solo un'umiltà epistemologica, ma promuovono anche la formazione di posizioni etiche. Le narrazioni scientifiche partecipano così alla continua negoziazione su cosa significhi essere umani, non solo in termini di ciò che siamo, ma anche di come dovremmo vivere.

5. CONCLUSIONI

Questo articolo ha indagato se e come la conoscenza scientifica, nei suoi momenti pubblici e riflessivi, si confronti con questioni ultime intese, con Weber, come domande esistenziali che eccedono la razionalità formale. La ricerca si è basata sull'analisi qualitativa di 85 monografie pubblicate tra il 1975 e il 2018 da genetisti e neuroscienziati di riconosciuta autorevolezza e rivolte a un pubblico non specialistico.

L'analisi ha evidenziato tre modalità principali attraverso cui queste preoccupazioni emergono. La prima consiste in una circolarità tra conoscenza scientifica e questioni ultime, che si esprime in un'articolazione, da parte degli scienziati, tra razionalità scientifica, prospettiva esistenziale, riflessione normativa e immaginazione simbolica. La seconda riguarda una consapevolezza dei limiti gnoseologici della conoscenza scientifica, resa visibile attraverso l'uso di metafore, registri letterari o filosofici, ma anche prese di posizione esplicite da parte di alcuni autori. La terza concerne la presenza di implicazioni morali e normative, dove la scienza non si limita a descrivere, ma prende posizione – anche implicitamente – su ciò che significa essere umani, entro una visione non riduzionista ma «estesa».

Questi risultati offrono un duplice contributo alla sociologia della conoscenza scientifica.

Sul piano teorico, essi mostrano che la scienza, pur mantenendo un impianto metodologicamente rigoroso, può incorporare elementi di riflessività epistemica, morale ed esistenziale, mettendo in discussione l'idea di una razionalità scientifica esclusivamente formale e totalmente autonoma e disincantata. In questo senso, l'articolo si inserisce nel solco di una tradizione che, da Weber (1966 [1919]) a Berger e Luckmann (1966), fino a Taylor (2007; 2024), Joas (2014) e Wagner e Briggs (2016), ha mostrato la persistenza del bisogno di senso anche nelle società più razionalizzate, pur riconoscendone le tensioni, le ambivalenze e le fragilità.

Sul piano metodologico, il contributo sottolinea la necessità di indagare non solo i processi istituzionali e culturali che strutturano la produzione scientifica (Jasanoff 2004; Knorr-Cetina 1999), ma anche le forme in cui la scienza si autorappresenta discorsivamente, producendo significati su ciò che è conoscibile, umano, degno di attenzione. In questa prospettiva, l'analisi qualitativa del discorso si configura come uno strumento particolarmente efficace, poiché consente di cogliere le articolazioni simboliche, retoriche e narrative attraverso cui il sapere scientifico tematizza sé stesso, i propri limiti e le proprie implicazioni esistenziali e normative.

Su un piano più ampio, questa analisi sollecita una riflessione sul ruolo della scienza nella sfera pubblica contemporanea. In un contesto segnato dalla pluralizzazione delle fonti di legittimità e dalla crisi delle grandi narrazioni, è significativo che una parte del discorso scientifico non si chiuda di fronte alle domande ultime, né le riduca a problemi tecnici o biologici. Al contrario, queste domande vengono accolte, tematizzate e mantenute aperte, costituendo uno spazio attraverso cui la scienza riflette sul proprio statuto epistemologico, i propri limiti gnoseologici e le proprie implicazioni sociali.

Da questa prospettiva, la scienza può essere intesa come un potenziale interlocutore pubblico – una forma

di sapere che, pur nei suoi vincoli metodologici, partecipa – in modi non sempre espliciti – alla costruzione collettiva di senso. In altri termini, la scienza – mai del tutto scindibile da una responsabilità etica – si trova attualmente davanti a un bivio: contribuire a rafforzare le logiche di razionalità formale già ampiamente diffuse, radicate e pervasive; oppure coltivare una tensione verso le questioni ultime dell'esistenza, sostenendo la legittimità di linguaggi simbolici capaci di accoglierle, entro una visione non scientista e riduzionista ma «estesa».

Come sostengono Taylor e Curry, la scienza è potenzialmente capace tanto dell'una quanto dell'altra direzione. Secondo Taylor (2024: 523), essa può reprimere le esigenze di senso nella «neutralità e indifferenza», assumendo una posizione «oggettivante», oppure può spingersi «abbastanza in profondità» da cogliere «la complessità e la bellezza degli ordini della natura», risvegliando una «aspirazione etica» che chiama all'azione e alla cura e un'attenzione per il «significato del mondo» (Weber 1966 [1919]: 38) con una efficacia comparabile a quella della poesia (Taylor 2024: 264). In modo analogo, Curry (1999; 2019) osserva come la scienza – e in particolare le scienze della vita e della natura – possa sottrarsi alla logica di colonizzazione del reale come oggetto pienamente conoscibile e manipolabile e, al contrario, nutrire un'etica della meraviglia e del mistero, riconoscendo ciò che sfugge alla spiegazione e coltivando una consapevolezza dei propri confini.

In una società secolare, pluralistica e iper-razionalizzata, in cui le domande ultime non sono scomparse ma faticano a trovare espressione in forme plausibili e condivise, questo bivio è tutt'altro che trascurabile, tanto per le scienze – compresa la sociologia – quanto per una società che continua a cercare linguaggi simbolici per dare senso alla propria condizione.

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Dalla fabbrica al simbolo: mobilitazione e convergenza nel conflitto Gkn

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Abstract. The concept of 'convergence' represents an innovative perspective for analysing collective mobilisations and contemporary conflicts. This article develops a theorisation of convergence as a dynamic process that integrates actors, resources and repertoires of action into collective configurations capable of transcending immediate contingencies. Through the case of the Gkn dispute, one of the most significant workers' mobilisations in Italy, the study analyses how workers built a network of solidarity and resistance, transforming a local crisis into a national symbol. Using methodological tools such as Protest Event Analysis (PEA) and a mechanism-process approach, the research highlights how convergence functions as a catalyst for the construction of collective identities, the articulation of innovative strategies and the redefinition of power relations. The work thus proposes a critical reinterpretation of contemporary mobilisations, suggesting that convergence, in addition to explaining the duration and impact of conflicts, can be an explanatory model of contemporary socio-political transformations.

Keywords: social movement unionism, contentious politics, collective identity, community organizing, conflict theory.

1. INTRODUZIONE

La "convergenza" rappresenta uno dei concetti più dibattuti nell'ambito delle dinamiche conflittuali e dei processi di mobilitazione collettiva. Nella letteratura sociologica, il termine evoca la capacità di diversi attori, risorse e repertori d'azione di intersecarsi e cooperare strategicamente, dando vita a configurazioni collettive che trascendono le contingenze immediate.

Questo articolo si propone di analizzare il fenomeno della convergenza attraverso il caso studio della vertenza Gkn, una delle mobilitazioni operaie più significative del panorama italiano contemporaneo. L'analisi approfondisce il ruolo di meccanismi e processi contestuali che hanno favorito l'emergere e il consolidarsi di questa mobilitazione, sottolineandone l'impatto sui rapporti di forza e sulle strutture sociali ed economiche di riferimento.

La vertenza Gkn, iniziata nel luglio 2021 con il licenziamento collettivo dei dipendenti dello stabilimento di Campi Bisenzio, si distingue non solo per la sua durata e intensità, ma anche per l'articolazione delle strate-

gie di resistenza adottate. Attraverso un approccio basato sull'*eventful protest* (della Porta 2008) e sul paradigma delle "cause di un effetto" (della Porta e Keating 2008), la ricerca esplora le modalità attraverso cui i lavoratori, supportati da reti territoriali e comunità solidali, hanno trasformato una crisi aziendale in un simbolo nazionale di resistenza collettiva. In questo contesto, l'articolo si propone di rispondere a due domande centrali: a) quali sono i fattori e i meccanismi che hanno permesso la costruzione di un processo conflittuale così longevo e articolato? b) in che modo il concetto di convergenza può essere impiegato come chiave analitica per spiegare tale processo?

Attraverso l'utilizzo della *Protest Event Analysis* (PEA) e la conseguente creazione di un set di dati qualitativi e quantitativi, lo studio si propone di offrire un contributo originale alla comprensione delle dinamiche di mobilitazione e delle trasformazioni che esse generano nei contesti contemporanei. La vertenza Gkn, come verrà discusso nelle sezioni successive, non si limita a rappresentare un caso isolato di resistenza operaia, ma costituisce un terreno fertile per l'elaborazione di nuovi modelli esplicativi in grado di cogliere la complessità delle lotte collettive nel contesto socioeconomico attuale. Attraverso il concetto di "convergenza", si aprono nuove possibili prospettive per riflettere sulle dinamiche di coordinamento, solidarietà e costruzione identitaria che caratterizzano le mobilitazioni sociali nell'epoca contemporanea.

2. DISEGNO DI RICERCA E METODOLOGIA

Il caso studio è qui indagato seguendo l'approccio metodologico di Eisenhardt (1989). Ispirandoci ai contributi di Cini e Goldman (2020) e adottando un disegno di ricerca basato sul paradigma delle "cause di un effetto" (della Porta e Keating 2008), l'obiettivo è identificare i fattori che hanno determinato il raggiungimento di un determinato esito. Nello specifico, l'analisi si focalizza sui meccanismi contestuali che hanno favorito l'emergere di una delle più rilevanti campagne di protesta del movimento operaio italiano: la vertenza del Collettivo di fabbrica Gkn.

La vertenza Gkn, per la sua durata – oltre due anni – e per il numero di individui e gruppi coinvolti, con cortei e manifestazioni che hanno raggiunto le 15-30 mila unità, non può essere considerata come un semplice caso di mobilitazione. Essa sembrerebbe rappresentare un fenomeno più profondo e radicato. Non a caso, gli stessi lavoratori descrivono il proprio agire attraverso un termine inedito: *convergenza*. Questa modalità

di agire, come sarà illustrato nel corso dello studio, si configura come un vero e proprio modello di processo conflittuale. Essa riflette la capacità di diversi attori e risorse di confluire in modo strategico e coordinato, generando una dinamica collettiva capace di affrontare sfide strutturali che vanno oltre le contingenze e le rivendicazioni specifiche.

Dal punto di vista della raccolta dati, la ricerca si basa sulla *PEA* che consente la quantificazione delle dimensioni correlate alla protesta come la frequenza, la tempistica, la durata, la posizione, la dimensione, la forma e il vettore di una protesta (Koopmans e Rucht 2002). Basandomi sulla definizione di Tilly (1995), un evento di protesta, qui considerato come l'unità di base della raccolta e dell'analisi dei dati, è o un raduno effettivo di almeno tre individui convocati in uno spazio pubblico per avanzare rivendicazioni che riguardano gli interessi di un'istituzione o di un attore collettivo, o un'azione indirizzata a suscitare l'attenzione dei media, di un'istituzione o di un attore collettivo, o un'azione tesa alla costruzione di momenti di partecipazione collettiva. Dalla raccolta dei dati sono state escluse le minacce di ricorso all'azione collettiva come anche le azioni collettive non adeguatamente definite dai media o dagli stessi attori della protesta.

Per la raccolta e la mappatura degli eventi, sono state utilizzate diverse risorse che consentono una documentazione accurata e multiforme. In primo luogo, sono stati analizzati i documenti prodotti dal Collettivo di fabbrica Gkn, integrati da tutti i post e i comunicati pubblicati sui profili *Facebook* e *Instagram* del collettivo, incluso il profilo "Insorgiamo con i lavoratori Gkn". In secondo luogo, è stato impiegato il motore di ricerca *Google News* per raccogliere articoli relativi alla vertenza. Seguendo la metodologia proposta da Andretta e Pavan (2018), è stata elaborata una lista di parole chiave che combinano i termini associati ai repertori di protesta (ad esempio: sciopero, picchetto, dimostrazione, marcia, corteo, protesta, raduno, flash-mob, sit-in, assemblea, occupazione) con quelli specifici del contesto della protesta (lavoro Gkn, protesta Gkn, licenziamenti Gkn, Gkn Campi Bisenzio, Gkn Firenze, sciopero Gkn, ecc.). Questa strategia ha permesso di identificare articoli pertinenti durante il periodo di riferimento (9 luglio 2021 – 17 giugno 2024), garantendo una copertura temporale completa e focalizzata sugli eventi rilevanti. L'integrazione di queste risorse consente una triangolazione dei dati, fondamentale per ottenere una visione più articolata e approfondita del caso studio.

Il set di dati finale è composto da 339 eventi. Per ognuno sono stati registrati i seguenti dati: luogo, data, repertorio, natura della rivendicazione. La codifica è

avvenuta sulla base del *codebook* proposto da Kriesi (1995) mutuandolo con alcuni codici presenti nel *codebook* proposto da Karapin (2007).

3. LE DINAMICHE DEL CONFLITTO

La *contentious politics* comprende numerose forme e combinazioni di azione collettiva ed è espressione di processi sociali complessi. Secondo Tilly e Tarrow (2008), la spiegazione di qualsiasi processo sociale complesso (conflittuale o meno) richiede tre passaggi fondamentali:

a. Descrizione del processo.
b. Scomposizione del processo nelle sue cause basilari.
c. Ricomposizione di tali cause in una descrizione delle modalità di sviluppo del processo.

