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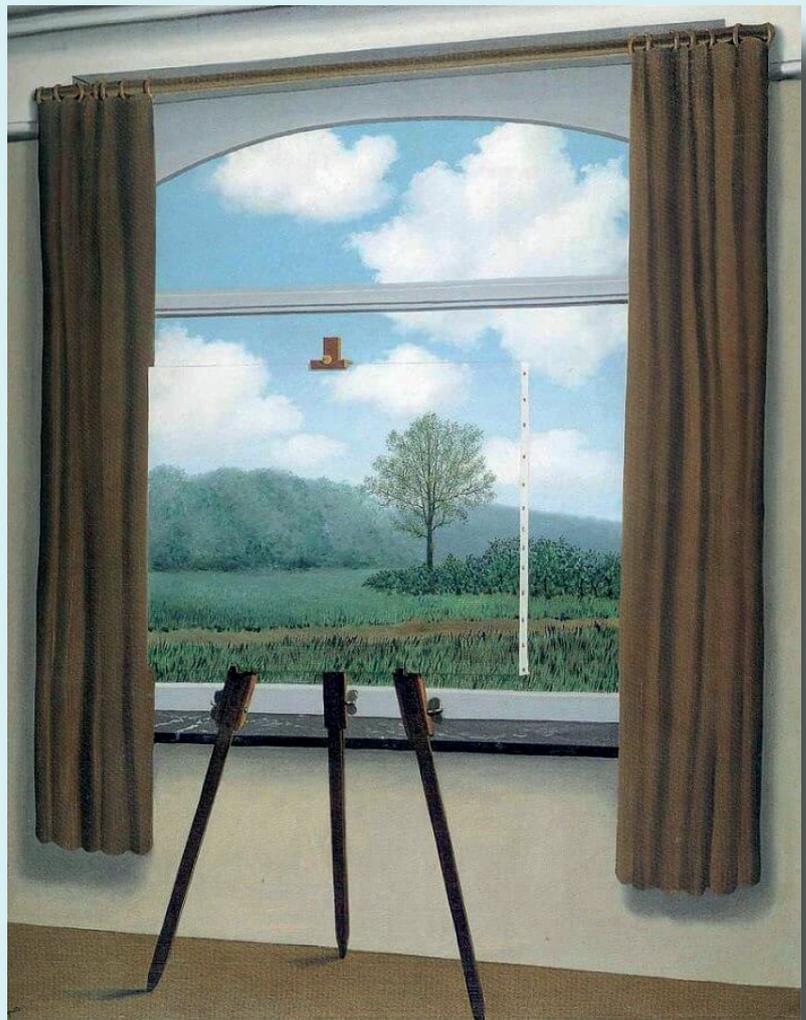
Putting the Political in Its Place:  
Towards a Political Sociology  
of Sustainability

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## Putting the Political in Its Place: Towards a Political Sociology of Sustainability

Edoardo Esposto and Giulio Moini (Eds.)

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## Introduction. Putting the Political in Its Place: Towards a Political Sociology of Sustainability

EDOARDO ESPOSTO

Since its inception in the early 1990s, the international framework on sustainability has developed into a rich and ambitious set of policy goals on such diverse topics as climate change, biodiversity loss, extreme poverty, public health, green growth, innovation, etc. Although it is often portrayed as a vague concept, sustainability has helped frame the multidimensional and highly interdependent issues that represent the crucial challenges of our time, framing them in a more or less coherent policy discourse. We are now used to grouping these issues according to the “three pillars” of sustainability, i.e., its environmental, social, and economic dimensions.

Notably absent from this conception of sustainability is the discussion of its political components, if by “political” we understand something more than the mere procedural concerns (such as transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, etc.) that are associated with its social dimension and the instrumental frameworks (such as policy coherence, global partnership, etc.) shoring up policymaking and governance for sustainable development. First, the “political” relates to situated conflicts over collective decisions – entailing winners and losers – between actors endowed with unequal power. At a more fundamental level, it refers to the possibility of altering the social structuration, which determines the existing unequal power distribution. In the light of this extended definition of the “political”, sustainability has been claimed to be a post-political frame, involving «the technical, managerial and consensual administration (policing) of environmental, social, economic [...] domains» (Swyngedouw 2011: 266). Even when the problem of governing socio-natural relationships is directly addressed (see *inter alia* Biermann *et al.* 2017), the current debate on the governance of sustainability seems to be mired in a post-politics, understanding social change as a techno-managerial issue, ignoring power unbalance in favor of a non-conflictual representation of social relations, and reducing political issues to pure cognitive problems (Blühdorn 2022a).

We think political sociology can contribute to reasserting the role of “the political” in the conceptual constellation of sustainability. Political sociology is, for example, well-suited to investigate the long-term institutional configurations and party politics that may enable a society-wide transition to sustainability, and the mechanisms of political participation best suited to solve

the tough trade-offs it entails. It may help to satisfactorily explore the links between social classes, groups, and identities and the support for radical or moderate sustainable measures, as well as the circumstances under which this support varies in the different national and local contexts. Sociopolitical studies can shed light on the role of industrial interest groups as sponsors of right-wing parties and think tanks that endorse a weak environmental agenda and are skeptical of climate change.

This special issue aims to demonstrate the importance of sustainability as a research topic for contemporary political sociology and, vice versa, the meaningfulness of socio-political research in improving our understanding of sustainability issues. This does not mean, though, that we are advocating for a partial, purely specialistic, point of view. We think that dialogues and hybridity between different disciplines are essential to define the place political sociology may have in this debate.

## 1. DEPOLITICIZATION AND THE POLITICAL

This special issue wants to interrogate the political dimension(s) of sustainability moving from the assumption that the policy discourses surrounding sustainability tend to obscure the relationship between politics and decisions of collective relevance. However, the breadth of this critical claim risks significantly diminishing its heuristic utility. When we assert that sustainability obscures the political nature of collective decisions, we might mean that sustainability, along with the issues it describes, transcends the division among diverse political cultures by presenting itself as a set of objectively collective problems requiring effective and efficient solutions. Alternatively, we might be suggesting that sustainability policies (from a normative standpoint) are best developed by autonomous authorities – detached from political contestation and independent of the need to seek public consensus.

A further interpretation could be descriptive: some actors and decision-making arenas critical to sustainability policies operate “at one remove” from mechanisms of democratic control and legitimation. This is the case, for instance, with international organizations that finance and implement sustainable development policies, like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, or transnational organizations like the OECD that produce policy recommendations and facilitate the transfer of experimental sustainability policies across geo-institutional contexts.

Another perspective might emphasize how policy discourses on sustainability pay minimal attention to the

conflict in defining goals and distributing the benefits and costs associated with sustainable transitions. Additionally, it might point to the regulatory frameworks for sustainability, which have consistently placed disproportionate emphasis on the voluntary actions of economic actors, market mechanisms, and individual consumer choices. In this framing, private behaviors – removed from the collective dimension of politics – are granted a level of importance comparable to, if not greater than, public regulation and policy initiatives.

Finally, discussing the absence of political dimensions in sustainability could pertain to the capacity of sustainability discourses to frame certain social phenomena as being beyond collective decision-making. For example, the naturalization of certain issues – the representation of phenomena as external, preexisting, and beyond collective agency – has been a prominent feature of how economic growth has been reintroduced into the sustainable development debate despite its critique by ecological approaches in the 1970s.

The variety of meanings connected to the claim that sustainability is a depoliticized concept requires a brief clarification of what we mean when we talk about depoliticization. Following the literature (Jessop 2014, Buller *et al.* 2019, Moini 2019), we can distinguish between two macro-domains in which depoliticization processes operate. The first pertains to politics, understood here as the exercise of legitimate decisional authority. In this case, depoliticization is «a governing strategy [...] *the process of placing at one remove the political character of decisionmaking*» (Burnham 2001: 128, emphasis in original). It operates on institutional architecture, attributing decision-making authority to “non-political” actors (i.e., not democratically legitimized). It also works through policy statements and public discourses, transforming a previously collective issue into a private affair and placing it outside the scope of collective decision-making (Hay 2007). The first-generation (Flinders and Buller 2006) and second-generation (Wood and Flinders 2014) studies on depoliticization understand it

*as a ‘principle’ of policymakers involving the implementation of particular ‘tactics and tools’ [such as] the creation of delegated agencies to advise on and make policy decisions, [...] setting binding rules on policymakers, and [...] discursive ‘acts’ aimed at making policy issues appear non-political* (Fawcett *et al.* 2017: 10).

The second macro-domain concerns the “political” itself. In this case, depoliticization refers to acts and discourses that can construct «a division between the political and non-political spheres and locating social relations and/or sets of social issues on one or another

side of this divide» (Jessop 2014: 210). This type of depoliticization seeks to neutralize the political nature of social orders, effectively denying that decisions with significant consequences for how a community is organized arise from conflict and exclusion and are contingent and reversible.

This form of depoliticization aims to neutralize the transformative potential of conflict by concealing the contingent nature of the decisions that established a particular articulation of social identities, i.e., a particular social order. This neutralization tends to abstract its object from the power relations within which it is embedded: consider, for example, the current naturalization of inequalities, which are framed as the result of different natural abilities within a context of free private enterprise and well-functioning markets. The “neutralization of the political” grants the existing social order an unquestionable and immutable character by obscuring the role of conflict in its formation. Following C. Mouffe (2000, 2005, 2013), we can define “post-politics” as that hegemonic relation which, in articulating various social identities and configuring their reciprocal relations, denies the legitimacy and even the existence of conflict within the social order it seeks to establish.

## 2. POST-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT, ONTOLOGICAL POLITICS AND POST- ECOLOGICAL POLICY PARADIGMS

Political ecology has long integrated the concept of the post-political environment into its analytical framework for understanding socio-natural relations. E. Swyngedouw’s contributions to the debate have particularly addressed the issue of the post-political environment. Drawing on a conceptual apparatus that integrates the theoretical outcomes of French post-structuralism, Swyngedouw has interrogated the paradoxical nature of contemporary sustainability policies. These policies aim to guide changes in the relationships between human societies and their environments without engaging in political conflict over choices regarding the reordering of social relations. «Although disagreement and debate are of course still possible, they operate within an overall model of elite consensus and agreement, subordinated to a managerial-technocratic regime» (Swyngedouw 2011: 267). This discursive regime tends to dissociate the social causes – a historically specific organization of relations of production and reproduction – from their environmental effects, so that the latter can be presented as imbalances in physical, chemical, and biological systems. Problems within social relations are externalized

as issues among natural entities requiring technical solutions, without the necessity to change the structuring of society or the unequal distribution of social power it entails (Swyngedouw 2013, 2015).

Swyngedouw’s radical critique of the Anthropocene follows a similar line of thought. His starting point is the observation that the so-called “end of nature” (McKibben 1990, Vogel 2015) – the crisis of modern ontologies that posited a clear separation between society and nature – has led to a proliferation of discourses about new ways to construct socio-natural relations. This heterogeneous set of approaches is united by the deployment of ontologies that are symmetrical (it considers human and non-human entities as equally endowed with agency) and relational (where entities are identified through differentiation rather than an assumed individual substance). These new ontologies have prompted critical thought to develop hypotheses for «post-capitalist politics that operate through horizontal, heterogeneous, and multi-species entanglements» (Swyngedouw and Ernstson 2018: 11). However, the discursive space opened by the disappearance of nature as the opposite, limit, and measure of the social seems to have been predominantly filled by constructions that bring the alterity of the non-human world under human manipulative capacity, now reframed as «loving supervision, intelligent crafting, reflexive techno-natural nurturing and ethical manicuring» (Swyngedouw 2019: 254). Concepts like the “good Anthropocene” or “planetary stewardship” exemplify this synthesis of the “end of nature” and technical optimism about capitalism’s ability to create a healthy and hospitable environment (see *inter alia* Arias-Maldonado 2016, 2019, Hamilton 2016).

Inspired by R. Esposito’s immunological-biopolitical perspective, Swyngedouw argues that this discursive ensemble tends to isolate and expel from the social body those socio-natural phenomena that appear to jeopardize its orderly functioning. Social groups, territorial communities, species, or ecosystems deemed beyond salvation may thus be sacrificed, while safe social groups «become mere spectators of the suffering of others from the cocoon of their sanctuary spaces» (Swyngedouw and Ernstson 2018: 16).

The “ontological turn” (for an introduction see Flemmer *et al.* 2024) away from the rigid dichotomy between society and nature constitutes a crucial element of contemporary thought on socio-natural relations. However, it has not ensured the predominance of new emancipatory ontologies. The renewed focus on ontologies highlights their significance for politics, as the foundations of the (European/Western) social and natural world are increasingly revealed as contextual, open to

multiple interpretations, and thus contestable. Yet, as L. Pellizzoni (2015) convincingly argues, this “ontological politics” risks «neglecting the extent to which the emergence of the material world is [...] also the (intended or unintended) effect of deliberate moves in the context of sticky power asymmetries [...] which crucially affect the conditions of possibility of the real» (*Ibidem*: 78).

It is therefore both useful and necessary to think about the “politics of ontology”, that is, the relationship between the multiple possible ways of reconstructing socio-natural entities and relations – with their links to epistemological and methodological questions – and the acts that transform or preserve the social order through domination and consent, connecting the ruling class and the ruled, and holding together systematic worldviews and common sense.

Pellizzoni notes how the neoliberal hegemonic project has made indeterminacy, risk, and radical contingency (elements intrinsic to many new ontologies as opposed to modern deterministic reductionism) one of the main tools for managing socio-natural relations (Pellizzoni 2023). «The more unstable the world, the more manageable» (Pellizzoni 2011: 797) is the motto of neoliberal governance of the real, which overturns received ontological perspectives without modifying in an egalitarian or emancipatory sense the unequal structuring of social power in which they were embedded.

The “end of nature” is only one component characterizing the current governance of socio-natural relations. I. Blühdorn (2007, 2013) has shown how this can be better understood by overturning certain sociological assumptions about the developmental trajectories of contemporary society. Firstly, the tendency of post-industrial societies to place greater emphasis on post-materialist values (such as self-realization or the enjoyment of an unspoiled environment), as proposed by R. Inglehart. Blühdorn argues that never before have consumption choices so thoroughly replaced other measures of autonomy, social responsibility, identity, and even emancipation. Support for environmental causes, for example, is immediately equated with acquiring goods consciously marketed as green or ethical. Secondly, the presumed reflexive posture of late modernity concerning risks generated by its developmental processes is called into question. U. Beck’s “risk society” did not establish institutions capable of democratizing and globalizing the understanding and accountability for risks arising from modernization. Instead, it has prevalently framed risk as an unrealized opportunity, a privileged object of private economic initiative. As A. Wildavsky (1982) posited, «[i]n a culture of competitive individualism, risk is opportunity. Without scarcity there is no competition;

without uncertainty, there is no reward» (*Ibidem*: 320). Finally, Blühdorn observes how the deliberative and participatory promises of “democratizing democracy” have given way to a variety of pessimistic diagnoses about the state of liberal democracies: the primacy of post-democracy (Crouch 2004), the crisis of representation (Viviani 2018), and the rise of illiberal democracies (Wagrandl 2021).

The “silent counter-revolution”, the “opportunity society”, and the “post-democratic turn”, along with the “end of nature”, are the main dimensions of the post-ecological paradigm in contemporary sustainability policies. This paradigm, and its associated modes of governance, do not deny the severe consequences of our development model for socio-natural relations but fail to acknowledge the different responsibilities for their emergence, or the benefit certain social actors derive from their unresolved status. A paradox marks the post-ecological paradigm: «the coincidence of an essentially uncontested consensus that the established values, lifestyles, and social structures are (by any understanding of the term) unsustainable and the adamant resolve to defend and secure the structures and principles underlying this unsustainability» (Blühdorn 2011: 42).

### 3. POST-POLITICAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE SHADOW OF THE ANTI-ECOLOGICAL BACKLASH

The characterization of sustainability as a post-political and post-ecological paradigm has been particularly apt in describing the governance of socio-natural relations over the past decades (Esposto 2024). However, the effects of current global challenges – such as the deterioration of geopolitical relations, the consolidation of openly authoritarian regimes, and the strengthening of radical right-wing movements – on this policy discourse remain uncertain.

Critical contributions have frequently highlighted the need to re-politicize the governance of environmental issues (see *inter alia* Ernstson and Swyngedouw 2018), emphasizing a move beyond the “depoliticizing deadlock” of contemporary governance. Blühdorn (2022b, 2022c) seems to have reached a pessimistic conclusion about the feasibility of such re-politicization. He argues that right-wing populisms have demonstrated a capacity to politicize sustainability and green transitions in anti-ecological terms. This has been achieved by deploying the same discursive repertoire – centered on autonomy, self-realization, and opposition to oppression – that historically underpinned Western emancipatory projects. Blühdorn examines the declining efficacy of the

“dialectic of emancipation”, i.e., the relationship between “rule-transgressing” and “rule-setting” that underlain and energized the emancipatory project, forming the basis of our ideas of progress. Today, we find ourselves in a paradoxical condition: as the unsustainability of modernization intensifies, «the emancipatory project [...] fully loses the ability to counterbalance its logic of expansion and transgression with a logic of limitation and restraint» (Blühdorn 2022b: 39).

Swyngedouw (2022) highlights an additional explanation of the current contingency: the vacuum left by the long post-political era has created conditions conducive to the right-wing re-politicization of sustainability. The mechanisms of this politicization vary. Some political forces appeal to the fears of those most exposed to the costs of ecological transitions, particularly within the Global North. Some actors – in particular, think tanks and corporate lobbyists – have fostered skepticism toward scientific knowledge on socio-ecological crises, such as climate change. Another common strategy contrasts the supposedly “ideological” ecological thinking with pragmatic, “common sense” – and invariably pro-business – decisions. Despite these variations, these forces share a common goal: delaying the regulation of economic sectors that contribute most to the unsustainability of the current development model (Brulle 2014).

In response to this context, it becomes essential to explore alternative perspectives on the politicization of sustainability and ecological transitions. These alternatives must be grounded in a robust conception of politics, recognizing it as a tool for mediating diverse interests through conflict and antagonism. This approach must also acknowledge the legitimacy of theoretical frameworks that attribute the contemporary socio-ecological crises to the capitalist system and critique the prevailing notions of sustainability and transition for failing to challenge the fundamental unequal structuration of society (Asara *et al.* 2015). Such perspectives must affirm the possibility of aligning labor struggles with environmental advocacy, demonstrating their potential for mutual reinforcement in challenging the exploitation of humans and non-humans (Imperatore and Leonardi 2023, Barca 2024).

#### 4. INTRODUCING THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The multidimensionality of sustainability refers to complex relationships between different and seemingly distant events. The study of interdependencies between social and political change is the hallmark of political sociology. This tension towards connections and inter-

dependencies represents a founding feature of the epistemology of political sociology. Segatori (2012: 13) identifies the specialization of sociological reflection on politics precisely in its ability to address the «interdependencies between conflicts, powers, systemic relations, and political forms». Moving from such considerations, the contributions to this special issue present a wide array of topics and interrogate them from the perspective of their political relevance.

Galmarini and Chiesi address the topic of the post-political environment in the urban context. The argument developed by the authors helps us appreciate the depoliticizing power of discourses on sustainable urban development and greening, which reduces the scope for alternative urban imaginaries that are more aware of socio-spatial justice issues. Secondly, and even more importantly, the contribution highlights what we might call the “dual movement” between the depoliticization of public policy and the politicization of private initiatives. This refers to the ability of market actors and entrepreneurial third-sector entities to exploit the “decoupling of social and environmental claims”, extending the privatization and commodification of urban spaces.

D’Agata revisits the theme of sustainability in urban policies, starting from a dialogue with neo-Gramscian approaches to the environment and urban regimes. This allows the author to present a theoretical framework useful for moving beyond the discursive critique of sustainability. One outcome of this theoretical reconstruction that we wish to emphasize is placing labor not as one of the many possible social identities articulated through political-discursive acts, but as “structurally constitutive of socio-ecological relations”. This is because labor is inextricably involved in the material appropriation of the non-human world, which is simultaneously the appropriation of surplus labor by capitalists or, that is the same, the unequal distribution of the products of this appropriation, and the consequent unequal structuring of social power.

Ferraro’s contribution, which introduces us to more markedly empirical research, delves into another crucial aspect of the relationship between labor and socio-natural relations, the combined negative impacts of production on the health of workers, territorial communities, and the ecosystems they inhabit. The case of asbestos pollution by Isochimica, in a territory already marginalized within Southern Italy’s Campania, reminds us of the core assumption of environmental justice: marginalized social groups and territorial communities are those that suffer the greatest effects of human-driven environmental degradation. The scenario described by the author is bleak: justice expectations have been systematically

unmet, despite sustainability rhetoric and simulated initiatives for health protection. Even when fully achieved, restorative justice intervenes – as Ferraro emphasizes – only in response to an event whose effects have already fully unfolded. Re-politicizing the issue of health within and beyond production could be crucial for forging alliances among workers, citizens, and activists capable of preventing socio-environmental devastation.