Per descrivere e spiegare i processi caratterizzanti la *contentious politics*, gli studiosi tendono a focalizzarsi su due principali unità analitiche: a) i flussi conflittuali, comunemente denominati cicli o 'ondate' di protesta; b) gli eventi conflittuali. Se i flussi si caratterizzano per un'ampiezza definitoria che li riconduce a periodi estesi di mobilitazione collettiva e rivendicativa, la definizione degli eventi è più specifica e può essere letta come una sequenza definita di un'interazione continua.

La decisione di adottare un livello di analisi macro-meso, focalizzandosi sui flussi, o micro-meso, concentrandosi sugli eventi, è strettamente legata agli obiettivi della ricerca. Nel contesto del presente lavoro, un approccio analitico centrato sugli eventi, piuttosto che sui flussi, appare più adeguato a cogliere le dinamiche specifiche e le interazioni contestuali che caratterizzano il fenomeno. Ad esempio, nella ricerca di Rucht (2005) sulla partecipazione politica in Germania, la scomposizione dei flussi di conflitto in episodi ha reso possibile l'articolazione di tre distinti approcci analitici, ciascuno caratterizzato da specificità metodologiche e rilevanza cruciale per la comprensione del fenomeno studiato. L'utilità di questa operazione risiede nella capacità di trascendere la mera descrizione cronologica di un processo – tipica di un approccio storico-narrativo – per individuare, invece, i meccanismi e i processi attraverso cui si struttura e si manifesta il conflitto nella sua dimensione politica. Questo approccio analitico è conosciuto in letteratura come "approccio in termini di meccanismi e processi" alla spiegazione del conflitto (Tilly e Tarrow 2008). All'interno di questo quadro teorico, i meccanismi sono definiti come una classe circoscritta di cambiamenti che modificano le relazioni tra specifici insiemi di elementi in modi simili o identici attraverso una varietà di contesti. I processi, invece, sono intesi come combi-

nazioni e sequenze regolari di meccanismi che generano trasformazioni analoghe negli elementi considerati. Per condurre un'analisi rigorosa in termini di meccanismi e processi, lo studioso deve seguire un percorso in quattro fasi: a) definire il contesto del conflitto, specificando i siti e le condizioni significative in cui ha origine; b) descrivere il flusso del conflitto, identificando gli episodi rilevanti e le loro dinamiche interne; c) individuare i meccanismi, analizzando i cambiamenti prodotti nei singoli episodi e le loro interazioni; d) ricostruire i processi e spiegare i risultati, combinando condizioni, meccanismi e analogie con altri fenomeni per comprendere gli esiti osservati (Tilly e Tarrow 2008). L'ordine delle fasi analitiche non è statico, ma dinamico. Esso, pertanto, può variare in base alle caratteristiche specifiche del caso studiato e alle indicazioni emergenti dai dati empirici che si hanno a disposizione. Tale flessibilità metodologica consente di adattare il processo analitico alle peculiarità del fenomeno osservato, ottimizzando l'individuazione dei meccanismi e dei processi rilevanti.

Alla luce di ciò, analizzare la vertenza Gkn non solo permette di dare rilevanza a un fenomeno significativo della contemporaneità, ma consente anche di interpretare l'evento in relazione al processo trasformativo che esso rappresenta. Questo approccio evita di ridurre la vertenza a un'unità isolata e priva di connessioni, collocandola invece all'interno di un contesto storico e politico-sociale più ampio, in cui emergono le dinamiche e significati del conflitto.

4. IL CONTESTO: LA MAIL DEL 9 LUGLIO 2021

9 luglio 2021
Non siamo in condizione di rispondere al telefono, troppe telefonate e messaggi. Siamo in assemblea permanente perché questa mattina ci hanno comunicato la chiusura immediata della Gkn di Firenze. Con effetto immediato. Una mail, più di 450 famiglie a casa. Questo sono loro. Questa è la loro violenza. Avete notizie e un invito all'azione. Avremo bisogno di tutta la vostra forza e solidarietà.
Stasera alle 21 ci sarà l'assemblea di tutti i solidali e della cittadinanza di fronte ai cancelli della Gkn, in via Fratelli 1, a Campi Bisenzio.
(Insorgiamo. Diario collettivo di una lotta operaia (e non solo) – Collettivo di fabbrica Gkn, 2022)

Inizia così la lunga vertenza operaia dei lavoratori della Gkn, con una mail che comunica il licenziamento di oltre 500 operai. Come hanno sottolineato gli stessi lavoratori (si veda Collettivo di fabbrica Gkn 2022: 61), l'elemento fondamentale non risiede tanto nella modalità del licenziamento quanto nel licenziamento stesso. Questo evento rappresenta solo l'ultimo episodio di una lun-

ga serie di licenziamenti che, sotto questo profilo, rendono la vertenza Gkn simile a centinaia di altre vertenze in Italia e negli altri paesi del centro capitalistico. Tale ancoraggio consente di considerare la vertenza in un più ampio contesto di ristrutturazioni aziendali, chiusure e delocalizzazioni che hanno caratterizzato le dinamiche del lavoro negli ultimi decenni, riflettendo tendenze sistemiche che travalicano i confini nazionali. La vera specificità della vertenza Gkn, invece, risiede nel contesto unico in cui si sviluppa: un'azienda di grandi dimensioni, tecnologicamente avanzata, efficiente e soprattutto caratterizzata da una forte e ben strutturata organizzazione sindacale. Questa combinazione di elementi distingue la vertenza Gkn da altre simili, poiché mette in evidenza la capacità di un collettivo operaio già consolidato di rispondere in maniera coesa e strategica a una situazione di crisi. Tale specificità rappresenta non solo un elemento distintivo, ma anche un fattore determinante per la capacità dei lavoratori di mobilitarsi e attirare l'attenzione su scala nazionale, trasformando una vicenda aziendale locale in un caso di resistenza generale alle logiche di ristrutturazione aziendale e del mercato del lavoro contemporaneo.

Già prima della ormai nota mail di licenziamento, i lavoratori Gkn avevano costituito un collettivo autonomo che operava come una struttura di base indipendente per l'organizzazione dei lavoratori. Come evidenziato da Cini (2021), questa struttura funzionava parallelamente e in modo autonomo rispetto alle organizzazioni sindacali "ufficiali", contribuendo a democratizzare ulteriormente le attività sindacali nello stabilimento e a rafforzare le risorse politiche e organizzative autonome dei lavoratori, offrendo un'infrastruttura operativa che ha dimostrato la sua efficacia nel momento in cui è scoppiata la vertenza nel luglio 2021.

Quando il conflitto è emerso, questa eredità di "infrastrutture organizzative" (Cini 2021: 3) si è rivelata determinante, assumendo un ruolo di guida e avanguardia sia nello sviluppo della vertenza sia nella costruzione della mobilitazione. Il Collettivo di fabbrica ha agito come catalizzatore per la mobilitazione, garantendo una risposta rapida, coesa e robusta al licenziamento collettivo. Parallelamente, le attività sindacali "ufficiali" sono state condotte dalla FIOM-CGIL, seppur in maniera marginale. Quest'ultima ha svolto un ruolo complementare, partecipando ai tavoli di negoziazione con le autorità locali, i funzionari governativi e l'azienda.

Tuttavia, più del sindacalismo istituzionale che, come detto, ha avuto un ruolo marginale, è stato fondamentale il coinvolgimento e la partecipazione della comunità territoriale, che emerge come un insieme di relazioni sociali fondamentale per comprendere le nuove

forme dell'*agency* del lavoro. Infatti, fin dal primo giorno della vertenza, i lavoratori Gkn hanno potuto contare sul sostegno e sulla solidarietà di un'ampia rete di attivisti, organizzazioni politiche e sociali e centri sociali dell'area fiorentina. Questa rete di supporto ha rappresentato un elemento distintivo e cruciale nella mobilitazione, distinguendosi per la capacità di strutturarsi in "gruppi di supporto" che hanno seguito e sostenuto la vertenza in ogni sua fase.

Le forme di solidarietà e aiuto che tali gruppi hanno infuso alla vertenza ha non solo rafforzato le risorse operative del Collettivo di fabbrica, ma anche amplificato la portata della protesta, coinvolgendo settori più ampi della società civile. Tale interazione ha reso la vertenza Gkn una delle proteste sindacali più combattive e significative in Italia negli ultimi anni. La vivacità politico-sociale del territorio, caratterizzata da un'ampia partecipazione della società civile, ha fornito un terreno fertile per la convergenza delle diverse realtà richiamate precedentemente, queste ultime hanno contribuito a trasformare la vertenza in un simbolo di resistenza collettiva e solidarietà sociale.

5. L'EVENTFUL PROTEST DELLA VERTENZA GKN

Il concetto di *eventful protest*, elaborato da Donatella della Porta (2008), si riferisce a quei momenti di mobilitazione collettiva che, per la loro portata, intensità e capacità di generare cambiamenti, acquisiscono un significato trasformativo, incidendo profondamente sia sui partecipanti che sul contesto sociale, politico ed economico in cui si verificano. In ambito sociologico, tale concetto consente di comprendere perché alcune mobilitazioni collettive producano effetti duraturi, quali cambiamenti nelle politiche pubbliche, l'introduzione di nuove leggi, l'innovazione nei repertori di azione collettiva o la nascita di nuovi movimenti sociali. In questo senso, esso evidenzia il ruolo cruciale del contesto, delle interazioni strategiche tra gli attori e delle dinamiche di opportunità politica nella configurazione e negli esiti delle proteste. Come affermano della Porta e Diani (2020: 273), attraverso la protesta, vengono sperimentate nuove tattiche e inviati segnali sulla possibilità di agire collettivamente (Morris 2000). Inoltre, vengono generati sentimenti di solidarietà, reti organizzative e si può sviluppare indignazione pubblica di fronte ai casi di repressione (Hess e Martin 2006). In questa prospettiva, la protesta si configura, almeno in parte, come un sottoprodotto delle proprie dinamiche. Il conflitto che ne costituisce il motore genera capitale sociale, identità collettive e nuove conoscenze che non solo alimentano

ulteriori mobilitazioni, ma contribuiscono anche a trasformarle in qualcosa di più strutturato e duraturo. Di conseguenza, la protesta non si limita a essere un mezzo per il conseguimento di obiettivi esterni, ma diventa un processo che ridefinisce le dinamiche interne ai movimenti stessi, rafforzando il loro potenziale organizzativo, identitario, simbolico e relazionale.

La Figura 1 rappresenta il numero complessivo di eventi di protesta registrati nel corso della vertenza, offrendo una rappresentazione quantitativa dell'intensità della mobilitazione nel tempo. Inoltre, evidenzia i picchi di attività corrispondenti agli eventi più significativi, fornendo una chiave di lettura delle dinamiche conflittuali e del loro sviluppo.

Tra luglio 2021 e giugno 2024 sono stati registrati 339 eventi di protesta, con una media di 9,41 eventi al mese. Il picco massimo di attività, situato nella parte finale della curva tra novembre e dicembre 2023, segnala ben 24 eventi di protesta. Questa distribuzione temporale riflette la capacità del Collettivo di fabbrica di mantenere un livello elevato di mobilitazione e di intensificare le azioni nei momenti strategicamente più rilevanti.

5.1. Gli eventi chiave, dall'occupazione alla strada

Per i lavoratori, scioperi e occupazioni non rappresentano soltanto strumenti di pressione collettiva (Pizzorno 1993), ma anche luoghi in cui si costruisce un senso di comunità (Fantasia 1988). Come sottolinea della Porta (2008), la partecipazione a proteste implica l'investimento di tempo e risorse in attività rischiose, che tuttavia generano (o rigenerano) risorse di solidarietà e coesione sociale. Allo stesso modo, Rochon (1998) evidenzia che molte forme di protesta producono un impatto significativo sullo spirito di gruppo e sulla coesione dei partecipanti.

Considerando gli eventi di protesta nella loro dimensione culturale e simbolica, l'occupazione dello stabilimento Gkn da parte dei lavoratori, avvenuta in seguito al licenziamento collettivo, può essere interpretata come un evento che trascende la mera logica strumentale della protesta. Questa, infatti, non si limita a rappresentare uno strumento di pressione politica finalizzato al raggiungimento di uno specifico obiettivo, ma assume una valenza trasformativa, creando lo spazio materiale, cognitivo ed emotivo per la costruzione di identità collettiva, solidarietà e nuove pratiche organizzative. Attraverso l'occupazione dello stabilimento, i lavoratori hanno posto le basi per la costruzione di una campagna di protesta strutturata, trasformando il sito produttivo in un luogo di resistenza collettiva, incontro e networking.

Da quel momento in poi, gli eventi di protesta e partecipazione organizzati dal Collettivo di fabbrica si sono moltiplicati, includendo cortei, marce, picchetti, dimostrazioni e momenti assembleari di vario genere. Queste forme di "networking in azione" (della Porta 2008) non solo hanno attirato l'attenzione dei media e dell'opinione
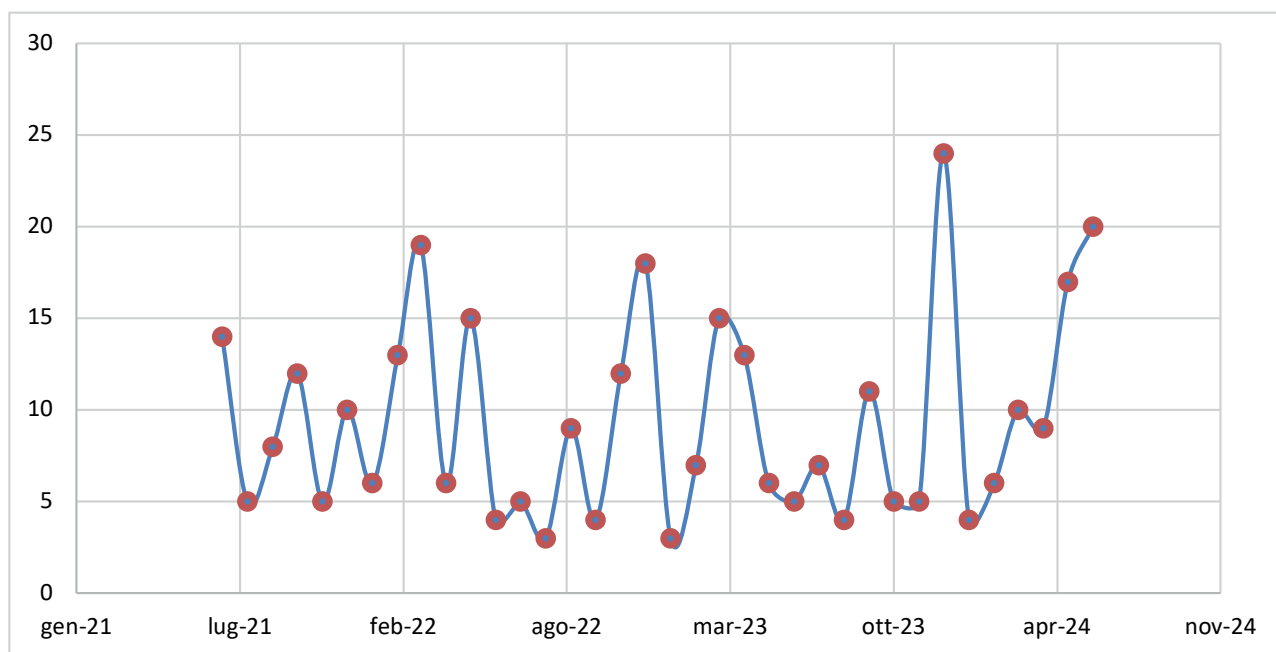

Figura 1. Numero totale eventi di protesta per mese. Fonte: elaborazione dell'Autore.

pubblica, ma hanno anche facilitato lo scambio di conoscenze tra i partecipanti e rafforzato i legami sociali, contribuendo alla creazione di una logica di rete e una "cultura della solidarietà" (Fantasia 1988). Una logica che è stata applicata in maniera modulare in ogni singolo evento, da quello più radicale a quello più convenzionale. Questo approccio ha favorito l'espansione della rete di attori coinvolti, contribuendo a una progressiva strutturazione delle alleanze e a una ridefinizione della posta in gioco e dello spettro d'azione della vertenza. Un passaggio cruciale in questa evoluzione è rappresentato dalle due giornate di lotta del 25 e 26 marzo 2022.

La prima giornata, organizzata in collaborazione con il movimento *Fridays for future*, ha segnato un momento di convergenza tra rivendicazioni lavorative e istanze tipiche dell'ambientalismo. La partecipazione di attori molto eterogenei tra loro, come operai, ambientalisti e giovani studenti ha dimostrato la capacità del Collettivo di fabbrica di saper dialogare con altre forze politiche e categorie sociali, rafforzando così la legittimità politica e sociale della mobilitazione. Il secondo evento, battezzato dai lavoratori "Insorgiamo, per questo, per altro, per tutti", rappresenta invece uno degli esempi più classici di cambiamento di scala e autorappresentazione sociale (Tilly, Tarrow 2008). Con un'alta partecipazione popolare, questa giornata di lotta ha evidenziato l'alta capacità organizzativa del Collettivo di fabbrica, nonché la voglia di singoli attori sociali e organizzazioni politiche di tornare a dialogare insieme per una causa e un interesse comune. Ciò che rende particolarmente interessante questo tipo di eventi è, insieme al già citato *background* plurale dei partecipanti, il livello multi-scalare dell'azione. Ciascun evento, infatti, nella misura in cui ha contribuito alla formazione di identità personali e collettive tra i partecipanti, ha anche ridefinito le rappresentazioni di questi ultimi come forza sociale e politica, con un impatto significativo sia a livello locale che nazionale.

5.2. La presa di Palazzo Vecchio

Insieme alle sopracitate forme di azione e protesta, l'occupazione temporanea del Salone dei Duecento a Palazzo Vecchio a Firenze, ribattezzata dai lavoratori come "La presa di Palazzo Vecchio", rappresenta un momento quasi-liminale (Turner 1982) per i lavoratori e per il movimento emergente, in quanto simbolo di consapevolezza politica e di utilizzo strategico delle risorse disponibili. Quest'azione è stata concepita come una sfida diretta a una delle principali strategie adottate dalle istituzioni e dalle proprietà aziendali per neutralizzare il conflitto: la creazione di arene istituzionali, come task-force, tavoli tecnici o consigli tematici, progettate più

per contenere e gestire il conflitto in modi controllabili e prevedibili che per risolvere concretamente le problematiche dei lavoratori. In questo contesto è utile richiamare la dinamica della *time politics* elaborata da Nowotny (1992), in cui il controllo del tempo diventa una risorsa cruciale che riflette l'asimmetria dei rapporti di forza. Nelle vertenze lavorative contemporanee, il tempo stesso si configura come una forma di potere, spesso utilizzata per indebolire la resistenza collettiva e ridurre la pressione esercitata dai lavoratori. L'occupazione temporanea di Palazzo Vecchio, circa 30 ore, accompagnata dalla decisione dei lavoratori di non sottoscrivere congiuntamente qualsiasi tipo di accordo con le istituzioni e la proprietà, costituisce una svolta significativa nelle modalità di conduzione della vertenza. Questo gesto rappresenta un rifiuto sia simbolico che concreto delle logiche istituzionali volte a deterritorializzare e decontestualizzare il conflitto, trasferendolo in spazi e tempi in cui risulti più facile depotenziarlo. La richiesta dei lavoratori di trasferire il Consiglio comunale da Palazzo Vecchio alla fabbrica, ancora occupata, non va letta come una semplice provocazione politica, bensì come un tentativo concreto di localizzare il conflitto, riterritorializzarlo e ricontestualizzarlo, ribaltando i rapporti di forza e spostando il centro della discussione dal dominio delle istituzioni percepite come distanti e autoreferenziali al cuore della lotta operaia. Il comunicato che segue, riportato da diverse testate giornalistiche, riflette in modo evidente la volontà dei lavoratori di evitare il ripetersi degli errori del passato, adottando una strategia che privilegia il conflitto rispetto alla concertazione tradizionale:

> *Dopo trenta ore di presidio in Palazzo Vecchio, ci è stato chiesto di fatto "qualche giorno, qualche ora" in più. È un giochino che ormai conosciamo: farci fare la parte di quelli che vogliono tutto e subito. Cosa volete che sia qualche ora in più o qualche giorno in più? È così da sedici mesi, le ore si trasformano in giorni, i giorni in mesi e i mesi in anni. Ed è così che abbiamo "lasciato la posizione" in vista della prossima finestra di verifica. Lunedì è stato indetto un Consiglio Comunale dedicato al tema Gkn. Abbiamo chiesto che tale Consiglio si svolga in fabbrica. Perché se noi abbiamo attraversato fisicamente il Comune ("la casa di tutti e tutte"), ora il Consiglio Comunale è chiamato a sancire con la propria presenza fisica che questa è la fabbrica di tutti e tutte. Quella sarà l'ulteriore verifica. Non abbiamo chiuso "la presa di Palazzo Vecchio" con alcun documento congiunto, perché a questo punto sarà l'intero Consiglio Comunale ad esprimersi.* (Comunicato Collettivo di fabbrica – 055firenze, 16.9.2022)

È importante richiamare questo evento perché segna una discontinuità rispetto ad altre vertenze, ridefinendo le modalità di conduzione del conflitto e sottolinean-

do il suo ruolo come motore di trasformazione sociale e politica. Infatti, sottratto alle dinamiche di contenimento istituzionale, il conflitto viene restituito al territorio e alla comunità direttamente coinvolta nella mobilitazione. In tal modo, la vertenza Gkn inaugura una nuova regola, dimostrando come la resistenza operaia possa non solo rispondere alle logiche istituzionali, ma anche ridefinirle, valorizzando la forza e la legittimità di una mobilitazione dal basso e dell'autoattività dei lavoratori (Atzeni 2016).

5.3. La settimana dell'imbarazzo e lo sciopero della fame

L'ultimo evento chiave richiamato in questo lavoro è la "settimana dell'imbarazzo", preludio all'entrata in sciopero della fame di alcuni lavoratori. Questo evento, avvenuto nei primi giorni di giugno 2024, si distingue per la strategia adottata dai lavoratori nel trasformare una situazione di stallo in un'occasione di denuncia pubblica. Tale iniziativa rientra in un momento di *escalation* e contrapposizione del conflitto. Esso ha evidenziato l'incapacità delle istituzioni di fornire risposte adeguate alla vertenza, nonostante la presentazione da parte dei lavoratori in collaborazione con un gruppo di studiosi, esperti e ricercatori, di un piano dettagliato di reindustrializzazione. Lo sciopero della fame si pone come un'azione estrema, simbolo di una resistenza che, pur nella vulnerabilità fisica, dimostra una forza morale capace di scuotere il dibattito pubblico e politico nazionale:

> Dopo oltre cinque mesi di stipendi non pagati, il ricatto della fame è fallito: da oggi un gruppo di lavoratori ha iniziato uno sciopero della fame a oltranza per chiedere l'immediato commissariamento di QF (l'attuale proprietà dell'ex Gkn) al governo, l'erogazione istantanea degli stipendi non versati e l'approvazione della legge regionale che restituirebbe dignità e futuro a questa fabbrica, al suo territorio e alla famiglia allargata delle migliaia di persone che non hanno mai smesso di abbracciarla. Non è un gesto disperato di chi cerca attenzione, o peggio, commiserazione [...]. Ora che il tempo delle vane attese è scaduto ed è iniziata la «settimana dell'imbarazzo», a ciascuno e ciascuna di noi il lusso di decidere da che parte stare e di provare a incidere sul come debba andare a finire questa storia. (Comunicato Collettivo di fabbrica – Jacobin, 4.6.2024)

Come si evince da questo stralcio di comunicato, i lavoratori hanno interpretato lo sciopero della fame collegandolo all'emozione dell'imbarazzo, intesa come quella sensazione che emerge in situazioni scomode, difficili e inaspettate, che provocano disagio e vulnerabilità. Questa emozione, a loro avviso, riflette lo stato d'animo di centinaia di migliaia di lavoratori licenziati, o di studenti che, non trovando lavoro, si sentono incapaci

di soddisfare aspettative sociali. L'imbarazzo, in questo contesto, diventa una metafora di una condizione diffusa e un possibile ancoraggio identitario attraverso il quale trovare riconoscimento, riconoscibilità e costruire un'identità collettiva.

Un ulteriore elemento legato all'imbarazzo, inoltre, risiede nella scelta simbolica della "fame" e della privazione della stessa in un paese capitalistico avanzato, dove il consumo e l'abbondanza sono dati per scontati. Attraverso questa forma di sciopero, i lavoratori hanno trasformato una privazione in un atto politico e collettivo, capace di mettere in discussione le disuguaglianze e le contraddizioni del sistema economico. La natura di questa dimensione emotiva è chiaramente espressa nelle parole utilizzate dai lavoratori nel loro comunicato, in cui collegano la loro esperienza a quella di milioni di persone, invitando a una riflessione profonda sulle condizioni materiali e psicologiche che caratterizzano il lavoro e la vita nella contemporaneità.

> Ci spaventa uno sciopero della fame, e ci imbarazza usare un termine come "fame" in un modo dove di stenti si muore veramente, ad esempio in Palestina [...]. Qua da noi la povertà non prende quasi mai la forma della morte per inedia. Anzi, spesso si accompagna con forme di obesità dovute al junk food. Qua da noi la povertà ha il volto della mancanza di cure, del disagio psichico, della morte per freddo durante l'inverno. E infatti con questo sciopero della fame non vogliamo denunciare solo o tanto lo stato di povertà relativa, a cui ci hanno ridotto due anni di cassa integrazione e cinque mesi senza stipendio. Vi restituiamo in faccia il gioco a cui avete giocato sin dalle prime ore di quel 9 luglio 2021. Lo sapevamo che lo avreste fatto. Ma tra saperlo e riuscire a impedirlo, purtroppo, ci passano i rapporti di forza. Incontri che rimandano incontri, chiacchiere, svolte annunciate, rassegnazione, zizzania seminata tra i lavoratori, cambi di proprietà, di liquidatori, di nomi: tutto per fare perdere le tracce di questa lotta [...]. Quindi, alla fine, ci siamo dati la risposta più semplice: siete voi a dovervi ammalare di paura e l'imbarazzo è tutto vostro [...]. Buona settimana dell'imbarazzo e ora, ci raccomandiamo, fate quello che sapete fare: prendere tempo, per perdere tempo. Noi siamo qua, con la pancia piena di rabbia e dignità. (Comunicato Collettivo di fabbrica – Instagram, 4.6.2024)

Due elementi fondamentali emergono da questo ultimo evento di protesta. Il primo riguarda la collettivizzazione e politicizzazione di un'emozione generalmente percepita come intima e privata, come l'imbarazzo, e la capacità dei lavoratori di trasformarla in una contro-emozione (Flam e King 2007). Attraverso questo processo, l'imbarazzo viene sottratto alla sfera privata e utilizzato come strumento critico contro un sistema economico e sociale che, come evidenziato da Standing (2011), tende a frammentare e isolare le esperienze di

precarietà e sofferenza. Questa interpretazione emotiva ribalta la logica individualistica, creando una narrativa collettiva di resistenza. Il secondo elemento può essere inteso, invece, come la trasformazione di un atto individuale, come lo sciopero della fame, in una azione collettiva. In questo caso, i corpi dei lavoratori diventano sia il luogo fisico in cui il conflitto si manifesta pubblicamente, sia il mezzo attraverso il quale vengono rese visibili le contraddizioni del sistema. Come sottolineato da Butler (1990) e Goffman (2022), il corpo, in alcuni casi, può assumere una valenza performativa, diventando veicolo di significati politici e sociali. Lo sciopero della fame, quindi, non si configura come un gesto di privazione personale, ma trova un'applicazione collettiva che espone il conflitto in una dimensione pubblica, tesa a stigmatizzare il comportamento e il disinteresse delle istituzioni.