The role of “hegemonic ideas” deployed by economic actors to generate consensus for their accumulation strategies is the focus of Nupieri’s contribution. The author examines the networks of actors forming the discursive coalition supporting the expansion of so-called “sustainable finance” in Italy. Through the careful use of key concepts of interpretative policy analysis, such as *référentiel*, the author describes in detail the representations this coalition has mobilized to establish finance as an indispensable tool for achieving sustainability goals. The financial sector has thus been able, on the one hand, to regain the legitimacy that seemed lost forever after 2008, and on the other, to find new domains of socio-natural relations in which to expand its operations.

D’Albergo and Giovanelli focus on the highly topical issue of data-driven policymaking. The case detailed by the authors lies at the intersection of the two transitions that the EU has decided to invest in: the digital and the ecological. The use of augmented analytics, through the contribution of AI systems, on the vast amount of data generated by social interactions in urban environments represents a new frontier at the science-policy interface. These technical tools seem to enable the almost automatic management of urban socio-natural relations. The authors convincingly show that these techno-managerial governance tools are far from being neutral to values and interests. They are, instead, situated at the intersection of the “values and beliefs” characterizing the “mainstream policy paradigms” of our time and the goals and interests of hegemonic actors in various local political-economic regimes.

Gozzo and D’Agata undertake the challenging task of analyzing the social dimension of sustainability, whose analytical definition remains an open issue in the literature. The authors demonstrate how social sustainability is a potentially contradictory conceptual construct. For instance, social cohesion can be both strengthened and diminished by other concepts associated with social sustainability, such as tolerance towards migrants or a sense of belonging to a defined community. Armed with the rich data from *the European Social Survey*, the authors reveal the existence of multiple models of social sustainability within the EU – largely determined by the variety of social models and politico-cultural regimes – and their evolution following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The theme of eco-activism among new generations is central to the contribution of Asara and Alietti. Through the analysis of a survey administered to the students from the University of Ferrara, the authors provide a detailed account of young generations’ attitudes toward socio-ecological crises and their possible solutions. The results highlight a persistent interest in environmental issues among the majority of respondents, even five years after the mass mobilization of *Fridays for Future*. The evolving international landscape, with environmental issues increasingly marginalized in policy agendas and public discourse, is reflected in a growing sense of “agencylessness” among young people, accompanied by a pessimistic outlook on the possibility of mitigating climate change. However, the majority of respondents – across the ideological divide – consider it a priority to change modes of production and consumption, moving beyond technical fixes. This serves as a stark reminder that socio-ecological crises remain a reason to imagine different political arrangements of socio-natural relations.

Montanari and Panarari tackle the problem of conscious consumption and its political dimension, that is, the necessary forms of organization and collective action that have enabled the emergence of various forms of ethical and eco-compatible production and consumption. The creation of what have become genuine giants in the sector, such as Slow Food and Whole Foods Market, reflects the intent to re-politicize tastes and sensory pleasures. However, the possibility that this subversive charge may be reabsorbed by market dynamics remains a constant risk in the operations of these major brands, thus making it increasingly difficult for “consumer-citizens” to balance the pursuit of self-interest with adherence to the common good.

Campbell provides an in-depth analysis of a case study on collaborative governance of a natural resource. The collaborative forest management detailed by the author highlights the potential of participatory science-based initiatives to reduce conflicts over managing socio-natural relations and to open techno-managerial mechanisms to scrutiny and collective deliberation.

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# Repoliticizing Green Spaces in Urban Transitions. The Relevance of Governance for Equitable Ecological Planning

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**Abstract.** In the pursuit of ecological transitions, city administrations emerge as key players in implementing global strategies. Urban ecological planning responds to several major objectives outlined in global sustainable agendas, and urban experimentation is considered an ideal arena for developing and testing models of renaturalization. However, this greening momentum is also serving as a means to depoliticize planning processes and city governance. Despite ambitious claims, ecological plans are frequently burdened by a fragmented approach, and a lack of structural imbalance and equity-focused provisions. The political significance of ecological planning and management is typically disregarded, with dissent and socio-economic impacts of greening on the population sidelined in favor of emphasizing social green benefits. Conveying a consensual and a-critical view of urban greening as a 'pure good' producing widespread benefits for all, and framing social benefits as a consequence of increased environmental quality sustainable planning often results in overlooking the possible unfair outcomes of greening-led urban regeneration. Moreover, emphasizing the urgency for adaptation measures, and celebrating measurable outcomes, ecological planning is embracing a technocentric approach to public space, whereby environmental issues are used to legitimize policies that are exclusionary. Fragmentation of ecological planning and governance, with the involvement of private actors or nonprofits in greening processes, may contribute to the decoupling of social and environmental claims, serving city marketing rather than citizens' well-being and social cohesion, and may result in the privatization and commodification of nature. By drawing on the analysis of green management experiences, this paper analyzes the need for a political sociology perspective in understanding and re-politicizing the governance of green spaces.

**Keywords:** green governance, urban green spaces, urban ecological transition, green gentrification.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the pursuit of ecological transitions, city administrations emerge as key players in implementing global strategies. With the vast majority of the world's population already living in cities and this trend expected to rapidly escalate in the future, and authors outlining our species as an "urban species" (Keil 2003, 2020), urban experimentation emerges as a prime opportu-

nity for developing and testing models of harmonious coexistence and sustainable prosperity (Hartig and Kahn 2016). Indeed, in the historical trajectory of global sustainability policy, the narrative has shifted from viewing cities as sustainability problems – for urban lifestyle and increasing trends of urbanization – to investing in them as drivers for global ecological transition (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2022). The global discourse about climate change has increasingly turned its focus to urban-scale adaptation strategies, driven in part by direct accountability and more agile leadership compared to the state level. This attention has led to an increase in funding and research efforts to develop guidelines for envisioning, designing, and implementing more resilient and sustainable cities. Embracing concepts like “sponge cities”, “resilient” or “neutral cities”, and approaches of “sustainable” and “climate” urbanism, urban ecological planning is evolving to align with key objectives outlined in global sustainability agendas, such as UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Among different climate strategies, urban renaturalization emerges as one of the most effective (Endreny 2018). Afforestation has been listed as Natural Climate Solutions (Griscom *et al.* 2017), hailed as “the most effective climate change solution to date” to counteract the trend of carbon dioxide production (Bastin *et al.* 2019), and proved to be particularly efficient in urban and peri-urban areas (Francini *et al.* 2024). Recognized within the EU’s Nature-Based Solution framework, urban afforestation and urban greening, namely the implementation of green infrastructure which encompasses vegetation and tree cover, addresses a range of issues including soil and air pollution, urban heat islands, rainwater runoff, and biodiversity loss (EU 2015, Gómez-Baggethun and Barton 2013, Salbitano *et al.* 2016, Ramyar *et al.* 2021). Trees and plants provide a multitude of environmental, economic, social, and psychological benefits to urban environments, while extensive scientific research has confirmed the positive correlation between the experience of nature and human health and well-being (Hartig *et al.* 2014, Kuo 2015, Bratman *et al.* 2019). Therefore, urban greening is widely acknowledged as an effective means for transforming cities into more resilient, healthier, and livable places.

In their evidence and achievement-based green initiatives, city governments are also leveraging the opportunity to attract investments and stimulate new “green growth” (Anguelovski 2023). Situated within the neoliberal framework of urban competitiveness, the need for green planning has given rise to the concept of “green boosterism”, an extension of the traditional notion of “urban boosterism” which focuses on enhancing a city’s image to attract financial capital and new residents

(García-Lamarca *et al.* 2021). Green boosterism involves the strategic adoption of environmentalist and green narratives and practices as branding tools to elevate cities’ appeal, to position themselves as leading environmentally-friendly urban centers (Greenberg 2015, Connolly 2019, Neidig *et al.* 2022). However, driven by market-oriented and outward-looking strategies of self-promotion, this green rhetoric often leads to the monetization and financialization of greening interventions, facilitating speculation and rent capture (García-Lamarca *et al.* 2022, Anguelovski and Connolly 2021, Brand 2007). In this scenario, there is a risk that green planning may overlook equity goals, and reproduce or even exacerbate existing inequalities in green provisions and spatial justice. As scholars have pointed out, if issues of social equity are not directly and locally addressed, strategies aimed at inclusive green development may paradoxically lead to greater inequality rather than widespread health benefits, social cohesion, and inclusion (e.g. Cucca 2012, Haase *et al.* 2017, Cole *et al.* 2017, Anguelovski and Connolly 2021, Anguelovski *et al.* 2022, Anguelovski 2023).

The growing call for cities’ renaturalization, which is shaping political agendas and driving investment in the global intercity competition, is increasingly adopting a technocentric (Checker 2011) and performance-oriented discourse on greening. This approach is grounded in, and reinforces, a consensual and acritical view of urban greening that has been referred to as “green orthodoxy” (Haase *et al.* 2017, Pearsall and Anguelovski 2016, Connolly 2019). Emphasizing measurable environmental green benefits, urban green orthodoxy invisibilizes tensions and unjust outcomes associated with new green interventions. In response, the concept of “green gentrification” (Gould and Lewis 2017), together with partially overlapping “ecological gentrification” (Dooling 2009) and “environmental gentrification” (Checker 2011) terms, has emerged to document the inequitable outcomes of greening plans, policies, and interventions explicitly pursuing resilience, sustainability or “greenness”. Drawing on approaches from environmental justice and political ecology, this expanding body of literature explores the relationship between greening, power, and justice in urban contexts through various trajectories, including increased property values and real estate prices, the displacement of low-income residents, the expulsion of marginalized people, the exclusion of targeted groups from decision-making processes, the privatization of public space, and the reproduction of spatial inequality patterns (Anguelovski *et al.* 2019, Quinton *et al.* 2022, Anguelovski 2023). Most publications on green gentrification explored aspects of distributional justice, examining how existing socio-economic and ethnic spatial inequalities

have influenced the distribution of green coverage and investments in renaturalization; and assessing whether new greening initiatives contribute to gentrification in the targeted area (Anguelovski 2020). Many green space redevelopment, expansion, or transformation interventions, especially large-scale ones, have been associated with physical displacement and cultural and social dispossession, with exclusionary effects in terms of accessibility and a reduced sense of belonging (Anguelovski 2023). A correlation between the intensity of green rhetoric and green branding efforts, and the decreased affordability of cities, was documented worldwide (Dale and Newman 2009, García-Lamarca *et al.* 2021). Research pathways focusing on identifying design and typological aspects more prone to unjust outcomes have also emerged. For instance, the “just green enough” approach, advocating for the implementation of numerous small scattered green spaces over large parks, was built upon the evidence that large-scale and functional parks are more likely to foster gentrifying effects (Curran and Hamilton 2012, Wolch 2014, Rigolon *et al.* 2020).

Green gentrification studies explore the complex interplay between urban greening and justice, framed through three key dimensions: distributive, procedural, and interactional (Low 2013, Schlosberg 2013, Anguelovski *et al.* 2020). Most attention has been drawn to distributive justice – which unfolds in the unequal distribution of green amenities and the reproduction of segregated spatial patterns of environmentally disadvantaged populations. However, scholars have also illustrated issues related to citizens’ participation in decision-making processes, and the marginalization of existing ecological knowledge and practices. Additionally, instances of conflict, rejection, and resistance to greening initiatives have been documented across Europe, and North and South America (e.g., Checker 2011, Newman 2015, Anguelovski *et al.* 2019). Nonetheless, the significance of green space governance and management in perpetuating injustice within ecological planning remains largely underestimated.

Addressing at the same time global climate crisis effects and branding purposes, cities are encouraged to adopt ecological plans and green initiatives aimed at adaptation, mitigation, and enhancing citizens’ health and quality of life. This re-naturalization necessitates a substantial reorganization of urban governance, encompassing the updating of procedures and protocols for green management, the integration of new skills, collaboration across different administrative sectors, and the allocation of dedicated resources. However, despite ambitious claims, such plans are frequently hampered by a fragmented approach, and a lack of structural and

equity-focused foresight. Moreover, the political significance of ecological planning and management is typically disregarded, with dissent and socio-economic impacts of greening on the population sidelined in favor of emphasizing the social benefits of green spaces. In this context, a re-politicization of green planning and a sociopolitical analysis of modes of green management proves necessary. The equity of urban greening interventions is inextricably linked to its planning and governance, as the decision-making strategy guiding interventions and the mode of resource acquisition can lead to very different outcomes in terms of spatial justice. Indeed, the fragmentation of ecological planning and governance with the redistribution of administrative functions, accompanied by green orthodoxy, resonates with a micro-political and techno-centric perspective to urban governance that is typical of cities’ neoliberalization (Brand 2007, Brenner and Theodore 2002, 2005). Operatively, the involvement of private actors in the design, implementation, and management of urban greening, without coordination and city-wide perspective, may serve city marketing rather than citizens’ well-being and social cohesion, and may result in the privatization and commodification of urban nature. Furthermore, the increasing reliance on public-private partnerships or collaborations with environmental nonprofits, ostensibly aimed at maximizing efficiency and reducing costs of greening initiatives, overlooks their possible exclusionary effects, as well as their impact on the perceived and actual accessibility of public green spaces. By drawing on an analysis of green space management experiences, this paper underscores the importance of adopting a sociological perspective to further our understanding of the implications of green space governance. The hypothesis presented is twofold: first, there is a need to re-politicize green planning and practices, moving away from the neoliberal rhetoric of neutrality; second, this re-politicization must be rooted in a critical examination of green governance.

## 2. GREENING AS DEPOLITICIZING NARRATIVE

### 2.1. *Depoliticizing effect of the climate crisis*

The urgent narrative of the climate crisis has resulted in a moral imperative towards greening as part of urban climate politics. This vision legitimizes the overshadowing of social and equity issues, insinuating environmental concerns to be prior to the survival of the human species against the threat of climate crisis (Harper 2020, Bulkeley 2021). Conceived under a state of (climate) emergency and addressing international accountability, new green

planning emphasizes environmental aspects and measurable outcomes while neglecting local social specificities and political issues. As a consequence, despite the integrated approach embedded in the sustainability, resilience, and adaptation frameworks, as expressed in the Agenda 2030 (Biermann *et al.* 2017), equity and justice aspects are frequently sidelined in favor of solely environmental mission. As the impacts of climate change intensify, with the increase of extreme heat, floods, and pollution levels, the necessity for compromise and consensus may override political divides and oversee possible contestations (Long and Rice 2019). According to Checker, «contemporary fixes to environmental issues, especially climate change, provide a prime example of the rise of technocracy, managerial governance and consensual politics» (2011: 214), «which disallow spaces for conflictual politics and the imagining of alternative modes of governance» (*Ibidem*). This applies to urban greening as well. In terms of consensus, a resilient agenda encounters less resistance from a wide audience (Chiesi and Forte 2022, Harper 2020, Swyngedouw and Ernstson 2018), gradually removing urban greening from political debates, or silencing protests and alternative narratives.

This re-signification of urban nature as a climate solution, thus as an urban requirement for adaptation rather than as public space, shifts the criteria for evaluating green spaces. In urban agendas, it may result in a technocratic, ostensibly politically neutral approach to solving environmental issues, through which unjust dynamics may operate. This technocratic perspective stresses the rapidity of climate crisis effects and the urgency for adaptation measures, in order to stage environmental issues that must be dealt with through compromise, managerial and technical arrangement, and the production of consensus. Planning decisions concerning where and how to green cities are framed as technocratic issues. No space is given to political dissensus, which is perceived as unseemly and counter-productive, while inclusion and equity are sidelined in the name of sustainable goals. The effectiveness of ecological and green policies is assessed in quantitative terms, for example in the number of trees planted. Yet, the spatial component is reduced to the role of service multiplier: it is a surface available for the performance of ecological and ecosystem functions, but it lacks any socio-political dimension. In green planning, characters like park size, biodiversity, number of trees present, and ecological connectivity, are prioritized, while considerations such as location relative to socio-economic context or public perception are downplayed. Accessibility and diverse use possibilities, key aspects for public engagement and inclusiveness (Chiesi and Costa 2022), can be even overshadowed by the need to ensure ecologi-

cal performance. From this viewpoint, the restriction of certain areas in public gardens for biodiversity protection can be read at the same time as exclusionary and ecologically oriented measures. As a result, the possibility of interaction and coexistence within green spaces, which would otherwise be fundamental requirements for public space, is not recognized as decisive, and the enjoyment of green spaces itself is depoliticized.

Equity concerns, if not overlooked in renaturalization plans, typically manifest solely through the activation of participatory processes (Angelo *et al.* 2022). However, the techno-managerial approach to urban greening, where a unique scientific rationale seems to be admitted, may affect participatory mechanisms, which, when adopted, reproduce power imbalances, or legitimize ongoing interventions, for example by presenting a limited range of alternatives for expressing preferences. Although the importance of public engagement in green and climate planning and management is widely recognized, scholars emphasize the need to critically assess the transparency, accountability, and openness of citizens' involvement in decision-making processes, along with the role and impact of participatory initiatives on the structure of these processes (Betsill and Bulkeley 2003, Bulkeley 2021). It is widely agreed that the term "participation" has become overly broad and elusive, often serving as a narrative tool for advancing neoliberal agendas dominated by private actors and profit motives (Moini 2012, Turnhout *et al.* 2020). Especially in climate-oriented green planning, participatory processes can be employed to respond to transnational recommendations, foster citizens' political commitment, or promote initiatives, rather than address complex and potentially contested issues including most marginalized groups in the decisional process (Bherer 2010, Bulkeley 2021). Citizens' involvement can serve not only to inform but also to legitimize policies. Indeed, in climate-oriented participatory processes, the «depoliticized discourse that uses rational and scientific arguments to evoke universalized ideas of what is 'the best' solution» (Turnhout *et al.* 2020: 16).

## 2.2. 'Green-as-good' narrative

The climate emergency narrative accentuates the stripping away of greening from its political nature (Long and Rice 2019). But the depoliticization of green spaces is also conveyed by the green orthodoxy narrative, which, as mentioned above, sees urban greening as intrinsically inclusive, producing widespread benefits for all. Framing distributed social benefits as a consequence of increased environmental quality, rather than as a precondition, green orthodoxy overlooks the existing ten-

sions among the corners of the environment–economy–equity “planner’s triangle” (Campbell 1996), and possible unfair outcomes of greening-led urban regeneration.

The depoliticization of renaturalization processes and the decoupling of environmental and equity considerations are facilitated by a process of removal of any political or social connotations from the dominant representation of urban nature. Hillary Angelo traced back the origins of a socially constructed view of nature as an indirect, universal, and aspirational good, with the delineation, starting from the industrialization period (Angelo 2021). With the creation of such “urbanized nature”, greening practices are selected, detached from the production of goods and services for self-consumption and survival in general, and oriented towards leisure and recreation purposes. These interpretations of nature as amenities have become dominant narratives, portraying green spaces as universally beautiful, positive, virtuous, and inclusive. The strength of such narratives contributes to the delegitimization of dissent and protests against green implementation, while also normalizing the renovation of existing urban nature to conform to an idealized image of “glitzy and manicured green” spaces (Anguelovski *et al.* 2018). Consequently, certain voices and practices may be marginalized in favor of others, and certain groups of inhabitants may be selectively excluded from accessing public spaces (e.g., Dooling 2009, Newman 2015, Koprowska *et al.* 2020).

Together with an increasing emphasis on their measurable outcomes, the narrative of green-as-good is particularly powerful in neutralizing any critical consideration regarding the same democratic and equitable nature of greening operations. Equity aspects are sidelined in favor of environmental performance concerns, justified by a narrative of implicit inclusiveness of greening, and the win-win paradigm of green orthodoxy. Trust in the intrinsically diffused benefits of urban greening policies leads to their development without direct attention to equity, and governance structures often lack explicit orientation towards ensuring justice and accessibility of those benefits. As a result, environmental efficiency may be easily used as a rhetorical tool to serve market and economic interests (Kotsila *et al.* 2021), and the involvement of private stakeholders is welcomed as beneficial regardless of socio-spatial outcomes.

### 3. THE CONTROVERSIES OF PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The search for different modalities of public-private partnerships is encouraged as a fruitful strategy to

maximize national and local efforts to achieve sustainable goals. With limited resources available for urban greening and the goal of expanding and improving green space provision, city administrations have increasingly adopted mechanisms such as privately owned public green spaces. However, while these kinds of spaces contribute to the overall supply of publicly accessible areas, private interests can shape their accessibility. Especially in the absence of proper negotiation between public and private interests, the latter often takes precedence, potentially leading to exclusionary practices or the commercialization of public spaces (Németh 2009, Németh and Schmidt 2011, Lee 2022). Privately-owned public green spaces typically feature increased regulation of use and behavior, often reflected in the presence of security personnel, surveillance cameras, stringent rules, and restricted zones, but also design feature guiding behaviors – such as access gates or furniture designed to discourage certain activities (Pearsall and Eller 2020, Verheij *et al.* 2023). Since the inclusivity of public green space is directly shaped by its permitted uses and perceived norms (Chiesi and Costa 2022), these features can significantly limit their accessibility. Similar concerns apply to publicly owned but privately managed parks (Pearsall and Eller 2020), especially when they are part of new urban developments. The profit-oriented participation of private stakeholders in urban ecological transition should therefore raise concerns about the fairness of such processes, and the inclusiveness of the outcomes (Brand 2007, Pearsall *et al.* 2020, Verheij *et al.* 2023), particularly in light of the increasing economic value and attractiveness of urban greening (Liebelt *et al.* 2023, Ma *et al.* 2024). Much of the green gentrification scholarship has examined the correlation between investments in greening and rising property values, highlighting how urban greening has been leveraged by developers and real estate investors to increase the value of their assets (Immergluck 2009, Loughran 2014, Haase *et al.* 2017, García-Lamarca *et al.* 2022, Anguelovski 2023). The term “green gap” was introduced to describe how municipalities, investors, developers, and affluent residents capitalize on greening projects through “green rents” – i.e. increased land and property value – while simultaneously claiming the universality of benefits delivered (Anguelovski *et al.* 2018).

Indeed, cities are increasingly marketing urban greening and resilience as integral parts of their international brand, often favorably viewing private initiatives as instrumental in shaping a new image of a green city. In this branding effort, cities have committed themselves to the search for flagship symbols of “a smart, sustainable, and resilient global urban orthodoxy”, rather than

a just renaturalization of urban space (Connolly 2018). Green landmarks and eco-symbols are created under the guise of resilience and inclusion, yet their resonance primarily serves private investments. Moreover, private partners' involvement is celebrated for enhancing the ecological contributions of green spaces – such as maximizing ecosystem services or biodiversity through expensive management practices – yet these factors are more relevant to the project's success and profitability than the overall well-being of citizens. In this context, the controversies inherent in privately owned and privately managed public spaces are even more neglected when it comes to green spaces. By framing urban nature as a universally desirable (and needed) amenity, high-end eco-symbols and public community gardens are equalized without scrutinizing the normative consequences of design choices and management approaches. As a result, profit-driven green projects or park management may be viewed positively even when they fail to achieve sustainability – favoring on the contrary land consumption and new development – or equity goals, ultimately diminishing perceived and actual accessibility to green spaces.

Over the last two decades, Milan has shifted its narrative from a gray to a green city. However, rather than reflecting an actual effort by the administration to enhance park provision or reduce land consumption – most of the experiences of urban forestry and community gardens predate the 1990s – this “green transition” narrative and perception is largely embedded in eco-symbols, such as Vertical Forests, Library of Trees, and CityLife Park. These green components have been integrated into new urban developments, marking as ‘green flags’ the two most ambitious and largest-scale operations of Porta Nuova and CityLife. The CityLife Park (168.000 sq.m, to be doubled in next years), described as the third public park and the biggest pedestrian zone in the city, was part of the masterplan for the conversion of the former headquarters of the city trade fair into a high-end residential and commercial site. The Library of Trees (90.000 sq.m) and two well-known Vertical Forests skyscrapers were part of the Porta Nuova redevelopment in the industrial and working-class neighborhood of Isola-Garibaldi, in the Northern part of the city. Porta Nuova, realized starting 2007 and launched during Milan EXPO2015, was the largest redevelopment in Europe, encompassing high-end residential buildings, offices, headquarters for financial firms, and a commercial plaza.

Both Library of Trees and CityLife Park exemplify the quintessential “quality park”, characterized by their highly designed and expensive-to-manage nature. These

parks, which primarily serve as ornamental spaces and scenic backdrops for new commercial hubs, were financed through urban development charges on private real estate operations and were created as public. Consequently, high maintenance costs burdened public finances. One year after the completion of the Library of Trees, in 2019, a sponsorship agreement was signed with the Foundation affiliated with real estate developers. The goal was to shift the responsibility for maintenance from public to private actors, also tasking them with cultural activities programs. In exchange for shouldering this sponsorship burden, private investors gained exclusive rights to host private and commercial events in the park and a few surrounding areas. The administration welcomed this public-private sponsorship agreement as a win-win situation, ensuring high-quality parks and environmental benefits while easing the strain on public finances. Yet, the eagerness to preserve this eco-symbol seems to disregard the equity implications of semi-privatizing the park.

To explore the impact of both the design and semi-privatization of the Library of Trees, we conducted research involving neighborhood residents and members of Isola Pepe Verde, a small shared garden adjacent to BAM. This research comprised 20 semi-structured interviews lasting between 35 and 90 minutes, and four observation sessions conducted between January and March 2024. Additionally, we reviewed policy documents, key press materials, and published writings, including books and journal articles, related to the Isola-Garibaldi redevelopment and the Library of Trees. The findings suggest that the Library of Trees can be seen as a contested space. Its over-management, separation from the residential fabric – the area designated for the park was displaced by a concession requested by the developers – and rigid design recurrently emerged as determining factors in how the park is used. The Library of Trees has been described as a “park to walk through,” a “meeting place, because it is recognizable and well-connected,” suitable for “walking the dog or pushing the stroller”. However, despite being positioned differently regarding the goodness of Porta Nuova operation, interviewees agreed that the Library of Trees was distinct from a public park. Both residents and activists reported limitations on their freedom of use, with enclosed biodiversity zones and intense commercial occupation resulting in a scarcity of available space. Some of the interviewees speculated that they “are not the intended users of the project”, while others declared to feel like “consumers of a service rather than users of a space”. The Library of Trees emerges as a space fundamentally disconnected from the needs of the neighborhood, lacking a community gar-

den following the redevelopment. The presence of Isola Pepe Verde's small shared garden – an asphalt area of a few thousand square meters covered with potted or box plants – stands as a critique to the grandiose park, as it accommodates functions prevented in the Library of Trees, such as direct interaction with nature, commoning practices, and gardening.

The exclusionary effects of certain types of parks or green spaces, particularly highly maintained, “glitzy and manicured” ones, have been described in the literature (Anguelovski *et al.* 2018). In the case of Milan's Porta Nuova and the Library of Trees, this effect is exacerbated by the semi-privatization of management and programming activities. Sponsorship agreements have shifted maintenance costs from public to private actors, resulting in exclusive and exclusionary connotations for residents of the surrounding neighborhood. Porta Nuova stands as an example of the dual injustice stemming from the commodification of public space under the guise of green branding, as previously discussed. In the case of the Library of Trees, urban nature is initially commodified and capitalized upon as an asset to enhance the land and property values of surrounding areas, particularly during the process of urban redevelopment. Subsequently, it serves as an income site for commercial activities, based on agreements made to ensure the ongoing commitment of the private operator (the sponsor) to maintain and renovate the park, thereby relieving the burden on public finances. In addition, this situation presents challenges in terms of reversibility: the potential exit of the private actor could weigh on the administration, posing a risk to the integrity of the eco-symbol image. Consequently, the exclusionary effects are not only linked to the gentrification and displacement resulting from the operation but also to the expulsion of certain modes of use, which displaces the Library of Trees as an insufficient substitute for the neighborhood garden. These effects are present in interviewees' perception but invisibilized in the dominant narrative, which instead celebrates the eco-symbol and supposedly social benefits.

Encouraging governance models of city renaturalization that prioritize public-private partnerships while neglecting considerations of cultural and social accessibility may exacerbate the unjust repercussions of green interventions. Rewarding parks' visibility and iconicity at the expense of inclusiveness and openness to diverse segments of the population runs the risk of legitimating the privatization of public space and accelerating green gentrifying effects. However, as green branding and green orthodoxy promote a notion of universally beneficial green spaces – emphasizing, moreover, their potential as climate solutions – these controversies are

only uncovered when formal and functional distinctions between types of green space are recognized, and equity goals are explicitly addressed.

#### 4. THE RISKS OF NONPROFITIZATION

In the collective “call of duty” of the climate crisis, the trend of outsourcing responsibilities for environmental planning and green implementation from public actors to corporations, non-profits, and citizen groups is often framed as a response to increasing austerity measures and spending reviews within the public sector. However, while such public disengagement may be portrayed as neutral, apolitical, and efficiency-oriented, it is worth mentioning that such outsourcing of services and the redistribution of responsibilities traditionally managed by state or city agendas, towards private initiatives are actually reflective of a neoliberal approach (Heynen and Perkins 2005, Brand 2007, Kotsila *et al.* 2021). Public disinvestments in the green component and park sector delegate green planning not only to private capacities but also to voluntaristic efforts, resulting in controversial outcomes such as disproportionately distributed patterns of greening or unjust processes. As previously discussed, greening interventions driven by private interests prioritize economic objectives and capitalize on green attractiveness, often at the expense of inclusiveness and equity. However, unjust outcomes are not solely attributable to the involvement of private investors in greening processes. Entrusting non-public actors with the design, implementation, and management of new green spaces may exacerbate existing inequalities, even in cases where profit purposes are not the driving force.

Indeed, although acknowledging the potential contribution of nonprofits to environmental advocacy and provision, scholars have raised equity concerns about the increasing reliance on these organizations (Joassart-Marcelli *et al.* 2011, Perkins 2013, Rigolon and Németh 2018, Pearsall 2020), as well as the involvement of consultants (Angelo *et al.* 2022), in park management and design. Engaging consultants in greening plans may result in decisions that overlook equity considerations, as «while consultants' templates may include generic equity-related language, they generally do not conduct local needs assessments before formulating specific policies» (Angelo *et al.* 2022: 12). Reliance on voluntary efforts can reinforce existing disparities among neighborhoods, favoring the more attractive or engaged, in spite of those most in need (Joassart-Marcelli *et al.* 2011, Perkins 2013). Furthermore, the claims and accountability

of nonprofits can be co-opted to legitimize processes of environmental gentrification (Checker 2011).

Undeniably, involving park-oriented environmental nonprofits in cities' greening processes, entrusting them with advocacy, fundraising, management, provision of recreation activities and cultural programs, but also project coordination roles, offers the opportunity to expand the city government's achievements without burdening public finance, while also benefiting from the expertise of nonprofits members, often activists. For instance, by advocating for park development, nonprofits can carry out fundraising and citizens' engagement campaigns more effectively than public agencies due to their extensive networks and their accountability. Moreover, nonprofits can do better than the public actor in design or project management roles, leveraging their environmental expertise and focusing solely on individual projects rather than the entire city. However, in terms of equity and spatial justice, outsourcing these responsibilities to nonprofits may prove counterproductive. These equity concerns encompass inequalities in park maintenance, limited accountability of semi-public parks management, or disparities in access to green spaces and recreational opportunities (Rigolon and Németh 2017, 2018). In general, the shift of greening responsibility from public to nonprofits may facilitate the decoupling of environmental issues from social ones, narrowing the intervention to mere environmental aspects and isolating it from its multi-dimensional repercussions.

In their study for Chicago's 606 Elevated park and Trails, Rigolon and Németh warned against the risk of "nonprofitization" of project management of large scale interventions (Rigolon and Németh 2018). Investigating the procedural aspects of a paradigmatic project whose gentrifying effect is documented, researchers have shown how the reliance on park-oriented environmental nonprofits provides a compelling explanation for the occurrence of gentrification. Indeed, park-oriented environmental nonprofits, primarily concerned with ecological components, often lack the mandate to address equity concerns like displacement risks, thus reinforcing the separation of urban greening from broader justice-related goals and a green orthodoxy-driven approach, especially in large-scale green infrastructure projects tied to urban development and economic interests. As they pointed out,

*although the nonprofitization of project management [...] has some real benefits in terms of efficiency, this strategy can increase the chances of environmental gentrification due to the fragmentation of green space development and affordable housing goals, an overemphasis on the ecological and public health benefits of parks that can draw away*

*attention from displacement concerns, and the reduced accountability of both public and non-state actors (Rigolon and Németh 2018: 72).*

As private entities, nonprofits are not required to possess a comprehensive understanding of the city or to adopt broader governance strategies. This results in reduced accountability, as the valuation of intervention outcomes is confined to their specific areas of expertise, both thematically – pertaining to environmental aspects spatially and temporally – individual projects and their implementation timelines. While park-oriented environmental nonprofits are committed to environmental protection and enhancement, they are solely accountable for the environmental quality of the project and the objectives achieved within that realm. They cannot be held accountable for the lack of measures to ensure space accessibility, affordable housing protection, or the prevention of potential unjust consequences. When tasked with intervening in specific projects, environmental nonprofits are shielded from potential critics related to, for example, project placement within the city, measures to safeguard housing rights, or the effectiveness of targeted community engagement efforts.

In the case of Chicago's 606 Elevated Park and Trails, the advocacy for affordable housing was silenced under the claimed apolitical nature of greening, a rhetoric of "win-win" outcomes, and the perceived universality of its health and environmental benefits. Activists and organizations contesting gentrification and consequent displacement reported difficulties in arguing against the perceived positive impact of community improvement (Rigolon and Németh 2018). In this context, the involvement of environmentalist organizations provides the administration with an effective means of neutralizing conflict and dissent, aligning with a consensus-building approach that appropriates environmentalist resources, discourse, and claims (Checker 2011, Immergluck and Balan 2017). As a result, the administration can limit the debate to the spheres of expertise of environmental nonprofits, claiming project successes and potentially boasting about the foresight of entrusting a competent entity, while evading broader responsibilities for urban overall balance. In this way, the outsourcing of greening to nonprofits allows the administration's environmental agenda to leverage its credibility without confronting other social, economic, and democratic concerns. Without explicit public coordination aimed at mitigating justice-related consequences, the fragmentation of responsibilities can perpetuate or worsen existing inequalities, or even favor speculative processes and new urban development driven by private interests rather than democratic purposes.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Emphasizing the urgency for adaptation measures, which include greening, climate urbanism has espoused a technocratic and uncritical approach to the governance of the public space, of which green spaces are a constitutive part. Concurrently, ecologists' and environmentalists' arguments are manipulated and assimilated in a green orthodoxy narrative, to hijack the production of spatial knowledge and the debate about inclusion and just cities. While greening is assumed as universally beneficial and immune to the risk of injustice, its implementation may be legitimizing or favoring unjust, controversial, or speculation-oriented urban transformation processes. Cities demonstrate their accountability based on data that are assumed to be neutral and transparent, while assessment of green benefits can be used to avoid democratic (thus conflictual) planning processes. This technocratic approach reinforces a perception of the city as merely a physical structure rather than a complex interplay of socio-ecological relationships. In this paper, we explored how the urgency of the climate crisis reinforced a depoliticized narrative of green-as-good, obscuring equity concerns and leading to the marginalization of certain voices and the exacerbation of existing social inequalities. Moreover, we shed light on the risks of the neoliberalization of the urban ecological agenda, that is fragmenting greening into individual intervention and outsourcing costs and responsibilities from the public to the private sphere. The effect of such fragmentation, expressed in the involvement of private actors and nonprofits in green interventions, or through the signing of sponsorship agreements, is not immediately evident. Framed as politically neutral, and embracing a techno-centric narrative, this dynamic aligns well with the neoliberal approach to public management and urban planning, characterized by a gradual decrease in public spending in the ecological component and green management. With findings from empirical research on a case study in Milan, this paper delves into the controversies surrounding public-private partnerships in urban greening initiatives. While such partnerships are touted as avenues for maximizing sustainable goals, they often prioritize profit-oriented motives over considerations of justice and fairness. The influx of private investments in green projects can fuel gentrification effects, marginalizing already vulnerable communities and imposing new consuming ecologies over already existing ones. New greening is the result of negotiations between private interests and the city's commitment to green branding, in a process where democratic participation and dissent are silenced. Furthermore, analyzing the existing litera-

ture, we underscore how the nonprofitization of green projects can sideline broader justice-related goals and perpetuate existing inequalities. As discussed, entrusting responsibilities for the planning and implementation of new green infrastructure to nonprofit organizations is a choice that aligns with the depoliticization of urban governance and the minimization of conflict situations. Therefore, as for the privatization of greening, the involvement of nonprofits contributes to the decoupling of social and environmental claims, reducing accountability for equity needs. In this fragmentation of competencies and issues to be resolved, the intersectional nature of residents' claims is ignored or denied. In conclusion, this paper advocates for reasserting the political dimension in urban greening efforts. It calls for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach that prioritizes equity and justice alongside environmental sustainability.

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## Hegemony and Sustainability. A Call for Historical Materialism

SENZIO SERGIO D'AGATA

**Abstract.** Social scientists have been critical about sustainability from its appearance. However, as the literature on post-politics highlight, they have failed to address why our society endures in unsustainability in what some authors call the post-ecological paradox. This article reflects on some of the major theoretical assumptions of urban political ecology, presenting the urban sustainability fix framework as the most valuable tool to perform a critique of sustainability. It adds to the debate arguing that empirical obstacles are related and rooted in theoretical incompatibility between neo-Marxist and post-structural literatures which shape the discipline, stating the need for a return to historical materialism starting by Antonio Gramsci. To this end, the article proposes to use Jessop's RSA to analyse sustainable development.

**Keywords:** urban sustainability fix, hegemony, Gramsci, sustainability, historical materialism.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the Anthropocene, the issue of sustainable development has become an existential one. The pervasiveness of the concept makes it impossible to give a full account of its usage and social functions. Indeed, the imperative of sustainability permeates every aspect of public governance and private investment as well, despite since its appearance scholars have been highlighting its vagueness and contradictory meaning (Lélé 1991, Redclift 2005, Giovannoni and Fabietti 2013, Mensah 2019). Indeed, its dimensions are hard to operationalize, and its claims refer to needs and rights which can hardly be claimed universally. However, a broad consensus worldwide has been developed around the concept, ranging from institutional actors to civil society groups.

The scientific debate around sustainable development has been evolving erratically. Within sociology, a broad literature has been produced about institutional and political economy analyses of sustainable development (e.g. Bulkeley and Castán Broto 2013, Bulkeley 2005, Betsill and Bulkeley 2021, Nieminen *et al.* 2021, Bulkeley *et al.* 2014, Bulkeley and Betsill 2005, DeAngelo and Harvey 1998). Albeit wide, within this literature there is an agreement on the centrality of the urban dimension for sustainable development policies and analysis, and the urban context is viewed as the core site

through which sustainable development politics develops, and where sustainability must be reached in order to sustain life on the Earth (Castán Broto 2020, Kunzmann 2014).

In this article, I will focus on critical accounts of sustainable development and sustainability (see Hopwood *et al.* 2005), especially those rooted in political sociology and institutional analysis. A particular focus is placed on the sociopolitical dynamics underpinning sustainability, especially the role of power structures in perpetuating social inequalities and environmental degradation. Responding to the calls of critical sociologists such as Ingolfur Blühdorn (2022a), the article explores sustainability within a post-political, post-democratic, and post-ecological framework (Blühdorn 2014, 2022b, Swyngedouw 2007, 2022), where necessary structural changes remain elusive despite widespread ecological knowledge. The first section unpacks the implications of post-democracy and post-politics, setting the stage for analyzing sustainability as a complex, and often depoliticized, techno-managerial project. Subsequently, the lens shifts to urban political ecology, investigating how urbanization processes affect and are affected by capitalist dynamics, shaping urban governance and sustainability policies.

The concluding sections advocate for a historically grounded approach to sustainable development, drawing from Gramscian state theory and arguing for its implementation within urban political ecology. This approach offers a nuanced understanding of sustainability as a contested concept, rooted in hegemonic strategies and the interplay of economic, political, and ideological forces. By grounding the discussion in Gramscian theory, the article calls for a re-evaluation of sustainability not as a static or purely technocratic goal, but as a dynamic and conflict-laden field in which social power and ecological crises intersect.

## 2. SUSTAINABILITY IN THE POST-POLITICAL SOCIETY

### 2.1. Post-democracy and neoliberalization

As for every post-concept, post-democracy is difficult to define. It points to significant changes in the functioning of Western liberal democracies, describing a situation in which democratic institutions have retained their form but significantly changed their content. Post-democratic societies emerge through what Moini (2012) describes as the spiral of neoliberalization – a historical process where neoliberalism progressively solidifies as a hegemonic regulatory framework for shaping public action, aimed at safeguarding the capitalist system amid

crises arising from its inherent contradictions. Indeed, the socio-economic crises that erupted during the 70s put capitalism in danger and sparked the neoliberal counter-reformation, namely a long period of societal restructuring led by political elites with the main aim of restructuring the market and opening new spaces for capital circulation and accumulation led by the financial sector. The process of financialization is, maybe, the most relevant one of the neoliberal counter-reformation, because it flags «a condition whereby the accumulation process is increasingly sustained by the circulation of capital through all manner of financial transactions, rather than by commodity production» (Swyngedouw 2018a: 161), causing a modification of inter-capitalist relations towards a form of accumulation by dispossession, that places more emphasis on surplus generation by rent rather than by production (Harvey 2018).