6. L'ORGANIZZAZIONE DIETRO LA MOBILITAZIONE

Molti episodi di conflitto si estinguono progressivamente o si interrompono improvvisamente perché trovano scarso sostegno nella società o perché il fuoco si spegne dopo la vampata iniziale. Se le politiche conflittuali consistessero solo di diffusione, mediazione e azione coordinata, assisteremmo a un elevato grado di conflitto ma a una scarsa continuità. Quest'ultima, invece, è ciò che caratterizza maggiormente la vertenza dei lavoratori Gkn.

Come è emerso da diversi studi (Barca 2020; Cini 2021; Coe e Jordhus-Lier 2010; Peck 2008; Pike 2007; Herold 1998), ciò che definisce il potere e la capacità di agire di determinati lavoratori nelle arene conflittuali non è solo la loro posizione nel processo di produzione o la loro appartenenza di classe, ma anche il loro radicamento nei paesaggi materiali in cui vivono (la comunità di riferimento). Pertanto, per capire più approfonditamente come i lavoratori Gkn siano riusciti a organizzare la loro vertenza, occorre spostare l'attenzione dagli eventi più visibili e dirompenti a quelli meno evidenti. Da questa prospettiva, risulta utile richiamare il concetto di *hidden transcripts* sviluppato da James C. Scott (1987), che si riferisce a quelle forme di azione, pratiche e atteggiamenti che i gruppi subalterni elaborano lontano dagli occhi del potere. Attraverso una serie di studi e ricerche (Anwar e Graham 2019; Rapport 2013; Scott 2008), il perfezionamento teorico di questo concetto ha evidenziato che, nonostante la loro apparente bassa carica conflittuale, assemblee, feste, momenti di svago, concerti, presentazioni di libri, ecc., possono rappresentare modalità concrete e significative di opposizione e resistenza (Hall e Jefferson 2017). Tali pratiche, pur non assumendo necessariamente forme apertamente conflit-

tuali o visibili di protesta e opposizione, agiscono come strumenti di contestazione contro situazioni di dominio, oppressione e sfruttamento. Inoltre, contribuiscono a processi più profondi di trasformazione e transizione sociale, facilitando la costruzione di una coscienza collettiva e favorendo, in termini marxiani, il passaggio da classe in sé a classe per sé. Questi aspetti, oltre a offrire alcuni spunti per comprendere le dinamiche e le relazioni che esistono tra potere e subordinazione, sottolineano il ruolo delle pratiche sotterranee nella formazione di identità collettive, come anche l'importanza del fattore umano come vera e propria risorsa nelle mani dei gruppi subordinati.

In questo senso è utile osservare la Figura 2 in quanto consente di individuare le diverse performance del conflitto che i lavoratori hanno messo in atto.

Come emerge dal grafico, accanto a una serie di performance particolarmente visibili, come cortei, sit-in, picchetti e grandi manifestazioni, si distinguono forme di azione meno evidenti, ma altrettanto fondamentali, come le "assemblee", che sono di gran lunga le più utilizzate dai lavoratori. Queste ultime, nelle loro molteplici declinazioni – assemblea tematica, logistica, organizzativa, culturale, ricreativa e mutualistica – hanno avuto un ruolo cruciale nella costruzione e conservazione della vertenza. In questo caso, l'analisi non si concentra negli spazi e nei tempi della mobilitazione, ma in quelli dell'organizzazione e del *community organizing* (Alinsky 1971).

Altrettanto importanti sono stati i festival, i concerti e i momenti di svago e festa, come, ad esempio, il Capodanno Gkn, svoltosi davanti ai cancelli della fabbrica. Come emerge dalla testimonianza diretta di un membro del Collettivo, attraverso questi momenti, i lavoratori hanno potuto sviluppare valori umani, come la conoscenza reciproca, la fiducia e l'amicizia con elementi identitari e pratiche solidali, promuovendo una cultura della solidarietà e del conflitto:

Il fatto che stasera ci sia una festa che tiene insieme una comunità e dei lavoratori che si interrogano sull'anno che viene e non lo festeggia in maniera vuota ma che si chiede quale anno vuole è un po' il messaggio che parte da questo 31 dicembre della Gkn. Sei milioni di poveri assoluti quasi, tre milioni e mezzo di precari, questo è un paese tendenzialmente in ginocchio. E questo paese può rimanere in ginocchio solo perché è avvelenata dal modello qualunquista consumistico, che poi imperversa anche in queste feste, dove non devi pensare al futuro ma vivere un eterno presente dove chini completamente la testa. Gkn è una lotta di prospettiva, di una fabbrica, dei posti di lavoro, del pianeta, e quindi questo è il messaggio. Cerchiamo di non vivere intrappolati nel presente ma di regalarci un futuro. (Intervista Dario Salvetti del Collettivo di fabbrica Gkn – YouTube, 1.1.2024)
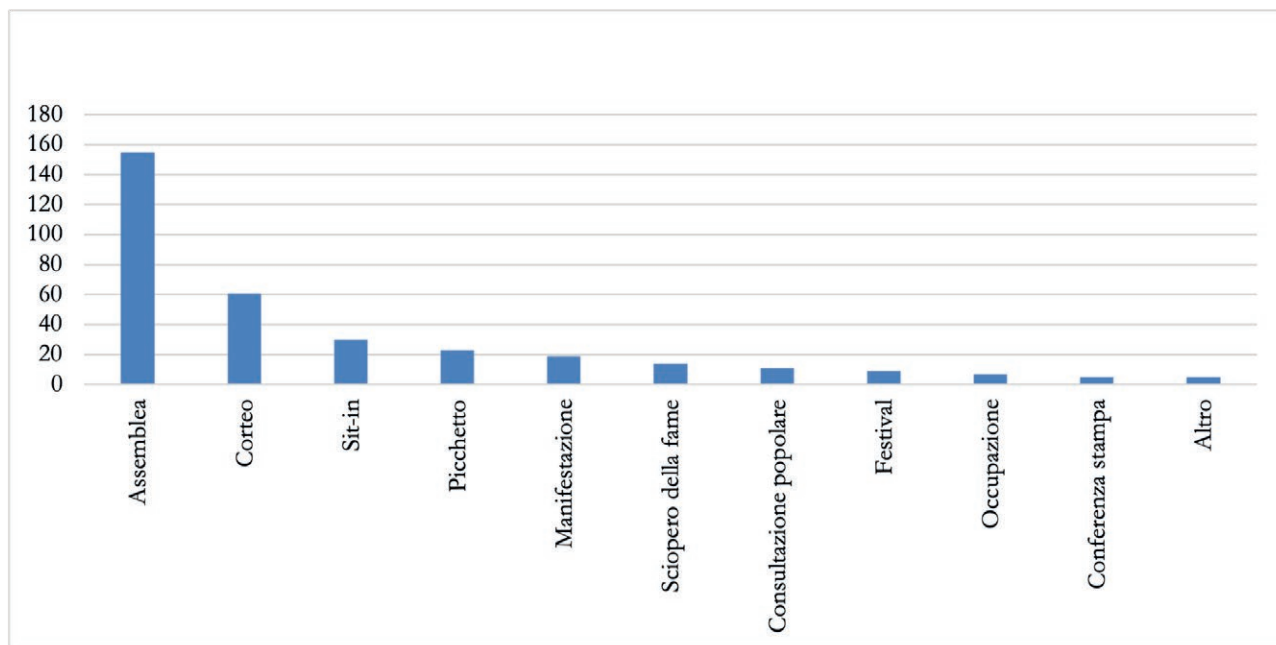
Figura 2. Numero totale performance della protesta. Fonte: elaborazione dell'Autore.

6.1. Unire i territori attraverso la testimonianza: gli Insorgiamo tour

Alla fine di agosto 2021, al culmine di un periodo di intensa mobilitazione, i lavoratori Gkn, profondamente colpiti dalle numerose manifestazioni di solidarietà e sostegno ricevute nei primi mesi di lotta, sia dalla comunità locale che da territori più distanti, intraprendono un tour itinerante attraverso varie città italiane. Questo progetto, dal nome "Insorgiamo tour", aveva lo scopo di esprimere gratitudine per il sostegno ricevuto e rafforzare le connessioni solidali emerse durante la vertenza, oltre ad essere un tentativo di esportare il conflitto su una scala più ampia. Esso viene presentato dai lavoratori come un vero e proprio metodo di lotta:

> *A fine agosto parte il primo "Insorgiamo tour" che toccherà Napoli, Roma, Milano. Inizia il metodo delle trasferte per andare ad ascoltare e conoscere il resto delle lotte nel paese […]. Restituiamo la solidarietà ricevuta a luoghi e settori lavorativi particolarmente colpiti dalla pandemia e dalle logiche di questo sistema.* (Insorgiamo. Diario collettivo di una lotta operaia (e non solo) – Collettivo di fabbrica Gkn 2022: 61)

L'organizzazione delle trasferte, come descritto dagli stessi lavoratori nel loro libro-diario (Collettivo di fabbrica Gkn 2022), si basava su una stretta collaborazione con gruppi di supporto e sulla disponibilità delle diverse soggettività preesistenti sul territorio. Questi attori loca-li, tra cui circoli Arci, Case del Popolo, centri sociali e associazioni culturali, offrivano accoglienza e sostegno logistico, favorendo una rete di solidarietà diffusa e radicata. In altri lavori (Caruso *et al.* 2019; Cini e Goldman 2020), la presenza di collettivi politici e spazi autonomi, come centri sociali, associazioni culturali e laboratori sociali, è stata considerata un importante fattore per la capacità di mobilitazione di un determinato territorio. Tuttavia, tale presenza influisce anche nella capacità di organizzazione, offrendo opportunità a nuovi e vecchi attivisti di incontrarsi, conoscersi collaborare, scambiare informazioni e, quindi, moltiplicare e rafforzare legami emotivi e reti sociali.

Questi luoghi hanno operato come i nodi di una rete e hanno facilitato non solo la diffusione della protesta, ma anche il flusso di informazioni e risorse. La Figura 3 rappresenta le province italiane in cui i lavoratori Gkn hanno organizzato almeno un evento, indipendentemente dalla tipologia.

Le province coinvolte nelle attività di brokerage e nella strategia di cambiamento di scala della vertenza sul piano nazionale sono 31, un dato significativo che riflette la capacità dei lavoratori Gkn di attuare una strategia di radicamento territoriale e di costruire alleanze trasversali su scala nazionale. Questo numero sottolinea l'abilità del Collettivo di fabbrica e del gruppo di supporto di portare il conflitto al di fuori dei confini locali, trasformandolo in una causa simbolica in grado di attrarre il sostegno di una pluralità di attori e comunità.
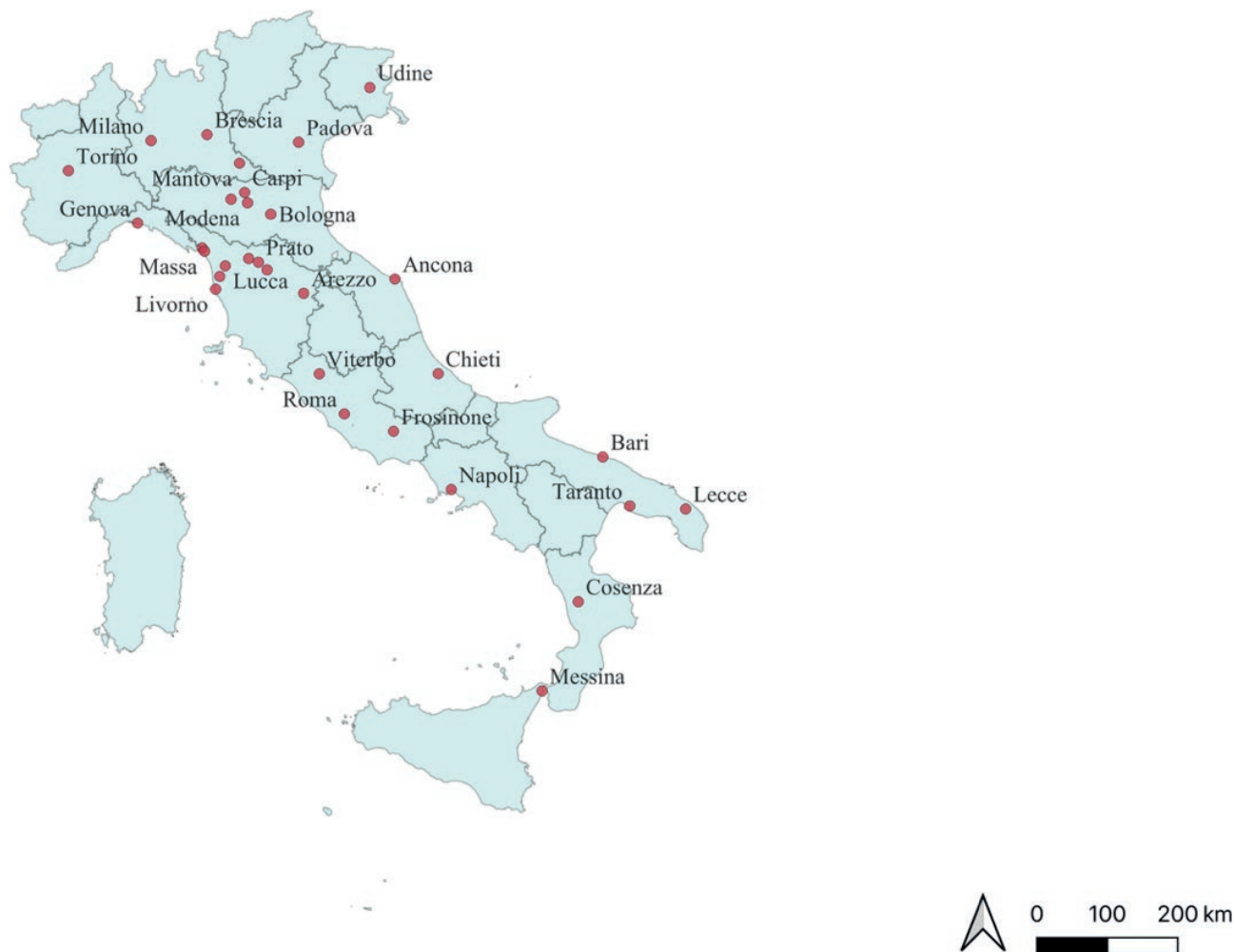
Figura 3. Distribuzione eventi di protesta per provincia. Fonte: elaborazione dell'Autore.