It goes without saying that structural changes in the economic sphere involve modifications to the entire social system. Broadly speaking, it can be argued that the process of neoliberalization has been provoking a shift from a Keynesian Welfare National State to a Schumpeterian Workfare Postnational Regime, causing the emergence of a new model of governance based on «the generalization of job insecurity», the «Darwinistic selection of elites, functional to a neo-oligarchic evolution», the «authoritarian transformation of institutional system and in particular the regression of the (private) State to an operational instrument in the full disposition of the dominant class» (Burgio 2009: 214). What this means is that the role of the State and its relation with civil society has deeply changed during the last 50 years, mainly due to the massive emergence of private actors as government bodies which blurs the distinction between the public and the private spheres of society, hampering the autonomy of State actors and obfuscating the accountability of elected officials, transforming politics to «a matter of closed elites, as it was in the pre-democratic era» (Crouch 2009: 82).

### 2.2. Post-politics: the era of consent

*Broadly speaking, post-politicization refers to a situation in which the political – understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement – is increasingly colonized by politics – understood as techno-managerial governance through consensualizing procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economics, and cosmopolitan liberalism (Swyngedouw 2018b: 1)*

This definition gives us a glimpse of post-politics, a concept that came out of «the tradition of post- or neo-

Marxist critical theory» (Blühdorn 2014: 149) and points to a frame that «reduces politics to the sphere of governing and policy-making through allegedly participatory deliberative procedures of governance-beyond-the-state, with a given distribution of places and functions, one that excludes those who are deemed ‘irresponsible’» (Swyngedouw 2018a: 27).

«Post-politics implies the reign of supposedly objective necessities and non-negotiable imperatives» (Blühdorn 2014: 149), thus the post-political society is one whereby the governance structure tries to include all in a consensual pluralist order and, contemporary, radically excludes those who contest the consensus. It is worth highlighting that the erasure of conflict is another typical characteristic of neoliberalism which, under neoclassical economic assumptions, idealizes a society consisting of free individuals in a one-to-one rational relationship with the market.

It is in this context that Swyngedouw (2018a, 2022) has referred to the concept of “immunological democracy”, meaning that the final aim of governance-beyond-the-State is that of protecting the social system, its division, and architecture, from external “pathogens” (those excluded by/from the police order) who could advance alternative institutional forms of governance. Authoritarianism, violence, and illiberalism are, thus, constitutive of neoliberalism (and of post-democratic societies) because they are necessary to defend a small number of private interests in front of the political demands of civil society.

### 2.3. Post-politicization of the environment: the ecological paradox

The lens of post-democracy and post-politics can be used fruitfully to analyze contemporary eco-politics. Swyngedouw (2007, 2018a) argues that sustainability is at the forefront of consolidating the post-political condition. Starting from post-human and post-foundational stances, he articulates his thesis by showing how discourses of sustainability and sustainable development are built to foster a consensual setting «sutured by fear and driven by a concern to manage things so that we can hold on to what we have. [...] While clouded in rhetoric of the need for radical change in order to stave off imminent catastrophe, a range of technical, social, managerial, physical, and other measures have to be taken to make sure that life (or at least our lives) can go on as before» (Swyngedouw 2018a: 82). In this sense, sustainability represents «the empty signifier par excellence» (Ivi: 83), the vanguard of the neoliberal biopolitical governmentality. The techno-managerial approach of environmental governance, predicated upon the eco-

modernization project, is inherently political since its aim is precisely that of erasing alternative ecologies, and depoliticizing eco-politics in the name of a fuzzy social common interest.

Post-foundational and critical cultural perspectives expose the void of concepts like Nature and sustainability. Indeed, the very idea of a single Nature is replaced by «a multitude of natures and a multitude of existing, possible, or practical socio-natural relations», recognizing that «the obsession with a singular Nature that requires sustaining or, at least, managing is sustained by a particular quilting of Nature that forecloses asking political questions» (Ivi: 76-77).

Through these lenses, sustainability is viewed as a hegemonic field, a contested empty signifier filled with selected ecological issues depending on their sociopolitical understanding and salience (Béal 2011). Hegemonic accounts of sustainability and sustainable development have been produced since the 90s, when Luke, following Foucault, talked about environmentality as a mode of governance that through the articulation of eco-knowledge produces systems of geo-power (1995a). In this “conduct of the environmental conduct” the idea of sustainability has a central role, since the articulation of the disciplinary code dwells upon the technocratic management of the environment and the process of neoliberal subjectivation (Oksala 2023) through individual education and institutional arrangements (Luke 1995b, 2001, 2005).

Following the neo-Marxist tradition, Swyngedouw calls for a return of the political, «he demands that ecological communication and environmental policy are explicitly reconnected to social values and notions of subjectivity» (Blühdorn 2014: 150) and points to urban emancipatory movements as new *loci* of alternative ecologies (Swyngedouw 2007, 2018a). Recalling Alan Badiou (2010), the author states the necessity for the “communist hypothesis”, namely a disruptive democratic restructuring of socio-ecological systems through the reappropriation «of the greatest of all common ecologies, the urban process» (Swyngedouw 2018a: 164).

Such a restructuring is necessary since our society faces an ecological paradox: while the urgency for radical ecological change is widely recognized, there is an equally striking resistance or inability to implement such changes effectively (Blühdorn 2011: 36). This paradox partly reflects historical shifts occurring since the neoliberal counter-reformation, after which a distinctive “post-ecologist” era has emerged (Blühdorn 2014, 2022a: 581-583).

Indeed, while at the end of the 20th century, capitalism faced a crisis of legitimacy, nowadays we live under a form of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009), in which capi-

talism permeates every social sphere with little challenge. Neoliberal reforms have blurred the line between public and private interests, reinforcing capitalist accumulation as a fundamental social aim. This makes the capitalist mode of production almost inescapable, effectively foreclosing any substantial alternative both materially and discursively (Chiapello and Boltanski 2006). Moreover, since the financial crisis of 2008, emerging social movements have largely been co-opted or neutralized by political elites. In this process, scientific knowledge and techno-managerial approaches are deployed as supposedly neutral tools, which, in practice, limit alternative socio-ecological configurations. This depoliticized framing restricts environmental discourse to technical fixes, maintaining social order at the expense of genuine political transformation. A notable example is the *Fridays for Future* movement and the so-called “Greta effect” (Imperatore and Leonardi 2023). Although it has raised awareness of climate justice and mobilized millions, its discourse has been channeled toward individual actions and techno-managerial issues, sidelining political debates about restructuring socio-ecological relations (De Moor *et al.* 2020, Della Porta and Portos 2023). Despite capitalism’s stability, democracy itself faces a crisis of legitimacy, evident in declining public confidence and the rise of technocratic and authoritarian trends in Western governance (Blühdorn 2020a). Addressing this crisis through “authentic democracy” seems unlikely; indeed, it may be the very norms underpinning democracy that fuel its post-democratic turn. Emphasizing notions of emancipation and liberation, social theory has shifted towards increasingly individualized, reflexive, and process-oriented forms of engagement. This evolution has led movements and organizations to adopt more individualistic, flexible, and identity-centered participation structures to address the changing demands for autonomy and freedom (Butzlaff 2022). At the same time, individual self-fulfilment in contemporary societies has become more rooted in consumerism and transgression than ever (Bauman 2009, 2010).

Together, these developments suggest a post-subjective modernity in which the emancipatory project has shifted from liberating individuals from bureaucratic constraints to fostering context-specific identities that are dynamic and often contradictory. Emancipation is now largely a personal, rather than collective, endeavor (Blühdorn 2022c).

These trends pose significant challenges for critical environmental sociology, which has traditionally grounded eco-emancipatory politics in values and norms that may now be outdated. Indeed, much of the debate has assumed that once alienated subjects are lib-

erated, they will naturally gravitate toward sustainable social organization. However, a historical and hegemonic understanding of sustainable development may offer a pathway to addressing these theoretical and analytical limitations.

### 3. URBAN POLITICAL ECOLOGY

The focus on the procedural aspects of capitalist accumulation through space is the main characteristic of urban political ecology (UPE). Urban political ecologists are concerned with the Lefebvrian (2003) idea of ‘planetary urbanization’, a concept that poses many troubles to urban theory and to urban political ecologists specifically. Starting from the analysis of the city-countryside relation in Marxist classical texts, the French sociologist highlights the fundamental role of cities as a medium of capitalist development, as the result of the historical reproductive activities of humankind, and as the privileged *locus of praxis* (Lefebvre 2022: 40-41).

«Planetary urbanization refers to the fact that every nook and cranny of the earth is now directly or indirectly enrolled in assuring the expanding reproduction of urbanization process» which is the spatial form of capitalist reproduction, implying that through this process capitalism seizes the natural and human environment forging «ever longer, often globally structured, socio-ecological metabolic flows» (Swyngedouw 2018a: 113-114). To Harvey (1996),

*Urbanization must then be understood not in terms of some socio-organizational entity called ‘the city’ (the theoretical object that so many geographers, demographers and sociologists erroneously presume) but as the production of specific and quite heterogeneous spatio-temporal forms embedded within different kinds of social action. Urbanization, understood in this manner, is necessarily constitutive of as well as constituted by social processes. It loses its passive qualities and becomes a dynamic moment in overall processes of social differentiation and social change (Ibidem: 52)*

This interpretation of urbanization emphasizes the dialectical interaction between society and nature, a hallmark of historical materialism. It also incorporates the essential Marxist idea of urban metabolism (see Foster 2016, Saito 2017), which highlights the dynamic relationship between material and immaterial flows such as capital, labor, energy, information, and social power. These flows create and perpetuate urban environments, while biophysical and geochemical cycles sustain both

human and non-human life (contemporary being affected by it).

However, UPE was born and developed around other conceptual frames too (Rademacher 2015, Gandy 2022). Indeed, by the 90s political ecology was well established as a non-urban and non-western discipline, interested mostly in nature-based conflicts in rural areas (clearly distinct from urban ones) and strongly influenced by the dependency theory distinctive of developmental studies (Leff 2015). Notwithstanding, the general post-structuralist shift that was occurring in the social sciences led political ecologists to follow literature other than Marxist ones, specifically critical theory and anti-essentialist materialism (post-humanism/post-materialism). This turn determined a critical node for PE in general and UPE (which was being born amidst this shift) specifically, because the latent tension «between the centrality of capital and other explanatory insights was not resolved but rather displaced through an overwhelming emphasis on manifestations of social power within the urban arena» (Gandy 2022: 23). The point is that flat ontologies are incompatible with Marxian categories because they are anti-dialectical by definition. As I said above, the main focus of UPE lies on the capitalist form of urbanization of natures, namely how non-human matter is invested by capitalist social relations and is «discursively scripted, imagined, economically enrolled (commodified) and physically metabolized/transformed to produce socio-ecological assemblages that support the urbanization process» (Swyngedouw 2015: 610). The urban fabric is understood as a “socio-nature” (Swyngedouw 1996) in an attempt to overcome the dualisms of society/nature and materiality/discourse around which the internal tensions of PE coalesced. Yet, despite significant breakthroughs in the discipline, the main problem has been precisely that of reading the urban as a process rather than as a fixed entity, something that has been called methodological cityism (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015), namely the «analytical privileging, isolation and perhaps naturalization of the city in studies of urban processes where the non-city may also be significant» (*Ibidem*: 20). In other words, the issue at stake here is that of reading the spatial processes through which the capital accumulation reproduces itself through different scales and spaces, being shaped by and shaping them; this calls for what has named an ethnography of the State (2015).

### 3.1. UPE and environmental governance

The contribution of urban political ecologists to the debate on contemporary environmental governance

highlights «the importance of nature’s materiality in urban political process and struggle; how local governments attempt to construct environmental subjectivities through discourses of proper urban citizenship; and the persistence of social inequality in the (re)production of urban environments» (Rice 2014: 381). A fruitful framework, capable of binding together these three analytical dimensions, has been developed by While *et al.* (2004), namely that of “sustainability fix” which points to historicize the politics of sustainable development at urban level building on the concept of “spatial fix”. Following Harvey, a spatial fix is a temporal, contested, and precarious spatio-temporal solution that capital creates to continue its process of accumulation, overcoming its cyclical crises. In order to realize a profit, capitalists must follow some steps: first, they need to accumulate some fixed capital (warehouses, technology, machines, etc.); second, they need to buy the labour force, the real site of surplus value; third, they need to arrange an encounter between fixed and variable capital, which practically consist of reunite them in the same location at the same time, establishing a spatial fix. This is repeated continuously through the (potentially) infinite process of auto-valorization of capital, which to solve its periodical crises of overaccumulation needs to create ever-new spatial fixes. Thus, the concept of spatial fix is useful to define a specific socio-ecological configuration, locally situated and shaped by the action of the abstract accumulation process, the resistance that the material world opposes to it, and the regulatory action of the State. It is a moment of the dialectical relationship between society and nature<sup>1</sup>.

The framework is useful for reflecting a hegemonic account of sustainable development, dividing between pressures for local environmental policymaking and pressures on local environmental policymaking. This understanding of sustainable development goes beyond the emancipation deadlock claimed by Blühdorn. Indeed, while environmentality accounts of sustainability are preoccupied with hegemony, their explanations rely on the existence of passive subjects that are activated through a process of subjectivation. On the contrary,

*the historically contingent notion of a ‘sustainability fix’ is intended to capture some of the governance dilemmas, compromises and opportunities created by the current era of state restructuring and ecological modernization. [...] Sustainable development is itself interpreted as part of the search for a spatio-institutional fix to safeguard growth trajectories in the wake of industrial capitalism’s long downturn, the global ‘ecological crisis’ and the rise of popular environmentalism (While et al. 2004: 551)*

<sup>1</sup> Among his many works on the topics, see Harvey (2018).

Thus, sustainable development is read as a process whose spatio-institutional fixes are temporary moments in which specific socio-natural relations can be recognized; they appear to us as “fixed” because they are moments of the process of urbanization which reproduces itself through sustainability, namely through «the selective integration of environmental goals into entrepreneurial forms of urban governance» (Martin *et al.* 2019: 641).

To date, a growing body of research has adopted this framework in empirical research (see Temenos and McCann 2012, Hof and Blázquez-Salom 2015, Long 2016, Carpenter 2018, Jokinen *et al.* 2018, Anderson *et al.* 2022, Neidig *et al.* 2022), highlighting three main pressures that shape each urban sustainability fix: the neoliberal restructuring of the State, including international policy development and diffusion; the decentralization of government; and the role of private capital in urban development. In conclusion, «the sustainability fix relies on the participation and consent of the local population as a whole» (Temenos and McCann 2012: 1400) making it mandatory for local elites to build ideologies and narratives that can somewhat mediate between their private interests and the population’s public concerns. A sustainability fix is always the result of a political compromise between socially contested understandings of sustainable development; thus, the hegemonic dimension stands as fundamental in order to understand urban sustainable development.

#### 4. THE NEED FOR HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

In the early 2000s, Levy and Newell signaled the need for a comprehensive analysis and theorization of hegemony in environmental governance recalling a Gramscian-inspired

*multi-level analysis of social systems to build a coherent framework that can link the macro world of international governance structures with the micro level of specific issue arenas such as environmental regimes. [Contrary to other approaches] a Gramscian framework highlights disequilibrium and change. Contradictions, competing ideologies, and active agents ensure that the terrain of economic and political contestation is forever unfolding (Levy and Newell 2002: 93-94).*

The call for adopting a Gramscian stance has emerged also among political ecologists (see Ekers *et al.* 2009, Ekers *et al.* 2012, Mann 2009), especially as a critique of the understanding of the State inside the discipline. Synthesizing, political ecologists have exam-

ined the State mainly from three perspectives. These include the State acting as a coercive force in opposition to local communities due to its repressive policies or resource extraction projects, as well as the Marxian view of the State as a balancing act and interplay among different groups, serving to stabilize capitalist crises and sustain conditions for accumulation (i.e. Regulationist approach). Additionally, Foucauldian theories have focused on the governing approaches and mentalities that lead the governed to internalize the norms enabling their rule, and the influence of modern state science and state representation that render populations and territories comprehensible and controllable (i.e. Governmentality approach) (D’Alisa and Kallis 2016: 231). On the contrary, a State theory based on a Gramscian understanding of hegemony conceives the State and the Civil Society as two analytically distinct moments of an organic whole, the “Integral State”: «both the State and Civil Society are affected by class struggle; the dialectic is real, open, and the outcome is not predetermined. The State is both an instrument (of a class) and a space (for the struggle for hegemony), as well as a process (of the unification of ruling classes)» (Liguori 2006, cited by Balsa 2019). This understanding concerns both coercion and consent, meaning that the effectiveness of bourgeois moral and intellectual authority in advanced capitalist societies can be understood as the continuous attempt to form a “historical bloc” through both the suppression of dissenting social groups and the promotion of existing worldviews connected to specific practices, searching for the «unity of the opposites and the distinct» (Gramsci 2014, Q 13 § 10: 1569).

The meaning of the State is “enlarged” (see Liguori 2016), comprising not just traditional coercive functions but also hegemonic ones directed towards and reproduced through Civil Society’s “private organizations”. Following a rigorous Marxist analysis, Gramsci has always in mind the dialectical relationship structure/superstructure and insists on the nature of the State as an effect of dominant property relations and production processes. Thus, the State is the manifestation of the unity of all classes and the reflection of the precarious equilibrium between them. Moreover, Gramsci analyzes in depth the role of intellectuals in shaping the State and its structure and recognizes their fundamental task in creating and maintaining the unity of State/Civil Society through hegemonic apparatuses, material and ideological “private” organizations that regulate the reproduction of the whole.

However, contrary to structuralism or post-structuralism, Gramsci always insists on the contingency of the State, that means on the contingency of the equilibrium

between State and Civil Society, between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic manifestations: each class needs to become State, which means that it needs to ensure its hegemony upon other classes in an endless struggle for stabilizing the unity, looking for solutions «necessarily set and attempted in the contradictory conditions of society» (Gramsci 2014, Q 22 § 1: 2193).

#### 4.1. *The integral State*

In order to move on it is necessary to elaborate further on the meaning of the “Integral State” and its implications to sustainability analysis. To this end, it is useful to refer to Bob Jessop’s works on the integration of Gramscian theory of the State into the literature on spatial research. Elaborating upon the concept of “spatial fix”, the author highlights that overaccumulation crises occur when capital and labor can no longer be reinvested at a profitable rate, or at all, within their original territory, leading to the devaluation of both. This necessitates internal or external transformations of capitalism within a given geographical area or economic region to ensure the continued reproduction of capital relations (Jessop 2006: 147). The need for a spatio-temporal fix stems from capitalism’s relentless pursuit to overcome its inherent crisis tendencies by expanding and restructuring geographically. However, a spatio-temporal fix is always temporary. The attempt to escape the contradictions and crises of capitalism by reinvesting surplus capital in new areas typically only spreads these issues further, eventually exacerbating them (Ivi: 149).

The accumulation process requires what Harvey calls a “structured coherence” within a totality of productive forces and social relations. In spatial terms, this means that each precarious and temporary spatio-temporal fix requires and contributes to the production of a bounded regional space arranged according to the accumulation process, thus in which profit can be realized<sup>2</sup>. This led the author to highlight the State’s key role in shaping structured coherence and regional alliances:

*the state thereby actively promotes and sustains the structured regional coherence that emerges from capitalist dynamics and gives it a political as well as economic character. But this capacity is also closely linked to the rise, consolidation and strategic capacities of regional ruling-class alliances. This implies that structured coherence results as much from political and cultural processes as from an economic dynamic (Ivi: 154).*

Yet, Jessop underscores that «Harvey’s analysis of temporal and spatial fixes is primarily value-theoretical» (Ivi: 161), lacking large explicit interest in extra-economic dimensions of capital relations. While understanding that «politics is an immanent necessity for every capitalist economy» (Ivi: 162), Harvey did not explore capitalism’s extra-economic dimensions as rigorously as its economic ones. To comprehend the political nature of the capital relation as a combination of economic and extra-economic elements, it is essential to consider why market forces alone are insufficient for the reproduction of capitalism. The incompleteness of the pure capital relation calls for the strategic construction of a specific dynamic between economic and extra-economic conditions for accumulation.

In other words, Jessop highlights that any specific substantive unity of the value form of capital in a given economic space must be searched outside the formal laws of capital, as it is rooted in the political domain, that is «the domain where attempts are made to (re-)define a ‘collective will’ for an imagined political community and to (re-)articulate various mechanisms and practices of government and governance in pursuit of projects deemed to serve it» (Jessop 1997: 29).

To address this issue, Jessop developed a Strategic Relational Approach to State power (see Jessop 2015) drawing heavily on the Gramscian understanding of the State in its inclusive (or integral) sense, namely as “political society” and “civil society”. While Gramsci referred to national States, Jessop highlights how his approach can be relevant also for local politics, in as much as it allows more weight to other apparatuses, organizations, and practices involved in exercising political power apart from the national sovereign State (Jessop 1997).