Tuttavia, questo dato da solo non restituisce piena-mente la portata della strategia di radicamento territo-riale messa in atto dai lavoratori Gkn. Restringendo l'a-nalisi alla regione Toscana, emerge una maggiore densi-tà delle attività: come illustrato in Figura 4, i lavoratori insieme al gruppo di supporto hanno esportato la loro vertenza in 21 altre località toscane, escludendo Campi Bisenzio quale epicentro della vertenza.

Un dato che evidenzia come i lavoratori abbiano saputo sfruttare il territorio regionale come una piatta-forma di organizzazione iniziale, estendendo progres-sivamente la loro influenza attraverso azioni mirate in diverse province. Questa strategia di radicamento multi-livello – locale, regionale e nazionale – non solo ha raf-forzato il legame tra la lotta operaia e le comunità terri-toriali, ma ha anche reso possibile la costruzione di una rete solida e diversificata di supporto. Attraverso di essa, i lavoratori Gkn sono riusciti a coinvolgere una plurali-tà di attori, includendo associazioni, movimenti sociali, organizzazioni sindacali e cittadini, generando un effetto moltiplicatore che ha ampliato la portata della mobilita-zione e la capacità di resistere nel tempo. Questa dina-mica evidenzia una delle caratteristiche fondamentali del meccanismo della convergenza, inteso come la capacità di costruire mobilitazione organizzandola, costruen-do spazi collettivi di azione, rivendicazione e riflessione identitaria, oltre che politico-sociale.

6.2. Assemblee, incontri e piazze: la costruzione dell'Altro generalizzato conflittuale

La pratica assembleare si è dimostrata centrale nella vertenza, non solo come spazio decisionale e organizza-tivo, ma anche come luogo di costruzione collettiva di legami, identità e solidarietà (della Porta 2011; Polletta
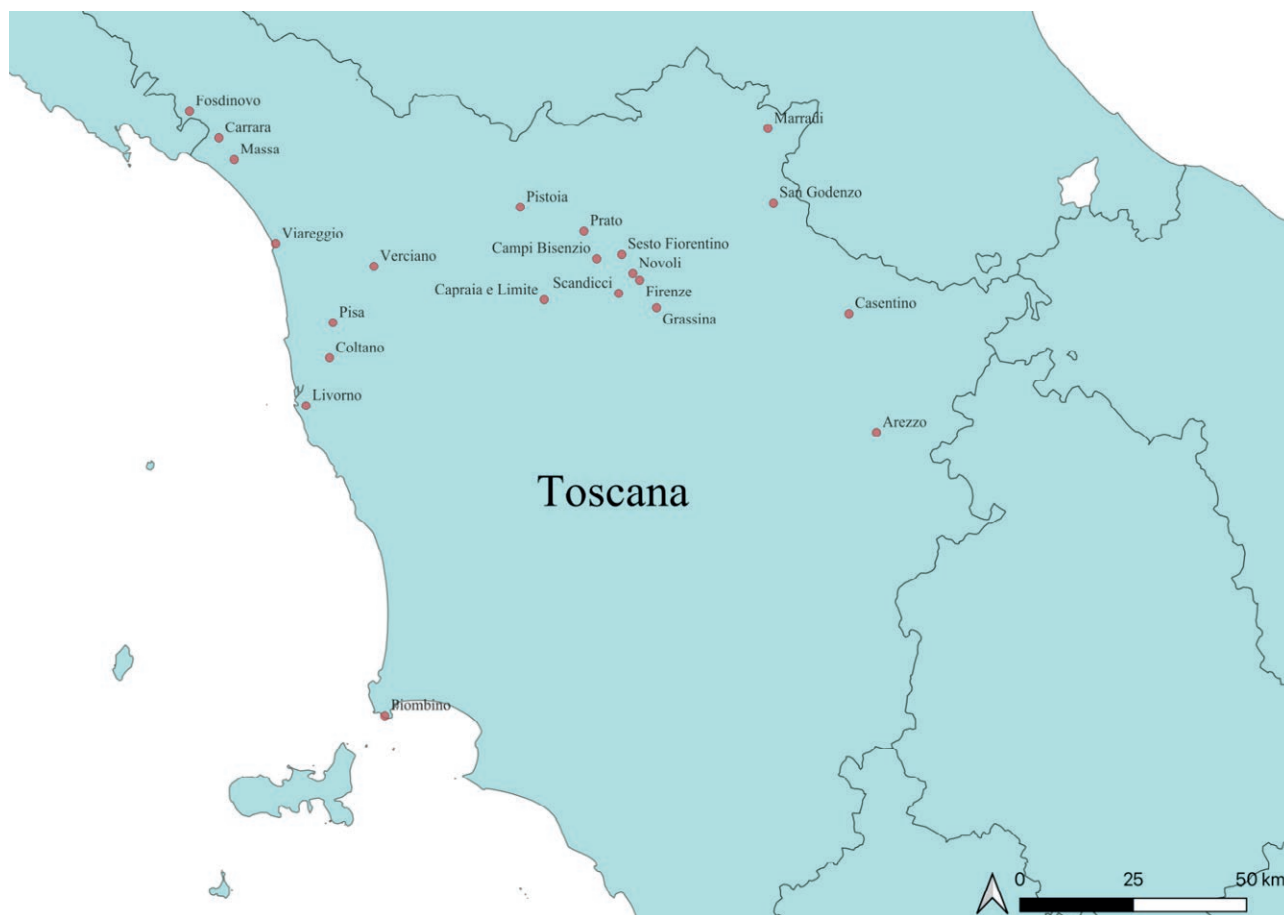
Figura 4. Distribuzione eventi di protesta per località. Fonte: elaborazione dell'Autore.

1999). Le assemblee e i momenti di incontro, condivisione e conoscenza che hanno accompagnato le azioni di protesta si sono configurati come spazi di confronto partecipato e discussione, favorendo la coesione tra i lavoratori, la comunità e le altre realtà che si sono avvicinate alla causa. Questi momenti, carichi di socialità e dialogo, hanno svolto una funzione gnoseologica, nel senso che hanno permesso ai partecipanti di apprendere non solo su se stessi, sulla loro condizione e potenzialità, ma anche sulla natura e sulla razionalità della controparte, contribuendo alla costruzione del confine simbolico "noi-loro". Tale confine, elemento fondamentale nei processi di costruzione dei movimenti sociali, è essenziale per rafforzare la coesione interna e lo sviluppo di un'identità condivisa. Il passaggio tratto dal libro-diario *Insorgiamo* (Collettivo di fabbrica Gkn 2022) scritto dai lavoratori Gkn esprime chiaramente come queste dinamiche abbiano contribuito a plasmare una narrazione condivisa capace di riunire sotto un'unica bandiera soggettività molto eterogenee tra loro per identità e pratiche.

Abbiamo visto quanto la lotta dipenda anche dalla persona che sei, come lottando definisci la persona che sei. Abbiamo visto che quando si lotta appiccicati ognuno deve prendersi cura dell'altro. E come la cura reciproca sia elemento inscindibile del provare a stare tutti i giorni in piedi, tutti i giorni uniti. Abbiamo visto la fabbrica fondersi con il territorio, perché non è vero che le fabbriche e i luoghi di lavoro devono essere chiusi, lontani dagli occhi, isolati, separati tra loro. Abbiamo visto che possiamo riapproppriarci delle nostre parole: solidarietà, comunità, lotta. E che possiamo appropriarci anche delle loro: produzione, valore, piano industriale. E abbiamo visto che c'è anche chi purtroppo ha ormai gli occhi completamente chiusi, chiusi dal pensiero debole, dall'autoreferenzialità, dal minoritarismo, dall'opportunismo. Talmente chiusi da non riuscire a vedere quello che noi abbiamo visto. Ma ciò che abbiamo visto è un fatto. Per chiunque vorrà vederlo. Per chiunque vorrà capire. (Insorgiamo. Diario collettivo di una lotta operaia (e non solo) – Collettivo di fabbrica Gkn, 2022: 59)

Questo passaggio non solo evidenzia il processo di costruzione dell'identità collettiva, ma introduce anche

la formazione di un nuovo "Altro generalizzato" specifico per il movimento. La letteratura (Benford e Snow 2000; Melucci 1989) ha mostrato come l'Altro generalizzato può fungere da guida per l'azione collettiva e promuovere un'immagine di un "noi" contro un "loro", come ad esempio è accaduto al movimento Occupy (della Porta 2015; Van Gelder 2011). Tuttavia, un Altro generalizzato può nascere anche per promuovere una nuova immagine e un nuovo modello di orientamento per il comportamento e l'azione collettiva. Questo è il caso della vertenza Gkn, che si pone come "Altro", non solo rispetto a una controparte, ma anche verso coloro che, secondo i lavoratori, rimangono intrappolati in una visione ristretta e autoreferenziale della lotta.

In questo senso, le pratiche e le narrazioni sviluppate dai lavoratori Gkn assumono una doppia valenza: da una parte, consolidano un'identità collettiva e rafforzano legami sociali; dall'altra, fungono da catalizzatori per ridefinire il significato di concetti come solidarietà, comunità, valore, cura. Questi elementi rappresentano il cuore simbolico e operativo del movimento, delineando un modello alternativo di azione e relazione sociale, dove l'interdipendenza e la cura reciproca diventano i meccanismi necessari alla creazione di un potere capace di trascendere la mobilitazione, superando i limiti contingenti della singola vertenza e generare un progetto di resistenza più ampio e condiviso.

7. CONCLUSIONI

L'analisi della vertenza Gkn ha permesso di evidenziare come il concetto di convergenza emerga non solo come un modello esplicativo delle dinamiche conflittuali, ma anche come una lente interpretativa per comprendere la capacità di organizzazione e mobilitazione di un collettivo di lavoratori in un contesto di crisi strutturale. Attraverso un approccio basato sui meccanismi e processi conflittuali, l'articolo ha messo in luce come risorse organizzative, solidarietà territoriale e una narrazione collettiva coesa abbiano contribuito a trasformare una vertenza locale in un simbolo nazionale di resistenza e innovazione sociale.

La convergenza, preliminarmente definita come la capacità di attori e risorse di coordinarsi strategicamente, può essere operazionalizzata attraverso una serie di indicatori concreti: l'aumento della partecipazione, l'estensione delle reti di solidarietà, la diversificazione delle pratiche di protesta e la continuità del conflitto. In particolare, episodi chiave come l'organizzazione degli "Insorgiamo tour" o la pratica delle assemblee tematiche, evidenziano come questa dinamica si traduca in azioni coordinate capaci di integrare risorse e legami sociali, favorendo il radicamento territoriale e l'ampliamento della rete di solidarietà.

Inoltre, il concetto di convergenza si collega strettamente ai meccanismi di coordinamento, solidarietà e costruzione identitaria analizzati nel testo. Ad esempio, l'occupazione temporanea di Palazzo Vecchio e lo sciopero della fame hanno mostrato come le emozioni collettive, quali l'imbarazzo e la rabbia, possano essere politicizzate e utilizzate per costruire un'identità condivisa e amplificare il messaggio politico. Queste azioni dimostrano che la convergenza non è solo un risultato della mobilitazione, ma anche un processo dinamico che trasforma legami individuali in reti collettive di resistenza.

Infine, il modello di convergenza emerso dalla vertenza Gkn offre spunti teorici per analizzare altre esperienze di lotta in contesti di crisi. Questo processo organizzativo dinamico e contestuale non solo favorisce la costruzione di legami e strutture collettive, ma rappresenta un'alternativa capace di ridefinire i rapporti di forza dominanti nei contesti socioeconomici contemporanei. La convergenza invita a ripensare il ruolo delle lotte collettive, non come episodi isolati, ma come processi trasformativi capaci di ridefinire le logiche di potere e solidarietà.

Tuttavia, è importante sottolineare il carattere provvisorio di questa analisi, legato allo stato evolutivo del fenomeno e alle sue numerose implicazioni sociologiche. Ulteriori ricerche potrebbero approfondire le dinamiche di convergenza in altri contesti o esaminare l'impatto di queste mobilitazioni sui processi di cambiamento istituzionale e culturale. Questo studio rappresenta quindi un punto di partenza per un più ampio dialogo accademico e interdisciplinare sul ruolo trasformativo delle lotte collettive nella contemporaneità.

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Alcune possibili funzioni del Soggetto

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Abstract. In contemporary society, new social movements with a cultural focus have emerged, addressing themes such as sexuality, information, ecology, and gender equality. These movements represent a novel form of protest, distinct from the revolutionary and conflict-driven tendencies of traditional movements. For these new social movements to become effective agents of societal transformation, collaboration is essential, along with the support of the "Soggetto," which represents individuals upheld by rights and institutions. Advocating human rights can be a powerful strategy if it serves as a framework to restore meaning in society, countering the persistent socio-cultural drift that enforces standardized and homogenized roles. This approach, coupled with an understanding of complex interdependence, can help mitigate the effects of disintegrative imperialism and address social crises.

Keywords: Subject, Social Movements, Individualism, Triangle of differences.

1. INTRODUZIONE

Decenni di globalizzazione hanno contribuito ad imporre criteri quasi esclusivamente economici ed hanno favorito quell'interdipendenza complessa nella quale si è palesato con successo il trionfo dell'individualismo disgregatore (Bauman 2003; Leccardi e Volonté 2018); tutto questo ha ulteriormente allontanato i processi determinanti della ragione strumentale dal mondo delle identità (Gallino 2003).

L'internazionalizzazione dei mercati, la crescita delle multinazionali, la formazione di reti sempre più interconnesse, un sistema finanziario in grado di trasmettere le informazioni in tempo reale, la diffusione di notizie da parte dei mass media, ma anche dalla pubblicità e dalle imprese stesse, così come lo scambio di beni culturali di massa, hanno portato all'attuale globalizzazione caratterizzata da un rapido allargamento della partecipazione agli scambi internazionali e dal predominio del capitalismo. In realtà i principali elementi della globalizzazione hanno favorito l'affermazione di un nuovo capitalismo finanziario, che ha dato vita alla civiltà globale, riuscendo ad avviare lo sviluppo di un sistema internazionalizzato, che riesce a sfuggire ad ogni controllo e a ogni tipologia di regolazione politica, sociale e culturale

(Piketty 2019 [2020]). Questo nuovo capitalismo trova la sua forza e radica le sue fondamenta in una logica prevalentemente funzionale, secondo la quale tutto viene ricondotto all'interesse economico, al calcolo, al denaro, all'utile a discapito di tutto il resto. Per questo viene considerato un capitalismo senza limiti, concepito come «un'ideologia che ha suscitato entusiasmo e sollevato contestazioni» (Touraine 2008: 34).

Le estreme forme assunte dal capitalismo hanno favorito la spaccatura delle identità, rappresentate dall'essere, dalla memoria, dalla tradizione, dalla lingua, dal sesso, dall'età contribuendo alla de-istituzionalizzazione, la cui estrema conseguenza è rappresentata dalla de-socializzazione (Bauman 2001). Quest'ultima, oltre ad essere deleteria per la società, favorisce la scomparsa dei ruoli, delle norme e dei valori sociali attraverso i quali si costruisce il mondo vissuto (Touraine 2006). Con la desocializzazione la società, che prima veniva regolata dalle istituzioni e dai loro ruoli, viene guidata dalle forze dei mercati e dalle iniziative degli attori economici, che ne sono i principali protagonisti (Morin 1985). In questo modo, si è creata una frattura tra tutti quei processi che sono propri dell'economia ed il resto della società, che tenta di coinvolgere attori sociali e sistema, per dimostrare quanto può essere determinante l'esperienza umana che, pur essendo sottomessa alla necessità economica, può provare a superare la storica dicotomia, ponendosi obiettivi e formando movimenti che si oppongano alle logiche economiche, tramite l'azione del Soggetto umano. Di fronte agli effetti di un modello economico-finanziario irresponsabile e alla debolezza che mostrano le istituzioni, soprattutto politiche, nel realizzare efficaci programmazioni e nel dare risposte e soluzioni, molti sentono il bisogno di confrontarsi con una prospettiva analitica di carattere generale (Ricciardi 2011). Un bisogno che sembra essere ancor più stringente nel momento in cui tutti riconoscono che la fiducia incondizionata nel progresso è ormai sfumata e si è alla ricerca di nuovi paradigmi per superare le entropie dei sistemi economici, sociali e politici.

2. DALLA SOCIOLOGIA DELL'AZIONE AI NUOVI MOVIMENTI

Il sociologo francese Alain Touraine con due importanti testi, *Sociologie de l'action* (1965) e *La conscience ouvrière* (1960; 1966), ha contribuito alla nascita della 'sociologia dell'azione', che non è tanto una sociologia dei valori, quanto, piuttosto, una vera e propria sociologia azionalista, nella misura in cui costituisce il campo dei rapporti sociali ponendosi l'obiettivo di comprende-

re il ruolo e l'impegno che può assumere l'attore sociale in quanto Soggetto. La coscienza operaia, che ha caratterizzato gli anni Sessanta del secolo scorso, viene interpretata come quel fenomeno grazie al quale l'individuo si definisce e si riconosce come operaio, consapevole di essere il risultato di tre principi fondamentali: il principio di identità, secondo il quale l'operaio si considera produttore e apportatore di un fattore essenziale della produzione; il principio di opposizione, che identifica l'avversario, mettendo a fuoco gli ostacoli che gli impediscono di appropriarsi delle sue opere; il principio di totalità, che distingue il campo dei conflitti sociali (Oommenn 1996).

Questa interpretazione analitica della coscienza operaia conduce a due costanti, che rimettono in discussione l'immagine di una classe operaia interamente costruita intorno alla lotta contro il capitale e chi ne detiene la proprietà (Harvey 2014; 2021). Da una parte gli operai, che non debbono essere pensati come gruppo omogeneo né tantomeno come vittime dell'oppressione e dello sfruttamento del capitalista; dall'altra, invece, c'è la lotta per la difesa dell'autonomia operaia contro la dominazione del lavoro e dei datori di lavoro, che dà vita a tutta una serie di movimenti, le cui azioni non riguardano esclusivamente le questioni e le tematiche legate al mondo produttivo, ma sono finalizzate anche ad altre rivendicazioni di carattere sociale e politico (Gobin 1970; Touraine e Wieviorka 1986; Johnston 2014). La stessa sociologia dell'azione ha contribuito alla formazione di movimenti sociali, epilogo dei tanti fermenti che hanno attraversato la società negli anni Sessanta (Waters 2008). Ad esempio, i movimenti universitari, che sono riusciti ad andare oltre gli atenei organizzandosi a livello internazionale, hanno avuto come obiettivo l'individuazione di cause e condizioni che avevano portato alla loro costituzione, proclamandosi, così, anticipatori di nuove problematiche sociali che, a partire dagli anni Settanta, si sono manifestate in tutto il loro vigore riuscendo anche ad ottenere risultati concreti (Melucci 1975; 1985). Il fatto è che i movimenti universitari nascono per una ragione sociale ben precisa: lo studente della nuova università di massa è di estrazione piccolo borghese e non entra nell'età adulta da 'giovane privilegiato' ma, consapevole di provenire da una condizione socioeconomica più svantaggiata rispetto all'universitario del passato, cerca nella laurea la propria promozione sociale. Quest'aspettativa, però, ben presto si rivela illusoria, perché la frequenza universitaria, che comporta l'iscrizione a corsi di studio, non garantisce automaticamente opportunità professionali certe e stabili. Gli studenti privi di capitale sociale necessario per un'integrazione diretta nella classe dirigente, comprendono presto che la loro futura

collocazione lavorativa dipende dalla più ampia organizzazione sociale, che, quindi, deve essere modificata. Le lotte sono portate rapidamente al di fuori dell'università e gli attivisti cercano di coinvolgere anche altri strati sociali tradizionalmente sotto-privilegiati o, comunque, non soddisfatti della loro situazione (Antonelli 2009). La nascita di questa forma di resistenza, portata avanti contemporaneamente con perseveranza da studenti di diversi paesi, ha dato origine ad alcune rivendicazioni che sono state messe in atto non solo nelle università, ma anche in contesti più generali, coinvolgendo di fatto l'intera società, fino a riuscire ad originare delle vere e proprie crisi sociali e politiche (Morin *et al.* 1968). Infatti, oltre al movimento studentesco si riescono ad affermare anche altre tipologie di movimenti: regionalisti, femministi e antinucleari, tutti organizzati con azioni collettive che superano i confini degli stati e si inseriscono nel contesto internazionale.

Gli anni Sessanta e Settanta rappresentano uno scenario contraddistinto da importanti mutamenti, riforme, azioni collettive di protesta, cambiamenti culturali e radicali trasformazioni della società, che rendono fondamentale la capacità di osservazione sociologica (Melucci 1978, 1980). L'azione collettiva, sia come insieme di decisioni individuali sia come espressione di strutture organizzative, considera come punto di riferimento una sfera più complessa: quella decisionale della politica (Smelser 1962; Sovaccol 2022). Anche per questo diventano determinanti i movimenti sociali, che hanno l'ambizione di sviluppare un'identità collettiva che venga rappresentata e considerata nelle decisioni che devono essere prese da chi gestisce il potere politico (Melucci 1985). Il movimento sociale viene generalmente definito come una rete di relazioni informali che si costituiscono tra individui e gruppi che condividono le stesse credenze, sono legati da fiducia reciproca e solidarietà e agiscono collettivamente attraverso il frequente ricorso alla protesta (de Nardis 2023). Questo rende il movimento sociale utile, perché consente di palesare l'esistenza di un tipo assai specifico di azione collettiva, mediante la quale una determinata categoria sociale può rimettere in discussione qualsiasi forma di dominio, richiamandosi contro di essa e facendo appello a valori e orientamenti generali della società (Touraine 2007). I movimenti sociali hanno, quindi, il compito di ri-naturalizzare la società, opponendosi alla direzione e all'egemonia dei centri di potere decisionale tradizionale e tendendo a proporre l'idea di cambiamento come un atto di programmazione e come un processo perfettamente controllabile (Cohen 1985; della Porta 2018; Blings 2020). Ma non tutte le mobilitazioni sociali, le proteste e le azioni collettive possono essere considerate movimenti sociali in senso proprio. I movimenti sociali sono possibili solo in società democratiche e possono esistere solo se le istituzioni politiche possiedono una certa autonomia (Blühdorn e Butzlaff 2020). Considerate queste condizioni i movimenti rappresentano comportamenti collettivi che mettono in causa, attraverso un conflitto sociale, l'utilizzazione da parte della società delle principali risorse e dei modelli culturali di cui essa dispone: i suoi modelli di conoscenza, le sue principali forme d'investimento e di produzione ed i suoi principi morali (Ayhan e Bee 2024). Secondo Alain Touraine, un movimento sociale «est la conduite collective organisée d'un acteur de classe luttant contre son adversaire de classe pour la direction sociale de l'historicité dans une collectivité concrète» (Touraine 1973: 360-368). In virtù di questa definizione si deduce che nel movimento si possono combinare tre elementi molto simili ai principi già visti come propri della coscienza operaia. La difesa dell'identità e degli interessi del movimento, nel quale si riconosce chi partecipa e che via via si sviluppa durante l'attività e l'organizzazione che assume il gruppo (principio di identità). Questa coscienza e consapevolezza si attua tramite la pratica/azione di rapporti conflittuali che hanno sempre un avversario/nemico che è espressione della politica consolidata e che si vuole tentare di modificare (principio di opposizione); infatti, non è possibile parlare di un movimento sociale se non si può definire un contro-movimento al quale si oppone (Goodwin *et al.* 2001). Infine, è fondamentale che ci sia una visione comune che unisce e con la quale si identifica il movimento (principio di totalità).

Dal tradizionale conflitto generato dagli orientamenti voluti e prodotti dalla coscienza operaia si è via via giunti ad una fase irreversibile di disgregazione, che ha determinato la crisi o meglio il superamento del classico movimento operaio, che non è più in grado di simboleggiare il conflitto sociale come era riuscito a fare nella società industriale (Ding e Hirvilammi 2024). Questo passaggio rivela una configurazione della vita sociale determinata dal fatto che alcuni movimenti sociali sono diventati sempre più deboli (Castells 2012), mentre altri sono sprofondati nel terrorismo o hanno conosciuto un'istituzionalizzazione precoce che li ha trasformati in gruppi di pressione (Pirzio Ammassari e Marchetti 2018). Tali sviluppi hanno indotto i movimenti sociali ad un certo declino, determinato dal fatto che hanno rallentato la loro intraprendenza nel tentativo di riuscire ad emergere e ad ottenere risultati concreti. Infatti, contrariamente all'originario movimento operaio che è stato più concentrato ed incisivo, formato come era da piccoli nuclei attivi di militanti, i nuovi movimenti sociali si plasmano nel processo democratico della creazione dell'opinione pubblica e non sono attivi nel confron-

to politico e rivoluzionario (Habermas 1981; Johnston 2014; Hutter *et al.* 2019). Tutto questo si verifica perché i nuovi movimenti sociali non sono più legati al lavoro, al reddito o al salario, ma hanno basi culturali differenti e diverse aspettative, afferendo a temi quali la sessualità, l'informazione, la religione, il nucleare, l'ambiente, il confronto di genere, ecc (Eder 1985). Questo li allontana sempre più dagli intenti rivoluzionari propri dei movimenti che hanno caratterizzato gli anni Sessanta (Castells 2012).