The indetermination of both the value form and the state form calls for strategies aimed at imparting some substantive unity to what otherwise would be just potentially re-united. Indeed, «the value form constitutes a terrain for various attempts to reproduce the capital relation and the nature of accumulation depends on the success or failure of these attempts» (Jessop 1991: 159). To analyze and give meaning to these attempts, «we need strategic-theoretical concepts that can establish meaningful links between the abstract, ‘capital-theoretical’ laws of motion of the value form and the concrete modalities of social-economic struggles analyzed by a ‘class-theoretical’ approach which neglects form in favor of content» (Ivi: 159-160).

To this end, the author proposes two pivotal concepts:

a) «An ‘accumulation strategy’ defines a specific economic ‘growth model’ complete with its various

<sup>2</sup> On this topic see the debate on the production of nature (e.g. Brenner 2009; 2017; Jessop, Brenner and Jones 2008; Castree 2000; 2015).

extra-economic preconditions and outlines the general strategy appropriate to its realization» (Ivi: 160). To succeed, an accumulation strategy must be historically organic, that is it must take into account the dominant form of the circuit of capital; the predominant type of capital internationalization; the international context confronting particular national (or subnational) capitals; the balance of social, economic, and political forces at home and abroad; the margin of maneuver given the productive potential of the domestic economy (Ivi: 162). Moreover, it is important to not mislead economic hegemony, secured through a specific accumulation strategy, for economic domination. Indeed, while the latter refers to the relative positions of fractions of capital capable of securing their own particular interests on other fractions «regardless of their wishes and/or at their expenses» (Ivi: 160), economic hegemony «derives from economic leadership won through general acceptance of an accumulation strategy» (*Ibidem*). This general acceptance (if any) provides for a relatively stable framework in which competition and conflicting interests can be resolved without disrupting the overall cohesion of the capital circuit. Yet, any given instance of economic hegemony is not established once and for all, rather it is ever-changing due to fluctuations in the overall functioning of the circuit of capital and/or in the balance of power among social, economic, and political forces.

b) The extra-economic prerequisites needed by the circuit of capital accumulation are secured by the State. Since also the State is a form-determined social relation, its analysis requires consideration of the balance of forces determined by extra-statal factors. Three aspects of the State-form need exploring: forms of representation, forms of intervention, and forms of articulation of the State as an institutional ensemble (Ivi: 170). These three formal aspects of the State confer to it its “structural selectivity”, shaping what Jessop calls “the art of the possible”, formal rule of competition and conflict. Beyond these formal dimensions, the State has also two general substantive dimensions: the social bases of support for and resistance to it, and the nature of the hegemonic project around which the State power coalesces. «By the social basis of the state we understand the specific configuration of social forces, however identified as subjects and (dis-)organized as political actors, that supports the basic structure of the state system, its mode of operation, and its objectives» (*Ibidem*). The support of the social basis cannot be reduced to a question of consensus, as it is built through material concessions, symbolic rewards, and repression directed through the State to different social forces. Variations are typically related to changes in the “hegemonic project”, that is

*the mobilization of support behind a concrete, national-popular programme of action which asserts a general interest in the pursuit of objectives that explicitly or implicitly advance the long-term interests of the hegemonic class (fraction), and which also privileges particular ‘economic-corporate’ interests compatible with this program. Conversely those particular interests which are inconsistent with the project are deemed immoral and/or irrational and, insofar as they are still pursued by groups outside the consensus, they are also liable to sanction (Ivi: 171).*

Hegemonic projects (or visions) entail the interpellation and organization of various “class-relevant” forces, which may not be class-conscious, under the political, intellectual, and moral leadership of a specific class (or class fraction) or, more accurately, its political, intellectual, and moral representatives. Their aim is to partially solve (in particular conjunctures according to strategic intentions) the abstract problem of conflict between particular interests and the general interest embodied by the State.

The realization of a hegemonic project ultimately depends on three key factors: its structural determinations, that is the structure of privileges inscribed in a given State form, its “structural selectivity”; its strategic orientation, namely the capacity of hegemonic leadership to link the realization of some short-term interests of subordinate classes to the interests of hegemonic classes on the long run; its relation to accumulation, because while there is no compelling reason to assume that hegemonic projects are naturally economic in their aims, it is important to highlight that no hegemony cannot be secured without depending on material concessions, thus on the productivity of the economy.

By treating hegemony in terms of specific hegemonic projects, it is possible to emphasize the dynamic and conflicting nature of the concept, in as much as it is understood as «the dynamic movement of leadership towards definite aims in specific conjunctures» (Ivi: 182). Moreover, this line of discourse emphasizes that capital accumulation is not purely an economic issue, rather it is dependent on political and ideological matters which have a crucial strategic dimension. In this regard, Jessop as well as Gramsci assign a pivotal role to “organic intellectuals” in elaborating hegemonic projects, that is in translating the particular interests of the hegemonic class (or class fractions) in the general will of the State which, formally, acts in favor of the “general interest”.

In the RSA proposed by Jessop, the State is understood in relational terms. The State is conceptualized as State-power, understood as an *explanandum* – something whose effects must be explained as products of social relations. The State represents the expression of

the reciprocal power relations among subjects and (dis)organized political actors that support the fundamental structure of the State System. Thus, it is in a constant flow, shaped by struggles over its very definition. While the State System delineates the boundaries of action and the “art of the possible”, these boundaries are, in turn, the result of the power dynamics among the forces that constitute the social base of the State.

Through the State, a class (or class fractions) secures power over the decision and realization of accumulation strategies that favor particular interests. But the realization of an accumulation strategy relies on the success of a hegemonic project, that is on the capacity of a class (or class fraction) to articulate its particular interests as the “general will”, winning consent over its vision. While, as Jessop highlights, the hegemonic project is not necessarily economic, the “economy”, meaning the material basis of social reproduction, must be secured by a hegemonic project. Thus, in a State made of strategies and struggles, when analyzing State-power in socio-environmental ensembles, or socio spatial-relation, we must take into account structural as well as strategic dimensions of the State. The latter relates to “political and ideological” forces that strategically pursue particular winning interests related to specific hegemonic projects in a constant struggle to secure consent. A relational reading of sustainability as a fix involves these issues, as long as specific instances of equilibrium in the hegemonic struggle upon sustainability are the result of precarious and “in-the-making” accumulation strategies and hegemonic projects.

#### 4.2. Gramsci and UPE

Gramscian State theory would shift the focus from socionatures as static assemblages to socionatures as moments of a dialectic process between society and nature. This shift would allow us to ground UPE in materialist tradition and reconsider the category of “class” not just as an identity among others but as structurally constitutive of socio-ecological relations since it points to relations of access and control over the means of production (Huber 2017). Indeed, engaging with Gramsci means engaging with historical materialism and some ontological and epistemological positions that are rejected by post-structuralism and new materialism. In fact, what Gramsci refers to as “the philosophy of praxis” relies on three fundamental pillars, namely absolute humanism, absolute historicism, and absolute immanence (Loftus 2015).

Absolute humanism refers to the idea that the individual is made up of a set of processes and relations

with other individuals and nature alike. In this sense, socio-natural relations are not shaped by the juxtaposition of society and nature as external to each other, nor are imposed by coercion by some external actor like the State; instead, society and nature are two moments of a dialectical process of co-production. However, in this process the agency is always placed on individuals conceived as laboring beings (see also Hornborg 2017) which produce the world «as a political construction, [as] the product of a conscious and purposive subject» (Fontana 2012: 124). Gramscian absolute humanism is blatantly anti-essentialist: in *The Prison Notebook* any reference to the “subject” is lacking, making room for the *persona* «a historically produced character that transforms according to socio-natural relations. She is formed actively, through work and technique – within a given historical and geographical moment» (Loftus 2015: 95).

Gramsci’s absolute historicism offers a complex examination of how historically and geographically specific practices shape reality and the corresponding epistemological frameworks. This shows how social and environmental constructs, and the ways we think about them, have evolved over time and can continue to change in the future. Even in this case, we are presented with a strong anti-essentialist stance inasmuch as Gramsci, besides his conception of *persona*, offers a multi-faceted conception of nature as undifferentiated matter; as second nature; as the irrational, as instinct and impulse; as chaos or disorder; as the potential overcoming of the domination and conquest of nature (Fontana 2012).

Absolute immanence acknowledges that the potential to conceive and create different versions of complex and tangible realities exists within the realities themselves. This calls for a detailed understanding of what Gramsci called “common sense”, namely the sedimented worldview of subaltern classes which emerges from the clash between hegemonic ideologies and everyday experiences. Indeed, «conditions of possibility for conceiving (and making) those fleshy, messy realities differently are to be found within them and not within the protected worlds of the academic community, the environmental technocrat or government agent» (Loftus 2015: 95-96).

These pillars, free of any trace of Cartesian dualism, allow for a nuanced understanding of society/nature relations. Gramsci argued for a revision of the concept of the individual, arguing that «we must conceive of humans as a series of active relationships (a process) in which, while individuality is of utmost importance, it is not the only element to consider. The humanity that is reflected in each individual consists of various elements: 1) the individual; 2) other humans; 3) nature» (Gramsci 1996: 28).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Governmentality approaches aim at analyzing the unfolding power in action, binding together power, knowledge, and practices and blurring the boundaries between the political and the social. According to post-structuralists, power relations are more important than the underlying structures from which they emerge. Their «social ontology is contingent, fragmented, pluralistic and dispersed. And without a conception of relatively enduring social structures, there is little chance of an account of social transformation and human emancipation» (Joseph 2004: 151). Flat ontologies conceive of “differentiated wholes”, different assemblages of human and non-human agents activated through processes of subjectivation. Power-knowledge conundrum is the origin, the medium, and the process of subject-making and spreads in different degrees yet in a coherent way, tending to uniformity.

On the contrary, Gramscian State theory allows for a different understanding of subjectivation. The State, in its hierarchically stratified institutions, is the *locus* where power relations emerge reflecting a structured hierarchy, with certain structures and relationships being more significant or influential than others. Thus, the process of subjectivation does not just fall into the realm of the State but its origin is there, it is inextricably linked to the economic structure of which the State represents specific interests. Yet, as the Gramscian State is inseparable from Civil Society, the process of subjectivation is a question of coercion and consent too. It becomes a contested process, specifically a geographically and temporally contested one, that presupposes active pre-existing subjects upon which the process of subjectivation works. The result is an incoherent “differentiated whole” «as an outcome of historical-geographical specific conjunctures with their sedimented power relations and multiply constituted class relations» (Jakobsen 2022: 583).

This article calls for a hegemonic understanding of sustainable development, framing it as a socio-political concept deeply intertwined with issues of power, governance, and socio-ecological relations. Through a critical lens, the article explores how sustainable development functions within post-political and post-democratic structures, shedding light on how sustainability discourse often serves as a tool for maintaining the status quo rather than fostering substantial systemic change.

While urban political ecologists have already brilliantly highlighted the role of sustainability as a domination technology, the article advocates for understanding sustainability within a historical materialist framework. This approach highlights how capitalist accumulation

processes shape urban environments, revealing sustainability as a contested concept influenced by hegemonic forces and ideological struggles. Thus, the article offers an in-depth view of sustainable development as a dynamic, conflict-ridden field that both shapes and is shaped by the socio-political order, making it instrumental for any comprehensive analysis of sustainable development and its practical implications in addressing social inequalities and ecological crises.

While aligning itself with critical accounts within UPE, this article highlights the need to clarify certain ontological and epistemological positions within the field to move beyond the “emancipation deadlock” noted by post-politics literature. Indeed, a truly hegemonic account of sustainability cannot merely consider the effects of dominance as contained within the State; rather, it must recognize these effects as emanating from the State and requiring extra-state collaboration, viewing them as products of the organic whole of State-Civil Society. In this perspective, individuals are not merely recipients of practices of dominance; they are also co-creators of these practices, which are based on a variable mix of coercion and consent.

Finally, the article proposes Jessop’s Strategic Relational Approach (SRA) as a theoretical framework for a hegemonic analysis of sustainable development. Struggles over sustainability’s meaning unfold within and through the boundaries of the State, making it essential to use relational and strategic concepts to analyze this contestation. In this view, sustainability becomes a hegemonic field, a signifier mobilized by various social forces to secure their hegemony, promoting specific interests through particular accumulation strategies articulated in hegemonic projects that must secure consent to be realized.

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## Asbestos Deaths: Sustainability Against Social Justice

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to analyze the contradictions between sustainability and social justice by examining the deaths caused by asbestos processing and the resulting environmental disasters in affected areas. In the first part, the author explores the contradictions between sustainable reforms and “performative environmentalism” as compared to integral ecology, which advocates an integrated and holistic approach to addressing political, social, economic, and environmental issues. Her analysis is grounded in a theoretical framework that argues sustainable development must be evaluated in its full complexity and contrasted with neoliberal simplification practices that prioritize efficiency and the economization of economically assessable resources. From this perspective, the second part of the paper discusses these issues through an Italian asbestos case study, viewed as an instance of social injustice conflicting with sustainability policies. The author outlines three main points demonstrating how sustainability governance can bypass any potential for social justice in situations involving asbestos processing. She explains that managing asbestos cases contributes to the normalization of environmental disasters and exacerbates the conflict between the right to work and the right to health. The incidents involving asbestos exemplify how sustainability is interpreted through a neoliberal lens.

**Keywords:** sustainability, social justice, environment, asbestos deaths, asbestos factory.

### 1. INTRODUCTION: ENVIRONMENTAL AND HEALTH ISSUES

This paper aims to analyze the contradictions between sustainability and social justice by examining deaths caused by asbestos processing and the resulting environmental disasters in affected areas. The analysis seeks to demonstrate that sustainability policies fail to challenge the neoliberal logic focused on extracting value from human beings and ecosystems (Galino 2011). Instead, these policies often contribute to the depoliticization of compensation claims and the legitimization of categorizing environmental disasters as non-criminal. This situation creates a disparity between law and substantive justice, leading to a “recomposition” of truth regarding environmental disasters that favors profit-driven logic, despite sustainability being a fundamental criterion in every political and economic intervention. As will be demonstrated below, the management of asbestos cases contributes to the normalization of environmental disasters and heightens the signifi-

cant conflict between the right to work and the right to health. Furthermore, Italian law (68/2015), concerning “provisions on crimes against the environment”, stipulates that for environmental pollution to be recognized, the deterioration must be “significant” and “measurable”. Consequently, in the absence of specific legislative guidelines, these criteria are determined by a judge on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, it is only after the act has been committed that it can be determined whether the impairment or deterioration is serious or insignificant (Telesca 2015). At the core of the following analysis is an awareness of the contradictions between sustainable reforms and “performative environmentalism”<sup>1</sup>; in essence, both lack a perspective based on the principles of integral ecology, which refers to an analytical and intervention approach to environmental sustainability that takes into account the essential connections with the broader context of social and economic crises. In other words, the concept of integral ecology highlights the impossibility of addressing environmental conservation without also safeguarding the humanity that inhabits it, thereby emphasizing the need for concrete actions aimed at reducing inequalities and protecting both global and local commons<sup>2</sup>. This approach stands in contrast to the practice of neoliberal simplification, which prioritizes efficiency criteria to determine the savings of economically assessable resources (Spina 2019).

Consequently, it is necessary to exercise control over the social role of science, its production, and its uses, as emphasized by Laval and Vergne (2021) in their discussion of the battle for the common future of knowledge institutions. These authors argue that sustainability cannot be separated from a policy of educational equality, which in turn is inseparable from a policy of equal living conditions. For this reason, discussing sustainability also fundamentally involves safeguarding the welfare state and equipping it with the resources needed to address the challenges posed by labor hypermobility and market anarchy (Castel 2002).

It is important to note that the current models of welfare are unable to cope with significant demographic changes, both in the quantitative and qualitative composition of the workforce, as well as with the fiscal crisis and the difficulties in governing nation-states (Burroni *et al.* 2022). Additionally, these economic, political, and social difficulties have been exacerbated

by the recent health emergency caused by Covid-19 (Mirabelli *et al.* 2022).

The general practices of medicalizing the social body (Maturò and Moretti 2019, Rose 2018, Conrad 2007) certainly do not align with social justice, nor are they consistent with the concept of integral ecology. These practices are tied to individualistic views of the social context, which are promoted by the performative and competitive criteria of neoliberalism.

Moreover, the excessive medicalization of the social body starkly contrasts with the inadequate protection provided to individuals who become ill due to work-related conditions, such as those suffering from diseases caused by asbestos processing. In Italy, the articulation of sustainability in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) appears somewhat disconnected from environmental and health issues. Specifically, the post-pandemic intervention document allocates measures related to the environment and health under Mission 2, titled “Green Revolution and Ecological Transition”, and Mission 6, simply called “Health”. Surprisingly, “Health” is the last of the six missions listed in the NRRP, a curious placement considering the health conditions that prompted the intervention. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has exposed many rhetorical discourses on the indispensable relationship between the environment and health, both individual and collective. It has redefined the neoliberal premises that previously emphasized individual responsibility as a determinant of health, *omnes et singulatim*. The pandemic has also highlighted the shortcomings of recent investment policies related to the environment and health. These policies, which could be described as weakly reparative (consider, for example, the management of post-environmental disaster situations) and entirely driven by efficiency (such as the logic of cutting health and social care spending), have proven inadequate (Ferraro and Petrillo 2022). Thus, many questions arise from such a perspective, especially considering that the NRRP primarily focuses on strengthening the managerial and digital competencies of health-care personnel, rather than increasing the number of human resources. Without any proposals that reconnect environmental planning with health-related planning – both individual and public, physical and mental – the NRRP’s approach to the environment predominantly targets sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and energy efficiency. According to the NRRP’s provisions, the organization of medical interventions is intensified into rigid protocols, dictated by economic principles of efficiency and effectiveness, and structured according to essential performance levels. Similarly, the management of environmental disasters follows the same logic,

<sup>1</sup> Performative environmentalism may also be linked to distortions in participation policies (Moini 2023). For a critical analysis of the concept of participation, refer to Moini (2011, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> On integral ecology topic, see Esbjörn-Hargens and Zimmerman (2009), particularly regarding the methods and areas of interdisciplinary and intersectional intervention in relation to environmental crises.

structured through intervention flows that primarily begin with the systematic activation of a state of emergency, replacing a political logic, anchored to the circuit of electoral representation, with a technical and politically “unaccountable” one, through the extraordinary Commission (Petrillo 2009). In both the healthcare and environmental sectors, management dominates, firmly anchored to the *gouvernance par les nombres* logic previously criticized by Supiot (2015).

There are also situations where risks do not inherently exist but are constructed through their discursive use to justify the application of pre-coded intervention flows, often driven by economic interests. This is thoroughly explained by Saitta (2022), who investigates the logic behind the recent attempt to clear the shantytown in Messina. He specifically analyzes how risks (including exposure to asbestos and viral contagion) are constructed to justify the political actions of the local administration aimed at clearance. Simultaneously, there are cases where environmental disasters are portrayed as a “brutal fate” to obscure both the lack of risk management and the flaws in intervention protocols driven by economic considerations (Vastano 2022). In the presence of environmental disasters and epidemics (or pandemics), whether viral or resulting from environmental and/or industrial interventions (intentional or negligent), sociology is called upon to recognize and understand the communities that form in response to each specific disaster or health issue. These communities are not merely groups united by suffering; often, they are primarily communities engaged in the co-production of knowledge about their specific conditions (Altopiedi 2022, Olivieri 2022).

## 2. ASBESTOS FACTORY IN IRPINIA: NEUTRALIZING DAMAGE

The case of Isochimica, an asbestos factory in Southern Italy examined below, is just one of many that aptly illustrates the contradictions between the principles of sustainability and the governance of environmental disasters, as well as the health impacts on workers and local communities. It is important to emphasize that the events at Isochimica coincided with the initial efforts to define the role of sustainability within political and investment frameworks. However, these efforts did not lead to addressing the diseases and deaths caused by asbestos in accordance with the principles of social justice, nor to an adequate acknowledgment of the environmental disasters that had occurred.

As Esposto (2024: 56) outlines in his historical reconstruction, sustainability is not a new concept. Since

the 1960s, international policymakers have progressively incorporated the relationship between development and the environment into their decision-making, driven by a growing awareness of the negative impacts of human activities on the planet. From the establishment of UNEP (the global authority for the environment, with programs focused on climate, nature, pollution, sustainable development, and more) in 1972 to Agenda 2030, there has been a shift from recognizing the centrality of sustainable development to treating sustainability as a neutral exercise, as it is based on consensus decisions made by stakeholders (Ivi: 58-83).

The neutralization process is carried out through a specific use of the concept of sustainability, leading to the equally neutral inclusion of multiple parties with differing interests under the term “stakeholder” (Ivi: 92-93). In this way, for example, the distinction between workers and trade unions, and businesses and industries, is partially blurred by their classification as non-state actors, i.e., stakeholders<sup>3</sup>. In short, neoliberal institutional environmental governance incorporates social groups with differing interests into the category of stakeholders. Although these groups are excluded from exercising power within sustainability governance, their classification as stakeholders nullifies any form of conflict related to the assertion of specific and legitimate interests, thereby fostering smooth relationships that sustain the discursive order of sustainability. In other words, institutional governance practices for sustainable development have created forms of participation among different groups that are homogenizing in nature, leading to a process of depoliticization of both claims and potential environmental damage<sup>4</sup>.