At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s the working-class movement was near its end as a social movement, even if Colin Crouch and Alessandro Pizzorno (1977) thought that they recognized a revival of class conflict in the struggles of the period. At the same time, new forms of protest were coming to the fore, to the point that it was quite legitimate to postulate a change in the type of society. From this point of view, there was a move from the industrial to post-industrial era, and the protest movements in post-industrial societies were no longer the working-class movement, historically on the wane, but the struggles of students, anti-nuclear groups, regionalist groups, women, and so on (Wieviorka 2005: 5).

Probabilmente un ruolo determinante lo hanno le motivazioni che possono indurre una persona ad aderire ad un qualsiasi tipo di movimento. Infatti, non tutti partecipano per convinzioni morali o ideali e molti decidono di prendere parte solo perché hanno amici o conoscenti che sono già membri del movimento o anche solo per motivi legati ad interessi professionali (Daher 2013). Sono poche le persone che partecipano perché hanno bisogno di sentirsi coinvolte da comuni valori identitari (Gongaware 2010). Inoltre, c'è da tener conto del fatto che i nuovi movimenti sociali hanno la caratteristica di riuscire a fornire anche un'offerta identitaria a coloro che, allontanatisi dalle tradizionali forme di partecipazione politica, cercano altre tipologie di soddisfazione (McDonald 2002; della Porta *et al.* 2017). Questo ha fatto sì che i nuovi movimenti sociali siano riusciti ad affermarsi anche in contesti di erosione del comune sentire e, grazie al processo di individualizzazione e alle incombenti trasformazioni culturali, sono diventati forme di espressione e di identificazione (Millefiorini 2002; Chouhy 2020).

Modernization processes have fundamentally remoulded the subjectivity of movement participants over time. Comparing historical analyses and qualitative empirical studies, we will show that the German labour movement was constituted by a reliable collective subjectivity (Lösche e Walter 1989), and that the new social movements were carried by a more mobile, yet still solid individual subjectiv-

ity. The small-scale, local, and experimental movements of today, in contrast, reflect a flexible, ever-more fractured subjectivity (Blühdorn et al. 2018). This 'liquefaction' of the subject (Bauman 2012) signals two developments: (a) direct social actions might no longer predominantly serve to prepare an alternative social order but to perform and experience it within the existing one; (b) with the subjective impetus of direct social action altered in that way, teaming up with a political party that could help implementing a social utopia is now longer deemed necessary (Butzlaff e Deflorian 2021: 4).

La trasformazione che c'è stata nella costituzione e all'interno dei movimenti stessi è l'ulteriore conferma del fatto che nelle società contemporanee non c'è più quella opposizione dicotomica tra razionalizzatori e consumatori e tra capitalisti e operai. La stessa lotta di classe è venuta meno, non tanto perché i rapporti tra i datori di lavoro e i lavoratori sono diventati pacifici, ma perché i conflitti si sono spostati dai problemi interni della produzione alle strategie mondiali adottate dalle imprese transnazionali e gestite dalle reti finanziarie. La conseguenza più importante di tutto ciò è che ognuno lotta per migliorare la propria personale e peculiare situazione e per riuscire a garantirsi l'accesso e la disponibilità adeguata per poter partecipare al mercato dei consumi. La storica contrapposizione e la separazione dicotomica sono venute meno, perché non funzionali all'economicismo imperante, ma anche perché ostacolerebbero la possibilità di affermazione dei nuovi movimenti sociali, in quanto la rivendicazione non verterebbe più sugli orientamenti della società, ma solo sulla spartizione dei benefici (Rossi 2018).

Tutte queste trasformazioni, in gran parte determinate da un'economia che ha assunto ruoli e funzioni proprie di un'ideologia (Mongardini 1997), hanno avuto come effetto certo l'indebolimento del ruolo della politica, aiutando ad accentuare quel distacco che via via si è creato tra la vita quotidiana degli individui e le vicende della *res publica*. Un distacco che ha contribuito a rinforzare il processo di dissociazione e di de-politicizzazione a cui consegue un progressivo avanzare del paradigma della società ipermoderna, caratterizzato da una concreta separazione tra le istituzioni politiche e gli attori sociali. Gli stessi partiti politici sono perennemente in crisi essendo ormai imprese dedite alla gestione di risorse per produrre eletti, manipolando gli elettori che possono essere convinti, o ancor meglio 'comprati', tramite il consenso gestito e veicolato dal marketing politico. Di conseguenza la politica viene ormai considerata come

una realtà molto degradata e travisata. Il carattere nobile dell'azione politica può rinascere solo dall'etica. Non da una politica di classe, non da una politica della nazione,

non da una politica degli interessi o da una politica del sacro. Utilizzando queste categorie del passato, la politica non sa e non riesce più a parlare alla gente. Diventa afasica [...] il solo scopo importante e nobile della politica è quello di favorire la nascita di nuovi attori sociali. E ciò non è possibile senza passare attraverso il soggetto e i suoi diritti. Solo così si ricrea il sociale (Gambaro 2013: 39).

È importante, allora, considerare il Soggetto che non potrà essere un mero attore inserito in dinamiche socio-politiche alienanti, ma dovrà agire secondo la propria coscienza e non in ossequio all'ordine precostituito del mondo, al fine di compiere azioni finalizzate alla sua auto-realizzazione e a evitare o superare forme di ostruzionismo che potrebbero allontanarlo dal perseguire la libertà (Maniscalco 1983). In questa prospettiva si può considerare lo stesso movimento sociale come Soggetto, in virtù del fatto che si struttura ed organizza le sue azioni con l'obiettivo di modificare situazioni che non tollera o non condivide più (Touraine 2009; Cousin e Rui 2011). L'attore sociale, così come gli stessi movimenti, prima, protestavano contro le tradizioni, le convenzioni, le forme di repressione e i privilegi elitari che gli impedivano di essere riconosciuti; oggi, la protesta ha come bersaglio gli apparati, i discorsi, l'evocazione di pericoli esterni e di incognite legate all'ambiente e alla sostenibilità, che impediscono di concretizzare progetti, di definire specifici obiettivi e di impegnarsi direttamente nei conflitti, i dibattiti e le negoziazioni nelle quali è opportuno "agire" (Ricci 2024).

3. ALCUNE INTERPRETAZIONI DEL SOGGETTO

Partendo dall'analisi dei nuovi tipi di movimenti sociali, strettamente legati alle esigenze e ai bisogni delle persone, si arriva a comprendere l'importanza ed il giusto ruolo che potrebbe avere il Soggetto nella società (Lojkine 2015; Blühdorn 2021), considerando sempre più come un paradigma da molti sociologi, perché

completamente proteso verso la propria capacità di agire, la propria creatività – esso è artefice della propria esistenza, domina la propria esperienza, dispone (per utilizzare un termine dell'economista Amartya Sen) di capabilities, di risorse per agire scegliendo il proprio modo di vivere (Sen 1987; Naz 2020). Questa idea di soggetto si distingue dall'individualismo contemporaneo come da ogni forma di utilitarismo per il fatto che tiene conto di come, se io posso essere soggetto, bisogna che possano esserlo anche tutti gli altri esseri umani – una riflessione che getta un ponte verso la riflessione sulla convivenza sociale e sulla democrazia (Wieviorka 2021: 210).

Secondo questa definizione, l'individuo, in quanto Soggetto, può identificarsi con le norme sociali, con le istituzioni e con la stessa comunità a cui partecipa e può, quindi, tentare di sfidare le dinamiche sociali in un contesto all'interno del quale sorgono forme di dominazione meno riconoscibili e più insidiose, che possono condurlo a un processo di de-soggettivazione (Hansell e Grassie 2011; Dubet e Wieviorka 2018). Infatti, sembra sia sempre più difficile riuscire a costruire un'identità fondata sull'appartenenza, perché le comunità spesso sono statiche e non riescono a soddisfare il desiderio di identificazione (Crespi 2015; Kinna 2019; Yilmaz e Bağçe 2022). La difficoltà registrata nella costruzione di una propria identità determina un processo di erosione delle certezze che crea smarrimento, dovuto all'impossibilità per l'individuo di sentirsi attore e Soggetto attivo della propria comunità (Mc Garry e Jasper 2015; Bauman 2020). Questa situazione porta ad una condizione esistenziale di emarginazione e alienazione ed ha come conseguenza la perdita di certezze e di punti di riferimento per le persone che si trovano davanti a un bivio: continuare ad accettare passivamente ciò che la società è disposta ad offrire, favorendo così quella sensazione di vacuità nella quale si sentono succubi, oppure attuare quella forza etico-morale che consente di emanciparsi dalla condizione meccanicistica e dicotomica nella quale sono relegate. Per dare seguito a questa seconda opzione sarebbe opportuno svincolarsi dalle norme del mercato e riconsiderare le opportunità del vivere insieme (Butler 2005). Infatti, il credo dell'economicismo imperante, quale re (Simmel 1907; Scott 2013), non troppo nascosto, della contemporaneità, ha mostrato tutti i suoi limiti, intrappolando l'individuo in una condizione di disagio (Lojkine 2009; Ruggieri 2019). Le promesse edeniche prospettate dalla cultura consumistica si sono rivelate per quello che sono sempre state: falò della vanità in un tempo dominato solo dalla contingenza e dalla fluidità dei rapporti e delle pratiche dello stare insieme (Streeck 2016; Brayne 2020).

Infatti, l'eccessivo prevalere degli interessi economici, che avrebbe dovuto facilitare il processo di liberazione dell'umanità dal bisogno, ha avuto come effetto prevalente la frammentazione della dimensione sociale a vantaggio di un individualismo cinico e radicale, fine a sé stesso e non più fonte di crescita e di benessere (Beck e Beck-Gemsheim 2001; Zuboff 2019; Gallino 2023). Questa situazione ha contribuito ad allontanare sempre più l'individuo dal riuscire ad essere "umano", lacerando la profondità relazionale dell'attore sociale e rendendo differente la crisi attuale rispetto a quelle passate.

La crisi attuale, infatti, si differenzia da quelle precedenti, perché richiede una duplice trasformazione, quella

della società, in termini generali perennemente "in crisi" e sempre più prossima alla sua *fine* (Touraine 2013, H-UTokio 2020; Burrell e Fourcade 2021), e quella del Soggetto, che proprio perché indebolito e svuotato di sé, per diverse cause, è tenuto a ricercare una propria identità e, nel farlo, deve individuare un nuovo paradigma che lo metta nella condizione di trovare una giusta collocazione sociale (Wieviorka 2008, 2020; H-UTokio 2020). Nella ricerca di questo nuovo paradigma l'individuo può riuscire a riscoprire e valorizzare la soggettività, che si realizza nel rispetto e nella difesa dei diritti umani, che danno forma e vita ad una dimensione differente delle relazioni tra i diversi individui. In effetti sarà difficile superare la crisi in atto, se i diritti universali del Soggetto non vengono realmente difesi, anche a garanzia e tutela delle varie diversità che sono presenti in una società globalizzata. Comunque, è opportuno tener conto del fatto che i diritti possono essere salvaguardati solo in quelle società nelle quali la democrazia viene riconosciuta come bene universale, non comprimibile né sostituibile (Marchetti 2018). Nelle società democratiche, infatti, i diritti umani e quelli emergenti trovano il giusto e naturale contesto per la loro diffusione, perché pongono gli individui nella migliore condizione possibile, al fine di esplicare la loro azione di soggetti sociali consapevoli e perché sono presenti alcuni elementi che consentono all'individuo di realizzare al meglio la condizione di Soggetto, promuovendo istanze e rivendicando la propria identità (Clemens 2016). La democrazia, quindi, pur essendo più complessa rispetto al passato, è una necessità, che riesce a garantire il riconoscimento della diversità, coniugando l'utilizzo delle tecnologie e il ripristino delle autonomie culturali; in questo modo può diventare l'unico sistema di governo in grado di promuovere la libertà dell'individuo, consentendo l'affermazione dell'uguaglianza e della giustizia e di tutti quei diritti che rappresentano una garanzia contro ogni tentativo di prevaricazione sul Soggetto, ma anche sull'altro in generale (Vaira 2014). Il Soggetto consapevole del suo progetto di vita personale, diventa fulcro attivo di mediazione e può unire azione strumentale e identità culturale, svincolato dall'appartenenza a dispositivi di potere che ne inficiano l'opera e l'iniziativa, può procedere ad una ricomposizione del mondo che porta in sé principi di organizzazione e trasformazione della vita pubblica, «ma è anzitutto ricomposizione dell'individuo, creazione del Soggetto come desiderio e capacità di coniugare l'azione strumentale con un'identità culturale comprendente le relazioni interpersonali e la vita sessuale e affettiva, nonché la memoria collettiva e personale» (Touraine 1998: 196).