In this sense, the claims of the former workers of Isochimica can also be seen as at least partially neutralized by a specific application of the concept of sustainability, which was spreading particularly in relation to models of development and prosperity in the inland and often rural areas of Southern Italy. Indeed, this conceptualization of sustainable development led to the

<sup>3</sup> The complexity and heterogeneity of the subjects included in the broad group of stakeholders also call into question the financialization of sustainability. For insights into this issue, reference is made to Nupieri (2024, see also her contribution in this special issue), who analyzes the foundational bases of sustainable finance in Italy from value and cognitive perspectives. She examines the actors involved in constructing the specific meanings attributed to the concept and demonstrates that sustainable finance, contrary to the claims made in public and political debates, serves as a tool to discursively reproduce principles underlying the neoliberal paradigm and to support the activation of courses of action aligned with the progressive process of financializing sustainability.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the concept of depoliticization, see de Nardis (2017); regarding depoliticizing public action by politicizing issues, see d’Albergo and Moini (2017).

Isochimica workers being left alone to fight a desperate battle that seemed to have no impact on the local social fabric. As we gathered from the examination of press sources, until the late 1990s, the workers were often accused of promoting an abstract and unrealistic subversiveness, and of irrationally rejecting the model of development and prosperity that was being painstakingly built for them in Irpinia.

Since the health of the workers was at risk due to manufacturing processes lacking adequate protection systems, the neutralization and depoliticization of their claims were achieved by criminalizing their demands.

Although Isochimica was a small factory, employing no more than 300 workers in the neighborhood known as Borgo Ferrovia in Avellino, its story is inseparably linked to a larger historical context (Petrillo 2016). This asbestos case is particularly interesting and can contribute to the scientific debate on the critical issues of sustainability because it highlights the responsibilities of various national and local institutional actors involved, who were, even then, jointly interested in promoting discursive narratives about the principles of sustainability. For many years, the Isochimica factory played an important role in addressing a serious nationwide problem: the disposal of asbestos that had been an integral part of many railway carriages. Therefore, from 1982 to 1988, workers at Isochimica removed asbestos from carriages and electric locomotives belonging to the public company Ferrovie dello Stato (FF.SS.)<sup>5</sup>.

To fully understand this issue, it is important to consider the context in which it arises. The history of Isochimica is closely intertwined with that of the province of Avellino, also known as Irpinia, a wooded area in Campania renowned for its chestnut trees and intensive agriculture. After the Second World War, this zone became synonymous with poverty and backward farming practices, emblematic of the underdevelopment of the Mezzogiorno, which led to mass migrations to the Americas and Europe. More recently, consumption and lifestyle trends have rebranded Irpinia as a rural retreat for health and relaxation, promoting it as “green Irpinia”. Despite this, real progress in local infrastructure and accommodations remains minimal.

The 1980 earthquake left 280,000 people homeless, thousands injured, and nearly 3,000 dead, transforming Irpinia into a hub for unregulated development under the guise of reconstruction. However, most companies that invested there, attracted by the opportunity to exploit state aid and facilitated by lax local oversight, eventually failed. This led to frequent closures, leaving

behind a landscape littered with unused and polluting “white elephants” (Petrillo 2016: 193). The earthquake fundamentally reshaped the region’s economic, urban, social, and political structures through an ad hoc law (Law 219/1980) that bypassed standard regulations on land use, contracts, public expenditure, and more. This law facilitated a shift in power, enhancing the mayor’s authority at the expense of council bodies and limiting local involvement in reconstruction efforts. A strong military presence ensured compliance. This environment became fertile ground for *laissez-faire* policies, blurring the lines between legality and organized crime (*Ibidem*).

This scenario also shapes the narrative of the young Isochimica workers, some of whom had just turned 18 and were envied by their peers for securing a “good job” amid the scarcity of employment during this post-earthquake period in Irpinia (Ivi: 195). The residents of Borgo Ferrovia, a marginalized area in a working-class part of town, have endured the hazardous aftermath of asbestos exposure. Despite the removal of large quantities of asbestos from a local factory, it continues to contaminate their schools, homes, and public spaces, symbolizing a persistent threat to health and life. These personal tragedies highlight broader failures of governance and oversight, implicating local and national authorities, healthcare systems, and even trade unions in a network of negligence and inadequate responses.

From a methodological standpoint, the small scale of this case allowed for more precise observation, highlighting how Isochimica synthesizes elements that clearly contradict the discursive narrative about sustainability. This case represents the plundering of territories and populations, employment blackmail, the exploitation of workers framed as development and progress, and work that causes death portrayed as an opportunity.

### 3. ISOCHIMICA: THE ABSENCE OF BASIC SOCIAL JUSTICE PRINCIPLES

In this paper, the Isochimica case is primarily examined as an instance of denied social justice that contradicts the discursive logic of sustainability. The denial of social justice principles can be observed in the following factors: the workers at this factory ensured that Italians would have the future right to travel safely in asbestos-free carriages by removing asbestos from 1,740 carriages and 499 locomotives. However, the dangers associated with asbestos removal were initially concealed from them. By exploiting a very young, non-unionized workforce in a predominantly agricultural and rural area of Southern Italy, these unsuspecting workers were denied

<sup>5</sup> At the time, FF.SS. was a public company managed by the Ministry of Economy and Finance; it was subsequently privatized.

all safety measures, in blatant violation of regulations designed to protect them, in order to maximize profits by avoiding the costs of implementing safety protocols. This situation is tragically encapsulated in a statement made by FF.SS. leadership at the time: «There, they either die of hunger or of asbestos» (Ferraro 2015: 128). Later, after the factory closed in 1990, the workers faced the downplaying or denial of the pathological damage caused by asbestos exposure, which was aimed at evading the demands for social security protection made by former workers now suffering from asbestos-related illnesses. It is important to note that Article 117 of Law 190/2014 grants early retirement only to former workers diagnosed with asbestos-related illnesses. However, the correlation between asbestos inhalation and disease is determined at the discretion of experts from INAIL (National Institute for Insurance against Workplace Accidents). One example, among many, of the arbitrary manner in which requests for early retirement and recognition of occupational diseases are handled is that of a former Isochimica worker who died of mesothelioma in 2022 at the age of 72, whose occupational disease was only recognized by INAIL a few weeks before his death<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, the failure to fully recognize the damage, or only partially acknowledge it, serves to conceal the political, economic, and social responsibilities that led to the “Isochimica tragedy”. For example, it has now been proven that many workers were employed off the books for extended periods, making it impossible for them to prove their employment. This was made possible by the complete silence of local authorities responsible for protecting both the environment and the population, including the labor inspectorate. Moreover, in disregard of any principle of sustainability, the court in Campania ordered the seizure of the factory site only in 2013, following protests by local residents and, of course, former workers. In that area, 469 blocks of asbestos-cement, totaling almost 3,000 tons of waste, remain, and their dust has claimed the lives of residents over the years<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, still in disregard of any principle of social justice, both former workers and residents continue to grapple with ongoing legal proceedings to uncover the truth, as will be discussed below.

It is clear that the Isochimica case, with its elements of social injustice, seriously challenges any possible appli-

cation of the sustainability criterion. Introduced at the first United Nations (UN) conference on the environment in 1972, this criterion was later defined and formalized in 1987 with the publication of the Brundtland Report by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). According to the report, development can be considered sustainable when it meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. It is evident that the Isochimica case, by denying workers’ rights to health and damaging the environment, has strongly contradicted this criterion. In addition, it is important to note that many other cases of asbestos contamination occurred during and after that period<sup>8</sup>.

The history of Isochimica began in this context: in the late 1960s, growing awareness of the dangers of asbestos led the State Railway to discontinue its use in new carriages by 1975, due to regulatory pressures. This marked the beginning of a phase of asbestos removal from train carriages, an activity that was carried out at the Officine Grandi Riparazioni (OGR)<sup>9</sup>. Over time, as awareness of the dangers of asbestos grew – partly due to the efforts of newly formed environmental defense organizations – workers at OGR protested the hazardous removal of asbestos insulation from carriages. In response, national trade unions developed a platform in 1972 to combat toxic substances in the workplace, advocating for safety measures and medical support. In 1979, an epidemiological survey conducted by Medicina Democratica revealed an increase in cancer cases among OGR workers handling asbestos in Bologna and Foligno, raising alarm and attracting the attention of medical and legal professionals.

In reply, a government inquiry committee was formed, which partially met the workers’ demands for improved safety measures, reduced working hours, and health inspections. The implementation of costly measures delayed progress, and in 1982, following protests by OGR workers and amid the process of transport privatization, FF.SS. outsourced the asbestos removal to Isochimica. The decision to outsource a hazardous activity makes Isochimica a particularly interesting case, as it foreshadows the logic of a globalized economy where polluting tasks are delegated to marginal territories and populations. It also represents one of the earliest examples of outsourcing by a public company in Italy. In 1984, two years into their work at Isochimica, a worker

<sup>6</sup> For more information on this case and others, see the Information and Legal Assistance Portal for Asbestos Victims, Mesothelioma, Occupational Tumors, and Medical Malpractice at <https://www.risarcimentomalattieprofessionali.it/isochimica-mesotelioma-pleurico-scoibentatori-ferrovie/>.

<sup>7</sup> To access updated data on illnesses and deaths related to the Isochimica case, see ONA (Osservatorio Nazionale Amianto; National Asbestos Observatory) at <https://www.osservatorioamianto.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of cases of deaths and pollution from the processing and use of asbestos, see Ferraro (2018).

<sup>9</sup> OGR is a large facility of FF.SS. designed for the maintenance, renewal, and repair of train engines and carriages across Italy. For a historical-sociological analysis of OGR, refer to D’Ascenzio and Ferraro (2022).

secretly shared an article about the dangers of asbestos and the related illnesses and protests among workers in Northern Italy. The article was passed around clandestinely, like contraband, in the factory toilets, spurring attempts to engage trade unions for protection. However, in the protest organizing group, participation never exceeded 30 workers, as others succumbed to employer pressure or union advice to avoid risking their jobs. Efforts to address the issue were consistently met with silence until a significant breakthrough occurred: a technical survey conducted by the Catholic University of Sacro Cuore in Rome, initiated at the union's suggestion to ease tensions. On June 10, 1985, experts delivered a shocking report. They found asbestos everywhere, visible to the naked eye, crudely removed with basic tools, mishandled by workers, and carelessly disposed of in the environment. The widespread contamination extended from poorly ventilated work sheds to offices, changing rooms, and beyond, affecting the entire town. Until 1988, the complicit media, bribed to ignore these issues, remained silent. Misunderstood by the community and their families, the workers' legitimate concerns were dismissed as mere laziness. Like many communities facing pollution, the residents were initially reluctant to acknowledge the health risks due to economic constraints and disbelief in the dangers surrounding them.

This is the status of the legal Isochimica case at the time of writing this article: on December 13, 1988, the factory warehouses were sealed by order of the Florence prosecutor for violating regulations on hazardous work. This action followed reports of asbestos dust found in the train carriages that had been processed at Isochimica. These reports were filed by workers at the FF.SS. workshops in Florence, where the carriages processed in Irpinia were sent. Subsequently, the case was dismissed due to an amnesty granted to the defendants. When the factory closed in 1988, the workers were placed on a temporary layoff scheme until early 1990, when the company went bankrupt. After the bankruptcy, fourteen former Isochimica employees were transferred to the new company ElSid Srl, which was responsible for de-insulating the last 33 carriages under the agreement with FF.SS. until 1992. After the final closure of the asbestos factory in Irpinia, cases of asbestosis among former workers began to rise, and, unfortunately, deaths also started to occur. In the neighborhood where the factory was located, there was a significant increase in respiratory diseases and allergies. This led to the start of a prolonged protest by residents, who eventually joined the demands of the former workers. It was only in 2013 that the Avellino Court ordered the seizure of the area where the factory had been located, due to the deteriorated condition

of 469 blocks of friable asbestos-cement. On October 23, 2014, the criminal trial related to the Isochimica case began. The prosecutor's office in the provincial capital of Irpinia requested that 29 individuals be brought to trial, facing charges including multiple counts of manslaughter, willful disaster, environmental disaster, bodily harm, forgery of public records, and omission of official duties. On January 28, 2022, the Court of Avellino delivered the first-degree judgment in the trial. This verdict came thirty-six years after the WWF (World Wildlife Fund) first lodged a complaint in 1986 with the Avellino Prosecutor's Office regarding the illegal disposal of toxic waste at Isochimica. The trial, which began in 2014 and involved 270 civil parties, lasted five years and seven months and included 127 court hearings. The sentence imposed ten years' imprisonment on two individuals responsible for safety at Isochimica and two FF.SS. officials, while acquitting all the other defendants. A provisional compensation of 50,000 euros was granted to each of the families of the 33 workers who died from illnesses related to prolonged asbestos exposure. However, no compensation was provided to former workers suffering from these diseases. While this verdict falls short of expectations, there is a significant risk that the crimes may be subject to statutes of limitations in the next stages of the proceedings (D'Ascenzio and Ferraro 2022), as has already happened in Italy, for example, with the Eternit case (Natali and de Nardin Budó 2018, Altopiedi 2014).

On May 23, 2024, the appeal trial began before the judges of the First Criminal Division of the Naples Court of Appeal. The outcome of the first hearing was the exclusion of numerous victims who had suffered asbestos-related injuries; they were effectively excluded from the appeal as civil parties contesting the statute of limitations applied to some of the defendants in the first-degree judgment. The request was denied, partly due to new Italian legislation aimed at reforming criminal justice procedures with a focus on efficiency<sup>10</sup>.

On a theoretical level, the reconstruction of this asbestos case can be analyzed, following Foucault (2010), from a biopolitical perspective, as it clearly illustrates the exercise of new power over life and death, in the sense of "letting die". This power is evident in the social and political role of scientific knowledge, particularly in interpreting the cause-and-effect relationship between unsafe asbestos processing and the resulting illnesses. It is also reflected in the weakening of welfare services and social policies, particularly those aimed at protecting workers and the environment. This includes the

<sup>10</sup> The reference is to the so-called Cartabia reform, Legislative Decree No. 150 of October 10, 2022, which was implemented with the aim of reducing the duration of criminal trials.

inadequacy of medical protocols based on essential levels of care, as well as the management of environmental disasters, especially in terms of the methods used for the remediation of contaminated sites.

#### 4. HOW SUSTAINABILITY MAY CONFLICT WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE

Concerning sustainable development, the Isochimica case study is just one of many examples that highlight certain contradictions in the management of workplace safety and environmental pollution. These contradictions emerge even as the concept of sustainability permeates all aspects of public policy and economic investments, ultimately betraying the concept of social justice, which should be a fundamental pillar of sustainable logic. Social justice is a complex concept that integrates the economy, health, and environment in terms of equity.

At least three points illustrate how the governance of sustainability can circumvent any possible form of social justice in matters related to asbestos processing.

The first point is that, despite the significant role of environmentalism and sustainable development since the 1970s, the geographic placement of asbestos processing factories has predominantly targeted the poorest populations. These communities are also less equipped to defend themselves against health, environmental, and economic injustices (Petrillo 2016, Ruggiero and Gounev 2012, Saitta 2009, 2010, 2015, Sanyal 2007). According to Foucault's views on biopolitical governmentality, the population and the environment are seen as being in a perpetual, living interrelationship that falls under the State's domain to manage (Foucault 2009). At the same time, there has been a shift in the concept of the "right to death", or at least a tendency to align it with the demands of a life-administering power and to redefine it accordingly. This notion of death, once rooted in the sovereign's right, is now regarded merely as the counterpart to the social body's right to ensure, maintain, or develop its life (Foucault 1978). Undoubtedly, biopower is an indispensable element in the development of capitalism, requiring both the availability and docility of bodies. Consequently, despite the influence of sustainability principles, neoliberalism continues to exploit marginal territories and populations. We must remember that Isochimica is located in Campania, a region facing a widespread environmental crisis. This includes a "waste emergency", with urban waste flooding the region's cities (D'Alisa *et al.* 2012) and toxic waste being dumped in landfills (Pasotti 2010, Petrillo 2009). Campania is also infamous for the "Land of Fires" (Terra dei Fuochi) and

the "Triangle of Death" (Triangolo della Morte) – notorious disasters that are clearly linked to economic speculation. By the way:

*Over the course of many years, the Campania region of Italy has been exposed to all sorts of environmental devastation by both national and international powers. This total disregard for any type of biopolitical objective regarding the health and safety of the resident population, which constitutes the basis of neoliberal 'governmentality' [...] has been achieved by developing a specific order of discourse aimed at the inferiorization of the local population by constant reference to their state of underdevelopment, and by means of very structured narrative patterns [...] As well as general indexes regarding the quality of life (the lowest in Europe), health data reveals some really worrying statistics: the National Cancer Institute Fondazione G. Pascale in Naples reports a disturbing increase (over the last two decades) in the cancer mortality rate (Petrillo 2016: 191).*

Regarding the waste emergency and the further construction of waste dumps, mainstream public discourse often portrays the opposition of the Campanian population as an egotistical refusal, epitomized by the Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) syndrome. This portrayal, based on the conventional and dominant representation of Southern populations as underdeveloped, uncivilized, and barbaric, strips social protests of their political dimension and redefines them in more naturalistic terms (Schneider 1998). In reality, these protests represent the "struggle of a community" capable of transcending the "local issue". This aspect is related to the enforcement of a political agenda that encompasses a politics of life itself and, therefore, also of death (Rose 2007). The protests are a political issue because they create public spaces for debate that transcend prevailing institutions and employ alternatives established from the bottom up, which cannot be included in the aforementioned category of stakeholders.

The second point is that, while public discourse and policies on sustainability are intensifying, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that asbestos will cause approximately 500,000 deaths in Europe over the next 20 years<sup>11</sup>. This continues despite the fact that, as early as the 1960s, the scientific community had already confirmed a correlation between asbestos exposure and mesothelioma, coinciding with the rise of the theme of sustainable development.

All this occurs because asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that can be extracted at a low cost. It has been extensively used in construction, shipbuilding,

<sup>11</sup> ILO, *Safety in the use of asbestos*, at the link [www.ilo.org/safework/cis/WCMS\\_337080/langen/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/safework/cis/WCMS_337080/langen/index.htm).

military, and transport industries, particularly for thermal and acoustic insulation, due to its high plasticity and resistance to water and fire. Asbestos has been an extraordinary multiplier of invested capital, enabling substantial profits at relatively low costs (Bonanni 2009). However, its harmful effects on humans and the environment were already well-known when discussions about sustainable development began.

During the 1950s, Sleggs, a medical practitioner overseeing the tuberculosis service in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa, observed that a group of patients with pleural effusions was not responding to the new anti-tuberculosis drugs. He noted that this phenomenon was more common among patients from the West, where the mountains contained workable deposits of crocidolite asbestos. Sleggs collaborated with a thoracic surgeon and a pathologist, and they concluded that the increase in pleural effusion cases was linked to a rare type of pleural cancer, specifically mesothelioma. The physicians eventually documented a series of 33 cases of this rare cancer over just four years. Following the publication of the paper by Wagner, Sleggs, and Marchand in the 1960s, scientists recognized that mesothelioma was caused by exposure to asbestos. Battista *et al.* (1999) documented the etiological relationship between work processes and the effects of inhaling asbestos fibers. Additionally, the American scientist Selikoff had already identified all types of cancer associated with asbestos exposure as early as the 1960s. The first Italian study on the carcinogenicity of asbestos in the naval engineering sector was carried out by the Institute of Occupational Medicine at the University of Genoa and was published by Zanardi and Fontana in 1971. Calls for the abolition of asbestos use coincided with the rise of environmental movements in the 1960s and 1970s, which also marked the beginning of the first public and political debates on sustainable development:

*To understand how stakeholders have shaped their attitude to asbestos during the years-long process leading to bans on asbestos, we should remember that the abandonment of asbestos was preceded by many notable events. The first was the beginning of the environmentalist movement emerging after the publication of Rachel Carson's famous "silent spring" in 1962. The second was the International Agency for Research on Cancer's finding, in 1977, that all forms of asbestos are carcinogenic to man. The third factor was a growing awareness, in the industry, trade unions and governments of the 1980s, on safer substitutes for asbestos (Terracini 2019: 331).*

Despite this, the first European directive (382), which prohibited the extraction, production, and marketing of asbestos, dates back only to 1991, while the

Italian law banning asbestos (257/92) came into effect in 1992. It should also be noted that the dangers of asbestos were recognized long before these bans. In fact, the Italian Royal Decree 442 of June 14, 1909, and Italian law 455/1943 had already acknowledged these hazards. These laws extended insurance coverage to include illnesses related to asbestos and silicosis for all workers (Ferraro 2016, 2018). Consequently, employers were obligated to report cases of occupational diseases and related worker exposures to INAIL. Not coincidentally, between 1940 and 1980, the commitment of the Italian National Institute of Health was significant, leading to the formation of a multidisciplinary research group that initiated epidemiological studies on asbestos. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, many harmful incidents still occurred, including those at Isochimica.

The third point is that legal interpretation techniques have also relied on the enduring relationship between scientific knowledge, power, and truth (Romano 2014). For instance, while some rulings concerning asbestos-related damage acknowledge the causal link between asbestos and mesothelioma, they have noted that this connection is not inevitable and can only be demonstrated in a certain percentage of cases. The risk of the statute of limitations expiring for offenses related to asbestos processing represents one of the most significant contradictions, especially when viewed through the lens of sustainability. It undoubtedly constitutes one of the clearest deviations from the principles of social justice.

The management of asbestos-related issues reveals an asymmetry in industrial legal systems, where rights and duties lack reciprocity (Romano 2014). Legal interpretations in these cases shape the boundaries of crimes, sometimes even denying their existence. Recent laws, such as Italian Law 68/2015, exhibit typical flaws of emergency legislation, including unclear environmental protection measures and ambiguous criteria for assessing damage (Telesca 2015). These laws contribute to the classification of offenses as involuntary, leading to the problematic outcome of statutes of limitations for asbestos-related crimes and disconnecting justice from factual accountability, an issue Foucault (2019) addressed in his analysis of power and justice. Despite the prolonged effects of asbestos, the cessation of business operations ends legal liability (Gatta 2015). Judicial interpretations often explore the interplay between scientific knowledge, power, and truth (Foucault 1980), sometimes challenging the inevitability of asbestos-related diseases. Italian law limits compensation to workers who have been exposed to asbestos for more than ten years and are regularly employed. Overall, the management and remediation of asbestos-contaminated sites have, to date, evolved into a

substantial business where speculation often takes precedence over the protection of health and the environment (Petrillo 2016). In practice, the costs of removing and treating asbestos range from 8 to 16 euros per square meter. However, the total expenditure is influenced by several factors: the amount of material to be disposed of, the structure of the building, any technical difficulties or unforeseen events, and, crucially, the distance from authorized landfills. This last factor is particularly problematic in the current Italian context, where asbestos landfills are few, unevenly distributed across the country, and inadequately monitored by authorities. According to current Italian regulations, each region should have a plan for the census, remediation, and disposal of materials containing asbestos; however, a complete national mapping is still not available. It is estimated that in Italy, there are over 30 million tons of contaminated material and more than 1 billion square meters of compact asbestos<sup>12</sup>. There is also the issue of illegal asbestos dumps, used throughout the years of processing for the exclusive benefit of entrepreneurs, thereby saving costs (D'Ascenzio and Ferraro 2022). Furthermore, the Italian Association of Asbestos Victims (AIEA) reports that asbestos-related diseases result in 4,000 deaths per year in Italy, with deaths solely attributable to Eternit expected to reach 30,000 over the next 15 years. All this occurs while sustainability is touted as the solution to all problems. However, there has been no change in the legal recognition of environmental disasters caused by asbestos, nor in the recognition of the health damages and deaths it continues to cause. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of investment in the remediation of contaminated sites.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS: THE FACT DOES NOT EXIST

As previously mentioned, Isochimica is just one of many asbestos factories that operated in Italy without any protection for workers or the environment. The stories of these deadly factories are very similar and almost always begin with a lie, encapsulated by the statement: «Asbestos is less harmful than Coca-Cola». This was the response given by the owner of Isochimica to counter accusations of a lack of safety in his factory (Petrillo 2016: 203).

This is followed by another version of the same lie:

*They told us that we could even eat off those jute sacks containing asbestos and cement. They assured us it was*

<sup>12</sup> For more information on these data, see: [www.tuttogreen.it/amianto-smaltimento-bonifica-rischi-salute/](http://www.tuttogreen.it/amianto-smaltimento-bonifica-rischi-salute/).

*safe, and we had nothing to fear. In 1979, I read an article that clearly stated the material caused cancer. That's when I began to connect it to the cancer deaths of some of my colleagues during that period. We demanded masks and protective suits that had never been provided to us, even though the law had mandated them since 1955. We requested medical examinations and checks. Following an inspection of Sacelit employees, the Faculty of Occupational Medicine at the University of Bari compiled a list of workers "not suitable for specific and general work"<sup>13</sup> [translation by the author].*

“Not suitable” refers to those who were sickened by asbestos, and became ill due to exposure. If work is the main foundation of social cohesion – as the division of labor into different roles makes individuals heavily dependent on each other (Durkheim [1893]1999) – then illness and death resulting from work represent, undeniably, the greatest betrayal of the principle of collective conscience.

Consequently, considering the role played by sustainability criteria, it seems necessary to note that work-related illnesses are on the rise: the International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that 160 million people worldwide fall ill each year due to occupational diseases. Thus, death, as a “random variable” of work, fits within the contemporary concept of risk (Beck 1998), because the production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks (Sennett 1998). Under such conditions, there is a clear dissociation between the role of sustainability and the protections that should be guaranteed to humanity and the environment in terms of social justice. Consider, for example, Taranto and its Tamburi neighborhood, located just steps away from Ilva, the largest steel plant in Europe. Here, the necessity to work at all costs collides with the refusal to die from the pollution produced by the steel plant, highlighting one of the greatest paradoxes of neoliberalism: the certainty of employment is contrasted with environmental safety (Colucci and Alemanno 2011, Colombo and Comito 2013, Ferraro 2014, Vignola 2017). Yet, even here, the neoliberal governance of sustainability reframes pollution and death in terms of individual blame and criminalizes the population.

*The mortality data for cancers in the Sentieri Study refer to the period 2003-09. The incidence and mortality from*

<sup>13</sup> Statements by Domenico Nania, former Sacelit worker and president of the former exposed committee (AIEA), in G. Maimone, *La Sacelit: la fabbrica della morte!*, in «[www.ilcarrettinodelleidee.com](http://www.ilcarrettinodelleidee.com)», 28 Gennaio 2010. Salicet is another factory that produced building materials from concrete and asbestos in San Filippo del Mela, a town within the high environmental risk area of Messina because other highly polluting industrial sites operate in the district.

*cancers reflect exposures that date back to the distant past. Lung cancers have a latency of 30-40 years and thus essentially reflect exposures from the 1960s and 70s, or earlier. Ilva was not present at that time. In this regard, it is well known that in Taranto, a port city, the availability of cigarettes was historically higher compared to other areas of the South. [...] It is the fault of the cigarette smugglers<sup>14</sup> [translation by the author].*

As Romano (2014) explains, truth and justice serve as mechanisms for the will to power; this principle also applies to the statute of limitations on asbestos-related crimes, which fails to meet the needs of social justice. The pursuit of justice for asbestos-related deaths is encapsulated by the Anglo-Saxon adage, *Hard cases make bad law*. Naturally, victims seek justice, but when a judge is faced with the difficult choice between law and justice, he has no alternative. Bound by law, he must choose the law, as asserted by Altopiedi (2014). Generally, the statute of limitations for an environmental disaster is tied to the date of the company's bankruptcy filing and/or closure, regardless of whether the responsible parties have undertaken any remediation or damage reduction efforts.

This statute of limitations disconnects the environmental disaster from its deadly effects, which is neither just nor consistent with sustainability criteria, especially since the mesothelioma epidemic will persist for many years because asbestos-related damage remains undetectable for at least 20 years. Furthermore, the failure to acknowledge the damage can also stem from denying the cause-effect relationship between asbestos and mesothelioma, as demonstrated by the deaths of twenty-eight workers from mesothelioma after working at Pirelli's Bicocca factories in Milan during the 1970s and 1980s. In these cases, the reasoning behind the judges' verdicts identified three impossibilities: determining the exact onset of mesothelioma, proving omissions by the factory's leadership, and establishing a contributory role in the causation or acceleration of the deaths.

Is all this sustainable?

With which principle of social justice does this align, especially considering that science has long established that inhaling asbestos causes mesothelioma?

Is it reasonable to believe that all those who have fallen ill or died from asbestos exposure are merely victims of their own negligence at work, particularly in light of well-documented cases of factory leadership denying the hazards of asbestos?

For these reasons, it seems to us that the asbestos incidents illustrate how sustainability is often interpreted through a neoliberal lens. As Esposto (2024) explains, sustainability has become a vacuous concept, representing not only a lack of meaning but also an absence of alternatives to the existing development model. In this void, the most aggressive mechanisms that undermine social justice take root, including the suppression of conflict and the exploitation of humans and nature, all of which align with the well-established canons of depoliticization. This does not happen by accident or due to institutional incompetence; rather, it occurs because it is conducive to profit. Furthermore, the criteria for sustainability are inherently meaningless, as they must be continually adapted to accommodate the specific exploitation being undertaken (Brown 2016).

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<sup>14</sup> Statements from the then-commissioner of Ilva, Enrico Bondi, in F. Casula, *Taranto, Enrico Bondi: "I tumori? Macché Ilva, la colpa è di tabacco e alcool*, in «Il Fatto Quotidiano», 14 luglio 2013.

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## Laying Stress on Ideas: Actors, Connections, and Meanings of Sustainable Finance in Italy

TIZIANA NUPIERI

**Abstract.** Although the idea of private investment as “essential for sustainability” has only recently been naturalized in European regulations (Hay 2004), the use of market instruments to address social-environmental challenges has long been established in Western societies. Since the “neoliberal revolution” of the late 1970s (Harvey 2005: 39), new modes of accumulation and regulatory processes have fostered the expansion of financial assets, a process known as financialization (Epstein 2005, Krippner 2005). Over the past 15 years, financial logic has permeated areas such as welfare, nature, and the environment. However, the literature still lacks a holistic analysis of the pervasive role of finance across all dimensions of sustainability, particularly in terms of “financialization of sustainability”. Social and economic actors play a pivotal role in constructing narratives that frame sustainability through market logic. Drawing on the *référentiel* approach (Jobert and Muller 1987), this paper explores sustainable finance discourses in Italy using a mixed-methods approach. It investigates the key actors disseminating information on the topic, the resources that position them as mediators, and the worldviews they embed in both discourse and policy.

**Keywords:** sustainable finance, financialization of sustainability, interpretive approach, *référentiel*.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2018, the regulation of sustainable finance has been part of the European Commission’s efforts to strengthen international agreements and sustainability programs in Europe. This development underlines the growing importance of the financial sector in promoting sustainability goals. Despite regulatory progress and the prominent position of the term in contemporary discourse, the concept of sustainable finance remains complex and ambiguous. Various interpretations by stakeholders and in the literature add to this ambiguity and confuse the relationship between sustainability and finance.

Political sociology has not yet explored this area in depth, leaving important topics that are crucial to understanding contemporary public action unexplored. These issues include the intertwined interaction between ideas and interests and the influence of non-political actors such as experts and knowledge communities in shaping hegemonic worldviews relevant to public action.

The intersection of sustainability, finance, and public policy provides fertile ground for further investigation within political sociology and sheds light on the intricacies of contemporary governance and decision-making processes.

The rise of discursive neo-institutionalism since the 1980s marked a crucial epistemological shift in political sociology and related fields. Previously, political analysis tended to neglect the role of discourse and ideas, focusing instead on material interests. In other words, discursive neo-institutionalism led to an argumentative turn that placed ideas at the center of political processes (Sabatier 1988, Hall 1993, Rein and Schön 1993). It proves difficult to separate the roles of ideas and interests in policy-making or discursive formulation. Hay (2011) argues that both interests and ideas are social constructs that guide action. A useful theoretical approach in this regard is the *référentiel* (Jobert and Muller 1987).

This approach foregrounds the actors who, through their discourses and ideas, intervene in the naturalization of “worldviews” in the context of certain public actions. *Référentiel* was first used in the 1970s by P. Muller and B. Jobert in their systemic analysis of the role of the state in French economic development. It emphasizes the importance of ideas in state regulatory processes and reconstructs how a system of values, norms, algorithms, and symbols can become hegemonic at a given historical moment. The term *référentiel* refers to the totality of cognitive and normative representations that concretize the “worldview” that guides public action at a given historical moment. This approach draws on Gramscian thinking and assumes that ideas are important for influencing public policies and their connection to power relations within a sector or subsystem (Muller and Surel 1998, Zittoun and Demongeot 2010). Ideas create meanings and change power relations and sites of power, thereby consolidating social reality. Following on from the latter consideration, interests can be considered in the context of what P. Muller calls the «production of interpretive frames» (2000: 193).

Using the analytical framework of *référentiel* and combining this theoretical framework with elements from the literature, this paper explores the following questions: Who are the mediators of sustainable finance in Italy? What resources do they mobilize? What representations constitute the worldview that these actors convey? Do these representations play a crucial role in the production and reproduction of contemporary hegemonic discourses?

The first section traces the processes that have led to the regulation of sustainable finance, its key definitions,

the diachronic development of the concept, and the historical steps that have accompanied the emergence and naturalization of the idea of private investment as necessary for solving social and environmental problems in the European context.

The second and third sections are based on research conducted from 2021 to 2023 using mixed methods and survey techniques such as social network analysis (Refay and Chanier 2002) and *référentiel* theory (Jobert and Muller 1987) and examine the cognitive and normative representations of sustainable finance in Italy. In particular, the analysis identifies the actors who mediate the idea of sustainable finance, the resources that empower them as mediators, and the worldview they convey.

## 2. TRACING AND DEFINING SUSTAINABLE FINANCE IN EUROPE

In European discourses, the importance of finance and private investment is seen as crucial for achieving the objectives of the Green Deal and mitigating climate change, supporting sustainable growth and socio-economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. This discursive process has deep roots going back to the years immediately after the 2008 financial crisis triggered by the collapse of the subprime mortgage bubble. De Felice (2017) noted that in those years, a movement of key financial actors emerged and spread globally, promoting new investment paradigms in which, for the first time, the term “social” was associated with “finance” (Pasi 2016).

In this political and economic context, for example, impact investing was presented as a solution to the problems caused by the financial markets and helped to change the image of financial actors from perpetrators of the crisis to promoters of the common good (Chiappello 2013). This vision has prompted the production of knowledge on the topic by private think tanks, foundations, and applied research funded by financial actors, thus legitimizing the idea that investments can serve social purposes and positively impact society (Chiappello and Knoll 2020).

More recent developments in the discursive construction of the idea that “private investment is essential for sustainability” can be traced to the European action for sustainability (EC 2016). Among its ten priorities, the European Commission is committed to creating a more sustainable financial sector that supports achieving sustainable development goals and encourages investors to embrace sustainability. This document not only endorsed the new development model with the slogan «Sustainability is a European brand» (*Ibidem*: 7) but also marked the

beginning of the notion that the private sector and the financial world should significantly drive the «collective journey» (UN 2015: 3) towards sustainability.

The important role of the financial system in the area of sustainability was further enshrined in the Action Plan on Financing Sustainable Growth (EC 2018), which introduced the European Taxonomy for Sustainable Activities. This document represents a significant milestone as it is the first time that the European Commission explicitly defines sustainable finance and considers it both as a tool to promote investment in sustainable projects and as a crucial mechanism to mobilize private capital to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By positioning sustainable finance within this dual role, the Commission emphasized its importance in aligning financial systems with broader environmental and social goals. The European Taxonomy provides a framework for classifying economic activities that can be considered environmentally sustainable, thus providing investors and financial actors with guidance for sustainable investments. In addition, the Action Plan was a critical point as it provided the impetus for the regulations that have been reshaping the sector since 2019.

Despite some regulatory progress, it remains difficult to provide a comprehensive and unambiguous definition of sustainable finance due to the diversity of contributions and the heterogeneity of stakeholders involved at the European and national levels. Like the concept of sustainable development (Jabareen 2008), sustainable finance has been described as an “empty concept” (Haigh 2012, Eccles 2013). This characterization implies that the concept can be molded to fit the actors’ ideas, interests, and fields of action involved in its formulation. In this regard, it has been noted that in the fields of green investment and socially responsible investment, several terms, e.g. Green Finance, are used synonymously with sustainable finance (Azhgaliyeva and Liddle 2020, Kuhn 2022), further extending its definitional ambiguity. In other instances, sustainable finance has been framed as an “essentially contested concept.” For example, Dimmelmeier (2021) acknowledges sustainable finance’s inherently contentious and complex nature but also highlights its ability to maintain clear underlying defining elements that prevent its indeterminate use.

One of the most widely accepted definitions of sustainable finance (Del Giudice 2019) describes it as a set of investment strategies aimed at achieving both a socially shared return and an economic return for the investor. This definition aligns with that provided by the European Sustainable Investment Forum - EUROSIF (2018), which promotes sustainable finance in Europe. EUROSIF classifies sustainable finance as an evolution

of Socially Responsible Investment, where value creation for both the investor and society is guided by a medium- to long-term investment strategy. In analyzing recent developments, Małgorzata *et al.* (2020) distinguish between two notions of sustainable finance:

a) A broad meaning refers to ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) factors integration to strengthen the financial stability of an economy.

b) A narrow meaning, which focuses on directing resources toward low-carbon investments.

Similarly, Migliorelli (2021) points out that the meaning of sustainable finance has evolved. Initially, the concept was linked to integrating ESG principles into investment decision-making. However, as political, and social systems have evolved, the concept has come to encompass providing resources needed to finance sustainability, sustainable development, and transition. Building on this reflection, Migliorelli argues that sustainable finance today should be referred to as “finance for sustainability”. It is possible to assume that sustainable finance today is discursively represented as a tool serving the community, capable of pursuing a general interest. This representation conveys, both overtly and latently, other meanings as well. Foremost among these is the indispensability of private investment in the path to sustainability, highlighting the inevitability and absolute necessity of market solutions for resolving contemporary problems. This trend is isomorphic to other fields of action, such as major urban transformations, economic development programs, and welfare system reforms.

Although the idea that private investment is essential for achieving Sustainable Development – central to the concept of “finance for sustainability” – has only recently gained traction in European regulations, using market instruments to address socio-environmental issues is not a new phenomenon in Western societal discourses. This vision can be traced back to the «neoliberal revolution» (Harvey 2005: 39), which began in the late 1970s and significantly reshaped modes of accumulation. During this period, there was a notable shift toward constructing regulatory frameworks that facilitate the growth of financial assets (Krippner 2005). In this context, exploring the emergence of the “worldview” (Muller 2000) associated with the proliferation of new and “innovative” market instruments reveals an apparent paradox: as finance penetrates new domains – such as environmental, social, and everyday life – it simultaneously retreats from more traditional sectors. Engelen (2008) explains how the economic and financial crisis has radically changed contemporary capitalism, identifiable in its most recent institutional form as neoliberalism, which seeks new conceptual tools to perpetuate its

original goals of capital accumulation and restoring economic elite power (Harvey 2005).

The penetration of finance and financial logic (Arjalès and Bansal 2018) into previously non-economic fields and the growing role of financial actors, institutions, and markets in national and international economies are distinctive features of the process defined as “financialization” (Epstein 2005). This form of capital accumulation is symmetrical to new processes of value production (Marazzi 2009: 32), and scholars like Kotz (2008) argue it is a consequence of the neoliberal model, which, once stabilized, creates an environment conducive to its realization. This includes mechanisms where the value of nature is increasingly expressed in monetary terms (Spash and Smith 2022) and the spread of governance models where private organizations and economic actors contribute to consolidating contemporary capitalism (Mazzucato and Collington 2023). Van der Zwan (2014) highlights how financialization has been applied to analyze the shift from industrial to financial capitalism, particularly in response to the 2008 economic crisis. The author identifies three primary strands of financialization research:

First, Regulation Theory views financialization as a structural transformation within capitalism, where firms increasingly abandon productive activities to maintain profitability in exchange for financial operations. This shift expands financial markets and actors (Krippner 2005, Epstein 2005, Boyer 2000, Chiapello 2015).

Second, Principal-Agency Theory focuses on the dominance of shareholder value as the central principle of corporate governance. In this model, firms prioritize shareholder interests, reshaping business strategies in favor of financial elites (Aglietta and Breton 2001).

The third strand, “popular financialization” (Aitken 2007), explores ordinary households’ growing reliance on financial instruments. Known as the “financialization of everyday life”, this approach examines how financial tools shape the economic behavior of middle- and lower-income groups, often resulting in increased household debt and the transfer of economic risks to individuals (Crouch 2009, Belotti and Caselli 2016, Dagnes 2018).

Over the past 15 years, financial logic has permeated various sectors, making finance not only an intruding force but also a strategic tool (Mader, Merter and van der Zwan 2020). Examples include its penetration into the food system (Clapp and Isakson 2018), the environment (Ouma *et al.* 2018), nature (Cuckston 2018, Benegiamo 2021, Pellizzoni 2023), and areas such as climate transition and environmental policy (Viganò 2023, Dal Maso 2023). Despite this, the literature has paid little attention to the pervasive influence of finance and its

underlying logic across all dimensions of sustainability, particularly in terms of the “financialization of sustainability”. This includes examining how the mechanisms of financial capitalism reproduction intertwine with discourses, which the analysis of the signification processes of sustainable finance can help explore.