La persona è concentrata sulla sua capacità di agire e, grazie alla creatività, diventa artefice della propria esi-

stenza, disponendo di risorse funzionali al proprio modo di vivere, che dovrebbero allontanarla da quell'individualismo che, invece, caratterizza gran parte della realtà sociale contemporanea (Wieviorka 2003; Grassi 2013). Un individualismo che si esprime in una domanda di partecipazione, di accesso ai consumi, al lavoro, all'istruzione, alla sanità e alla ricchezza, intesa, soprattutto quest'ultima, come condizione per la stessa accettazione e che viene considerato ad uno stadio superiore e più evoluto rispetto alla tradizionale convivenza (Wieviorka 2000; Beck e Beck-Gemsheim 2001; Urbinati 2011) Purtroppo, però, non sono state considerate le conseguenze che, nel tempo, questa tendenza dominante all'isolamento può produrre: la disgregazione della vita collettiva e la decostruzione della comunità, fattori che hanno favorito il proliferare di processi drammatici come il razzismo, la conflittualità senza soluzione di continuità, le disuguaglianze e anche le guerre. Questo scenario, inevitabilmente, fa riflettere sul fatto che l'idealtipo del Soggetto possa arrivare a scontrarsi con altre tipologie di attori che traboccano di soggettività e la impongono negando quella degli altri. Alcuni attori sociali, in effetti, assumono atteggiamenti e comportamenti in nome di una natura che essenzializza il gruppo cui fanno riferimento e tutto ciò li porta a compromettere i rapporti e a consentire l'affermazione di logiche basate sull'indifferenza e la distanza, che spesso, però, vanno oltre, fino a far sì che l'individuo assuma comportamenti aggressivi e violenti, che sono propri del lato negativo del Soggetto: l'anti-soggetto (Wieviorka 2015).

The Anti-Subject is that side of the Subject that fails to acknowledge the other person's right to be a Subject and which can develop only by negating the other person's humanity. This case corresponds to the dimensions of cruelty or enjoyment of violence for its own sake, as an end in itself. Here, the victim is dehumanized, reified, or animalized and is in every respect the opposite of the Subject (Wieviorka 2012a: 20).

I comportamenti sociali del non-soggetto o dell'anti-soggetto hanno come conseguenza la distruzione, la negazione degli altri, la violenza fine a se stessa, andando di pari passo con la disumanizzazione dell'altro e con la sua oggettivazione. Ma per un'analisi più completa del concetto di Soggetto si deve tener conto sia della parte positiva che lo caratterizza, sia della parte negativa, considerando anche gli eventuali rischi e responsabilità che questo può comportare. Infatti, ciascun Soggetto è il prodotto del suo vissuto, della sua istruzione, e delle scelte che hanno portato ad intraprendere azioni, ma anche di ciò che è stato scelto di non fare.

Ces processus sont de deux ordres, qu'il faut distinguer analytiquement même s'ils peuvent se combiner contradictoirement dans la pratique: les uns sont des processus de subjectivation, les autres de dé-subjectivation. Les sciences sociales ont tout à gagner à envisager de tels processus, car c'est à travers eux, avec eux que les individus et les groupes se construisent comme acteurs, qu'ils peuvent ou non faire des choix, s'inscrire dans des logiques d'action collective, inventer des mouvements sociaux ou culturels, contribuer à la mise en place, la transformation ou la destruction d'institutions, passer à la violence, etc. Les processus de subjectivation et de dé-subjectivation sont les processus par lesquels se construit et se transforme la conscience des acteurs, à partir de laquelle ils prennent des décisions. La subjectivation conduit vers le «sujet» à la Touraine ou à la Joas, capable d'agir car capable de se penser comme acteur et de trouver les modalités du passage à l'action, la désubjectivation conduit à l'inverse vers les formes décomposées et inversées su sujet, vers l'anti-sujet ou le non-sujet, et, de là, éventuellement, vers des conduites de destruction et d'autodestruction» (Wieviorka 2012b: 6).

Spesso è proprio a causa dell'anti-soggetto e della de-soggettivazione che si verificano fenomeni come l'odio, il razzismo, il terrorismo, l'antisemitismo. Fenomeni degenerativi e divisivi che comportano il rifiuto dell'universalismo, dell'umanesimo, della creatività umana a vantaggio della distruzione e dell'autodistruzione. Su questi versanti, dunque, si colloca quella messa in gioco, nella quale l'individuo disorientato ed inerme vive il suo disagio quotidiano all'interno di società disgregate che hanno annullato il senso della comunità (Bauman 2020).

4. APPLICAZIONI DEL TRIANGOLO DELLE DIFFERENZE

I repentini e recenti cambiamenti sociali, che hanno generato situazioni incerte e contraddittorie, rendono ancora più urgente il radicamento di una cultura democratica che si basi sulla difesa dei diritti individuali e sulla tutela degli attori sociali, rispetto ad altre forme di potere che possono attuarsi (Marchetti 2018). La difesa dei diritti umani e sociali deve, allora, diventare una risposta prioritaria, individuale e collettiva, considerata come azione capace di restituire un senso alla società. In tal modo, si può tentare di contrastare quella deriva socio-culturale che impone all'individuo ruoli standardizzati ed omologanti che impediscono la piena realizzazione della soggettività (Touraine 2015).

My essence as a subject (not as an organic being, of course, but as an actor, as a subject of opinions and rights, as a bearer of emotions and relations) is founded on my ability to exercise my multifaceted capacities by relating to the

world. The consistency of my own person is the consistency of my world. My own subjective coherence is grounded in the coherence of my relations and worldviews. My contradictions work themselves out in the tensions and divisions of my world. This process must not be understood as a flat projection or reflection of the ego onto the world, nor as an abstract metaphysical idealism. It is rather a creative and open process in which we become ourselves only by shaping our environment. Our being consists in the complex unfolding of personal autonomy through perception, exploration, and action (Pugliese 2021: 76).

Ripartendo dai tratti biografici dell'identità del Soggetto sarà possibile ricominciare ad agire collettivamente ed i membri dei gruppi, che hanno comuni interessi e reciproca solidarietà, potranno autodefinirsi e fornire un senso al loro agire unitario. Ma per farlo sarà opportuno coinvolgere in modo strategico i tre elementi che Michel Wieviorka utilizza nel triangolo della differenza. Il triangolo della differenza descrive le componenti essenziali e le possibili configurazioni della diversità, sulla base della combinazione degli angoli di un triangolo, che corrispondono ad elementi sociali. Il primo dei tre vertici rappresenta l'identità collettiva intesa come l'insieme dei riferimenti culturali su cui si basa il sentimento d'appartenenza a un gruppo o ad una comunità (Wieviorka e Ohana 2001). I tratti presenti all'interno delle identità collettive diventano orientamenti per l'agire sociale (Crespi 2015). Il secondo vertice del triangolo è quello dell'individualismo, che rende ogni persona l'atomo elementare di una società in cui gli uomini, teoricamente liberi ed eguali secondo il diritto, partecipano come tanti esseri singoli alla vita moderna. L'ultima componente del triangolo della differenza fa riferimento al Soggetto che si impegna per trovare il suo posto nella società esprimendosi con la creatività, l'umanità, la sensibilità e la particolarità che lo contraddistinguono.

Considerando con attenzione il triangolo delle differenze si può notare come i tre elementi che Wieviorka indica per analizzare le differenze sociali sono molto simili agli elementi propri della coscienza operaia (Touraine 1965) e dei movimenti sociali (Oommenn 1996; Farro 1998).

Il Soggetto si impegna, quindi, a favorire e condividere un'identità collettiva aperta e dai contorni fluidi, capace di tenere unite componenti molto diverse e in sintonia con i nuovi movimenti globali e con le dinamiche sociali che vogliono essere rappresentate (Daher 2013, 2020). Un'identità collettiva in accordo con quel Soggetto, capace di essere attore e di costruire la sua esistenza in modo consapevole e responsabile e che abbandona l'idea di un'identità esclusiva e totalizzante che porta all'individualismo, al quale, anzi dovrebbe opporsi.

Tabella 1. Similitudini tra i tre processi sociali applicati ai principi.

	Coscienza operaia	Movimenti sociali	Triangolo delle differenze
Principio di identità	l'operaio si considera produttore e apportatore di un fattore essenziale della produzione	difesa dell'identità e degli interessi del movimento	il Soggetto
Principio di opposizione	l'operaio identifica l'avversario, mettendo a fuoco gli ostacoli che gli impediscono di appropriarsi delle sue opere	lotta contro un avversario che in genere è espressione della politica consolidata e che si vuole modificare	l'individualismo, che rende ogni persona l'atomo elementare di una società alla quale gli uomini partecipano come tanti esseri singoli
Principio di totalità	si definisce il campo dei conflitti sociali	visione comune con la quale si identifica il movimento	l'insieme dei riferimenti culturali su cui si basa il sentimento d'appartenenza a un gruppo o ad una comunità e che diventa di orientamento per l'agire sociale

Fonte: elaborazione dell'Autore.

Un Soggetto culturale e creativo che si appropri del proprio destino, mostrandosi capace di cambiare la propria realtà partendo da sé, pur ponendosi sempre in relazione con gli altri e dando importanza ad una comunità con la quale riesce a identificarsi. L'attore sociale, inteso come Soggetto, può allora provare a sfidare le dinamiche sociali in un contesto all'interno del quale sorgono forme di dominazione meno riconoscibili e più insidiose, che possono condurre verso un processo di de-soggettivazione.

Per riuscire a contrastare una deriva socio-culturale che impone all'individuo ruoli standardizzati ed omologanti con i quali si impedisce la piena realizzazione della soggettività (Touraine 2015), è necessario uscire dalla condizione di vacuità, grazie alla quale predominano la transitorietà e la contingenza, ed andare verso una reale e consistente prospettiva di riscatto e di affermazione; devono essere consentite e valorizzate le capacità, le volontà e le responsabilità dell'attore sociale di essere Soggetto (Mongardini 2009). Ripartendo dai tratti biografici dell'identità del Soggetto sarà possibile anche ricominciare ad agire collettivamente ed i membri dei gruppi, che hanno comuni interessi e reciproca solidarietà, potranno autodefinirsi e fornire un senso al loro essere e al loro agire unitario in modo consapevole e responsabile.

5. CONCLUSIONI

Il passaggio dalla società industriale a quella post-industriale ha costituito un traguardo importante, che si è realizzato in maniera autonoma. Sembra sia attualmente in corso un ulteriore passaggio, segnato da una vera e propria rottura nella quale i modelli di riferimento, fomentati dall'individualismo e dall'economicismo imperante, si mostrano inadeguati e non più affidabili. Si parla di terza ondata di modernizzazione, così come si ipotizza la fine

del sociale (Baudrillard 1985, Touraine 2013) e diventa lecito chiedersi chi o cosa potrebbe sostituire la società. Da qualche tempo, si sta rivalutando l'importanza della riscoperta della sfera emozionale e creativa e allora il sostituto o meglio il collaboratore più attivo e determinato della società potrebbe essere proprio quel Soggetto, che sbarra le porte all'individualismo per aprirle alla dimensione umana, plurale, collettiva e, dunque, ontologicamente sociale. In effetti, il Soggetto non è al servizio di cause, valori o leggi diversi dalla sua esigenza e dal suo desiderio di resistere al proprio smembramento in prevalente la libertà sia personale che collettiva (Nussbaum 2002).

In questa prospettiva, la difesa dei diritti umani deve diventare una risposta prioritaria che si pone come azione capace di restituire un senso alla società, ma lo può fare solamente se riesce a garantire l'affermazione dei tre principi: identità, riconoscimento dell'opposizione e totalità. È proprio il principio di totalità con la cultura, con l'appartenenza e con la comunità che riesce ad individuare il campo dei conflitti sociali e può, quindi, proporre una eventuale soluzione nella quale c'è l'identificazione e l'attiva partecipazione del Soggetto.

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Appendice bio-bibliografica su autori e autrici

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Gaia Antinelli is a PhD Student of the Joint International PhD in *Social Representations, Culture and Communication* at Sapienza University of Rome, where she also earned her Master's degree in *Media, Digital Communication and Journalism*. Her doctoral research focuses on the issue of the gender gap within organizational cultures. In addition, her research interests are increasingly oriented toward the field of Gender Media Studies, including international collaborations, with particular attention to the representation of online violence, Incel communities and methods for investigating closed groups.

Daniele Battista, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Business Sciences – Management & Innovation Systems at the University of Salerno. His research focuses on digital media, with particular attention to the interaction between social networks, political communication, and the broader implications for democratic processes. His studies examine how platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X are reshaping political discourse, civic engagement, and the dissemination of information in the age of disinformation. He is the author of the book TikTok Politics: Influences and Social Interactions (Meltemi, 2024), which analyses the platform's role in shaping political narratives and mobilizing engagement. He has also published numerous contributions in international academic journals and conferences, addressing topics such as the dynamics of disinformation and the implications of emerging media technologies today. Additionally, he has served as a Visiting Professor at Epoka University (Albania), where he collaborated on research projects on digital transformations and taught courses on digital media strategies and political communication.

Fabiana Battisti (Ph.D., Sapienza University of Rome) is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Rome Tor Vergata, where she teaches Sociology of Cultural and Communication Processes (GSPS-06/A) in four bachelor's degree programmes and a master's degree programme in the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery. In 2023, she was a Visiting Fellow at the Africa Media Matrix School of Journalism and Media Studies (Rhodes University, South Africa). Her work focuses on the

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Teresa Carlone, PhD in Sociology, fixed-term researcher in Tenure Track (RTT) at the Department the Arts. She works on cultures and practices of participation, co-design methodologies in public policy and cultural welfare, urban commons, and collaborative governance. Always locally engaged in citizen participation processes, she has been involved in interdisciplinary research projects at the intersection of climate change impacts, citizen engagement, and social and environmental justice. In recent years, she has focused part of her academic interests on gender and feminist perspectives in the study of public space and the representation of women and gender minority citizens, with a particular focus on data feminism and public policy through participatory and creative methodologies.

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SOCIETÀMUTAMENTOPOLITICA

INDICE