Reviewing the literature on financialization processes, sustainable finance can be understood as an essential component of expanding financial markets into sustainability, and the regulation process can be seen as a “window of opportunity” (Kingdon 1984) for the penetration of complex financial logic into public financing mechanisms for sustainability and transition. This facilitates the diffusion of financial accumulation instruments through the discursive rhetoric of “necessity” concurrently, it broadens shareholder investment opportunities within European and international programmatic objectives, exemplified by the proliferation of financial devices and instruments combining environmental impacts with financial returns (e.g., Green Bonds and Social Impact Bonds).

Based on this perspective, sustainable finance can be viewed as one of the hegemonic discursive constructions, capable of reaching consensus through persuasion (Gramsci 1975), functional to reproducing the accumulation models of 21st-century financial capitalism. The role of social and economic actors is significant in this process, as they contribute to constructing narratives and discourses that disseminate information widely on the topic, conveying ideas and worldviews that “signify” the dimensions of sustainability in terms of market logic. The respective role of these actors in the Italian context is explored in the next section.

### 3. THE MEDIATORS OF SUSTAINABLE FINANCE IN ITALY: FEATURES AND TIES

As mentioned, a key feature of the analytical construct of the *référentiel*, beyond its ability to reconcile contradictory issues (Muller 2003), is its emphasis on the role of social and political actors in shaping the worldview that underpins public action. Indeed, the *référentiel* theory comprises what P. Muller and B. Jobert refer to as mediators: social, economic, and expert actors capable of cognitively decoding a complex socioeconomic reality and transforming it into a coherent and applicable political program (Jobert and Muller 1987, Moïni 2012). Mediators also structure the links and points of contact between global and sectoral dimensions, promoting the diffusion of a particular worldview across different scales and domains, making it hegemonic.



knowledge-building and advocacy activities. With the European regulation on sustainable finance, introduced in 2019, these actors have organized events and collaborations to increase awareness and networking on this topic in Italy becoming in other words, experts with a deep knowledge of sustainable finance.

Sociological reflections on public action and its relationship with knowledge have long debated the role of experts and the nexus between knowledge and policy. Experts typically are defined as possessing specific scientific or professional knowledge applicable to solving collective problems (Bulsey 2017). Depending on public regulation and decision-making objectives, experts may intervene at various points in the policy life cycle, addressing technical issues or problems involving conflicting stakes (Maasen and Weingart 2005). Caselli (2020) describes eight types of expert knowledge to systematize and analyze the multiple hypotheses of knowledge bearers, from the “pure scientist” to the “advocate for a cause” (Pielke 2007). This continuum helps us understand the deep relation between pure science and advocacy activities. The inclusion of technical knowledge in decision-making arenas has been framed as a central element of neoliberalisation processes (Peck and Tickell 2002), and the neutrality of expert solutions has been questioned, often linked to processes of depoliticization of public action (Flinders and Buller 2006).

The concept of the knowledge broker, as introduced in recent literature (Meyer 2010), describes expert actors who operate between the public sphere and the market, mobilizing, reformulating, structuring, and assembling expertise and policy imperatives among actors from different spheres.

The “Forum per la Finanza Sostenibile” and the “ASVIS Gruppo di lavoro trasversale Finanza per lo sviluppo sostenibile” primarily operate within the sphere of public discourse. While they share characteristics with think tanks, private research centers, and nonprofits in producing and disseminating knowledge, they also exhibit a growing trend toward politicization, akin to what Weaver (1989) describes as advocacy tanks. These organizations use cognitive productions, such as position papers, reports, and institutional engagement initiatives directed at both public debate and policy specialists. They act as mediators of the worldview related to sustainable finance, using specialized knowledge and professional expertise oriented toward a cause. Their effectiveness lies in their ability to build knowledge useful for networking and creating links between different spheres of action, concentrating on the interests and ideas of actors and organizations with differentiated specialized knowledge and skills. Their mission is

manifested through various activities, including events, research endeavors, position papers, and networking with actors possessing exclusive knowledge (Collins and Evans 2002). These characteristics enable these actors to produce and disseminate “worldviews” that guide public discourses on sustainable finance. Additionally, they facilitate the penetration of policy choices and solutions, shaping the operationalization of conveyed representations. Their pivotal role positions them as a potential key player in shaping public discourses and policy choices regarding sustainable finance in Italy. In particular, for their ability to contribute significantly to the discursive construction of the concept and its representations within the national context of sustainable finance, which will be analyzed in the next section.

#### 4. THE IDEA OF SUSTAINABLE FINANCE IN ITALY

Looking at *référentiel* from an analytical perspective, we can deconstruct the interpretive frameworks conveyed by the discourses and artifacts produced by mediators into four elements: values, norms, algorithms, and images (Muller 2000). Values, situated at a high level of abstraction, represent theories for action that delineate what is desirable in a specific social context. On the other hand, norms are guiding principles that inform social and political action by embodying the theories they represent. Algorithms refer to mechanisms of decision-making based on conditional causality, often expressed as “if...then” statements. Finally, images enable the dissemination of these elements by using symbolic, synthesizing information quickly (Zittoun and Demonjeot 2010).

Several artifacts published by the “Forum per la Finanza Sostenibile” and the “ASVIS Gruppo di lavoro trasversale Finanza per lo sviluppo sostenibile” between 2020 and 2023 are noteworthy in this context. These include two position papers *La Finanza per Lo Sviluppo Sostenibile: Un tema strategico per l'Agenda 2030* and *La Finanza per Lo Sviluppo Sostenibile* published by “ASVIS Gruppo di lavoro trasversale Finanza per lo sviluppo sostenibile” in 2020 and 2023, the letter to the Council of Ministers shared by the Sustainable Finance Forum in October 2020 and the position paper *La finanza sostenibile oltre i pregiudizi* published in November 2023.

To analyze these artifacts, and the content of interviews with referents of the organizations analyzed, the coding technique (Strauss and Corbin 1990) was applied within the framework of *référentiel* (Jobert and Muller 1987). This approach, supported by NVIVO analysis software, facilitated the systematization and interpreta-

tion of coded text. From the analysis, it becomes evident that certain fundamental values and norms characterize the discourses on sustainable finance conveyed by the analysis actors in Italy. Regarding values, a consistent theme across all analyzed documents is the notion of the centrality of the market and financial instruments for solving essential problems for economic growth. This perspective reflects a belief in the market and financial sector's capacity to address specific socio-environmental challenges, such as climate change, post-pandemic recovery, and gender inequality. For instance, the 2023 position paper of the "ASVIS Gruppo di lavoro trasversale Finanza per lo sviluppo sostenibile" emphasizes this viewpoint, stating: «Sustainable development finance has recently become an increasingly prominent field of action for achieving gender equality. The reasons for this relevance lie in the empirical evidence that progress in gender equality would have significant effects on overall economic growth and well-being»<sup>1</sup> (ASVIS WG 2023: 40).

Another significant value observed in the discourse on sustainable finance is the "centrality attributed to performativity and competitiveness", especially concerning environmental, social, and governance (ESG) investments. These investments are not only portrayed as capable of generating positive social and environmental impacts but also positioned as competitive market options comparable to traditional investments in terms of cost and performance. This perspective is highlighted in the 2023 position paper published by the "Forum per la Finanza Sostenibile", which aims to "dispel false myths" about sustainable finance. In this document, the following evidence supports this notion:

*We refute the idea that sustainability harms investment profitability by highlighting the economic benefits of sustainable finance. Using case studies and best practices, especially from Italy, we show how adopting sustainable practices generates performance and reduces risk. We show that considering sustainability in investments correlates positively with risks and returns, leading to reduced volatility and improved long-term financial performance (FSF 2023: 4).*

In addition to these overarching values, another specific value pertains to the "centrality of procedural and technical aspects", which encompasses aspects such as measurement, data availability, and transparency. This highlights the importance attributed to technical procedures in determining the quality and accessibility of resources provided by sustainable finance for recovery and transition efforts. This emphasis on technical

aspects is evident in the paper produced by the "ASVIS Gruppo di lavoro trasversale Finanza per lo sviluppo sostenibile" (2023). For instance: «There is also a need to strengthen SRI market transparency and counter greenwashing and improve the quality of data collection on financial products that authentically finance sustainable and responsible investments» (ASVIS WG 2023: 45).

Concerning the norms, a distinction arises between desirable actions for public and institutional actors on one hand, and for actors within the private and financial systems on the other. In the case of public and institutional actors, there is a consistent call for the creation of a regulatory and policy framework capable of fostering the development of the market and financial actors dealing with sustainable products, which is evident across all the analyzed documents. For instance: «Strengthening the set of regulatory tools is needed to clarify and unambiguously clarify investors' orientation toward genuinely sustainability-impact projects and ensure that the Taxonomy Regulation truly selects investment projects based on their impact on environmental and social goals» (ASVIS WG 2023: 45).

This assumption runs hand in hand with two other norms, the first of which is embodied in the exhortation to "adopt sustainable finance instruments (e.g., Taxonomy) for economic recovery", as stated in the position paper of the "ASVIS Gruppo di lavoro trasversale Finanza per lo sviluppo sostenibile" (2020):

*the economic recovery phase must be based on medium- to long-term public and private investment plans aimed at supporting the real economy and, in particular economic sectors that contribute to the transition to more equitable, inclusive, and environmentally friendly growth models. In this context, it is important that the selection of investable projects also considers their impact in terms of their contribution to the achievement of the SDGs (Ibidem: 33).*

The second norm entails encouraging increased public and private investment towards technological progress, deemed essential for transitioning and combating climate change:

*A key element is proper and careful management of the transition process, including through a significant increase in resources for the so-called "Just Transition." The balance between a rapid achievement of climate-neutrality goals, adequate advancement of technology for the adoption of techniques that facilitate the ecological and energy transition (particularly about energy-producing sectors and the impact of energy-consuming sectors), and the maintenance of adequate levels of competitiveness of the system-country can only be achieved through the intense, calibrated and adequate support of resources and definite timeframes*

<sup>1</sup> All translations of texts from Italian to English are by the author.

*for the rapid and effective realization of transition goals* (ASVIS WG 2023: 45).

Further regulations concerning institutional and public actors pertain to the desired “use of public-private partnerships (PPPs) for climate action and environmental requalification”. The document emphasizes not only the desirability of utilizing financing mechanisms but also outlines how these should be implemented with a long-term perspective, alongside a concessional tax regime. This reaffirms the emphasis placed on private actors and public-private partnerships for rejuvenating the real economy, reinforcing the norm that the public actor should promote financial instruments to support companies engaged in sustainability and their transition. The expansion of instruments and resources available to these actors not only outlines the direction but also operates symbolically by positioning businesses as central beneficiaries of resources for change. «One solution may be a system of incentives commensurate with companies’ achievement of decarbonization targets, tradable in a market with the assistance of a government guarantee» (*Ibidem*: 45).

The expansion of providing direct financial services and instruments to businesses represents a norm not solely aimed at the institutional public actor; the financial and banking sector is also mentioned several times in the documents for its engagement:

*Encourage the provision of credit lines tied to sustainability targets (sustainability-linked): targets of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals can serve as technical benchmarks for determining interest rates on loans. The use of these credit instruments could incentivize companies and SMEs to increase the quantity and quality of non-financial reporting, a key element in the development of sustainable finance* (FSF 2020: 2).

At the same time, among the actions to be taken by the financial sector is the norm of expanding the demand/supply of sustainability-oriented credit and financial bond products, e.g., green bonds: «Concerning developments in green bonds and efficientification of real estate, one can imagine the issuance of green bonds related to the regeneration of land and public real estate» (ASVIS WG 2020: 34).

Further elements that emerged from the analysis are related to the images and algorithms that contribute to reconstructing the worldview underlying discussions on sustainable finance in Italy. The images that emerged reflect a vision of sustainable finance and financial instruments capable of driving forward acceleration, aligned with a just transition and a better future,

often associated with progress and economic growth. In summary, among the various images linked to sustainable finance, the ones of accelerator, engine, gear, lever, or key stand out. Below are some of the emblematic discursive evidences that immediately recall the centrality attributed to the concept of sustainable finance: «Finance is a crucial cog in the operation of this plan, and the EU’s goal is to ensure that capital flows are directed toward projects, organizations, and sectors that are in line with the EU’s environmental ambitions» (Ivi: 15). «Sustainable finance is one of the drivers of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, which can implement measures that generate lasting, green, and inclusive growth. It is also an indispensable lever for addressing the ecological and economic challenges of our time» (ASVIS WG 2023: 35).

By examining the highlighted values, norms, and images, two types of algorithms can be reconstructed to understand the cognitive framework of sustainable finance, its expansion in the national context, and the sectoral (financial and corporate) openness to sustainability issues. The first “regulatory algorithm” is primarily aimed at the public and institutional actors to facilitate and accelerate the creation of the regulatory framework of sustainable finance. This can be summarized as follows: If certain environmental and social problems (obstacles to social and economic welfare) are to be solved with greater speed and efficiency, the tools made available in the European regulatory framework of sustainable finance must be applied.

This algorithm frames the expansion of sustainable finance in the national context as the operational solution to overcome socio-environmental problems and critical issues hindering the country’s economic and productive well-being. Simultaneously, it illustrates how such an algorithm, on the discursive level, depoliticizes (Flinders and Buller 2006) the resolution of contemporary socio-environmental problems by shifting the responsibility for their timing and quality resolution to the private and financial sectors, legitimizing its enlargement.

The second algorithm codified as “sectoral”, branches into two specific mantras. The first pertains to the financial sector more broadly and can be summarized as follows: “If the financial sector wants to supply a diverse range of innovative offerings in the free market, it must consider sustainability”. The second mantra is directed at companies: If companies would gain competitive advantage in the long term, they must internalize ESG aspects.

In summary, these two highlighted algorithms illustrate how sustainable finance is conceptualized at the sectoral level as a functional tool to support competitiveness and innovation in the free market, as well as to pro-

vide corporate competitive advantage in the long term. Specifically, they demonstrate how the regulatory and sectoral algorithms serve different operational purposes, such as shaping public and political debate with sustainable finance's idea as an operational solution for socio-economic problems and promoting its expansion in the private and financial sectors by integrating sustainability into corporate strategies and financial offerings (also in light of the temporary voluntariness associated with mandatory corporate sustainability reporting)

### 5. A HEGEMONIC IDEA

The analysis shows how the mediators under review contribute to promoting a concept of sustainable finance consistent with the notion of finance for sustainability. This notion implies a core belief in sustainable finance as a tool for the "collective good", capable of pursuing general interests. However, it also conveys and implies other meanings, e.g. "necessity of private investment for sustainability" ideas. This helps normalize the notion that market solutions are essential to address contemporary challenges and foster progress, well-being, and economic growth. Additionally, the analysis reveals how the values inherent in sustainable finance discourses reflect some fundamental principles of contemporary neoliberal society and how the norms they promote can perpetuate its existence.

Overall, examining normative and cognitive representations in the analyzed discourses helps outline the worldview promoted by sustainable finance mediators at the national level and reveals the hegemonic connotations underlying the idea of finance for sustainability. Specifically, the values and norms highlighted are reinforced by discursive mechanisms of conditional causality based on "if ... then" algorithms. These mechanisms legitimize sustainable finance as a viable operational solution for addressing socio-environmental problems, fostering economic development, and enhancing corporate competitiveness and long-term investment profitability. They also underline a project to expand shareholders' and investors' investment possibilities in alignment with European and international sustainability goals, potentially leading to a process of financialization.

The analyzed discourses contribute to the semiotic legitimization of expanding financial markets to "new" fields through the rhetoric of "necessity". In these discourses, sustainability carries both a symbolic connotation of an essential and a substantive connotation of a means to diversify supply within the free market. This instrumental interpretation of sustainability fosters the

expansion of profit-oriented financial logic, blurring the distinction between means and ends through discourse and contributing to the hegemonic dissemination of discourses across various spheres of action.

The strategic role of analyzed actors in the national sustainable finance landscape is crucial. They can build knowledge useful for networking and linking different spheres of action, concentrating the interests and ideas of actors and organizations with specialized expertise. Moreover, recognition within the political-institutional sphere empowers them to disseminate ideas that shape public debate and influence political decisions, directing discussions toward problems and solutions aligned with an instrumental vision of sustainability.

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## Urban Sustainability and the Local Politics of Digital Twins: the Cases of Bologna and Milan

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**Abstract.** To address the complexity of sustainable urban development, policymakers are making increasing use of digital technology tools, now including AI and urban digital twins (UDTs). The aims of the article are to shed light on the political implications of UDTs uses in urban policy and governance aimed at sustainability and to understand from a perspective of political sociology factors influencing processes of UDTs design and implementation. Research questions regard the local politics of UDTs for sustainability analyzed through the lenses of policy frames, contexts, regulation and data governance and value. Responses are based on evidence from the comparative analysis of two case studies: Bologna and Milan, carried out through desk and field research (analysis of documents and interviews). Local agencies lead to different approaches and, potentially, outcomes, made possible by the diversity and plasticity of UDT models, systems and purposes, as well as by the elasticity and adaptability to different spatial contexts of the policy paradigm of urban sustainability. Two patterns of the local politics of UDTs emerge in Bologna and Milan, in which above all the roles of public actors and businesses are different. Logics of action, practices and forms of coordination are transferred from the broader systems of urban governance and political economy to the more circumscribed systems of action of UDTs.

**Keywords:** urban sustainability, digital twins, urban policies, urban governance.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The policy frame and goals of sustainable development and especially SDG 11 place in the foreground aims and actions to be carried out in cities, since urbanisation processes have made them places where the challenges of social, economic and environmental sustainability will be won, or lost. Agendas for urban sustainable development include a wide range of programs and measures, implemented locally in several fields of policy such as economic development, planning, mobility, housing and social policy, natural resources, energy and waste management.

To address the complexity of sustainable urban development, policymakers are making increasing use of digital technology tools, as observed over the past two decades in the context of smart cities. The “sustainable smart city” approach has recently been integrated with artificial intelligence (AI) systems in its main domains: mobility, education, healthcare, environ-

ment, governance, living and infrastructure, economy and urban security. These innovations include tools to support decision-making, such as urban digital twins (UDTs). Since the development of UDTs is just at an early stage, it is too early to base a critical analysis of how they impact on local political and administrative decision-making and sustainable development on empirical evidence. So, the aims of this article are to shed light on some of the political implications of UDTs' uses in urban policy and governance and to understand, from a perspective of political sociology, which factors so far have influenced the processes of UDTs design and implementation.

The resulting research questions regard the local politics of UDTs for urban sustainability and in particular the frames, contexts, regulation and data governance of UDTs projects. Responses are based on evidence from the comparative analysis of two case studies in Italy: Bologna and Milan, carried out through desk and field research.

The first section of the article reviews the current multidisciplinary literature on UDTs, providing a definition and describing their main characteristics, fields of use and modalities in supporting decision-making. The second section provides a summary of the scientific debate on the political implications of UDTs. Next, the theoretical approach of this paper, the research questions, methodology and field of analysis are presented. Section four provides a description of the two case studies, highlighting their main similarities and differences. Section five shows the main comparative results regarding the four issues analysed and outlines the characteristics of the two implementation models, which are discussed in the final section.

## 2. WHAT URBAN DIGITAL TWINS FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT ARE

The concept of digital twin (DT), first coined about 20 years ago in the industry sector, means a digital replica of a physical object, person, device, system, or place, with its spatial, social, or economic processes (Batty 2018; Deren *et al.* 2021; Charitonidou 2022). A DT makes it possible to observe changes, detect errors, make changes and corrections remotely, reduce risks in harsh environments (Allam and Jones 2021) and simulate the effects of human decisions regarding the original twin. On the one hand, DT technology has a significant impact also on the sustainability of industrial production, particularly in terms of reducing waste, energy consumption and environmental impact (World Eco-

nomics Forum 2022). On the other hand, DTs are a cutting-edge technology for sustainability policies, as demonstrated by the European Commission's flagship project "Destination Earth", a highly accurate digital Earth model that can be used to simulate policies and actions to mitigate climate change. The European Commission Von del Leyen I (2019-2024) has set the course for the "Twin Transition", a term that highlights the opportunity to integrate the green and digital transitions to avoid the traps of parallel development and to promote synergies between policies and actions (Muench *et al.* 2022). To this end, DT technology provides to date the most advanced model for analysing interactions between the physical and virtual worlds in major natural and social phenomena (Nativi *et al.* 2021).

DTs focused on urban management (UDTs) started to be developed around 2018, also built on the knowledge gained with the development of smart cities. There are several types of UDTs, since their characteristics depend on their use and they are based on a lot of different data. Such "Big Data" can be provided by existing datasets, IoT and sensors, including smartphones, while UDTs feedback processes data (Deng *et al.* 2021) applying machine learning techniques for making predictions (Papyshev and Yarime 2021).

UDTs are not the only digital tool used in urbanism (Ferré-Bigorra *et al.* 2022). They are sometimes compared to cases and concepts such as: (i) urban (or city) brain, also integrating multi-source heterogeneous data through multi-perspective learning methods to do analysis, prediction, and intelligent intervention (Cugurullo 2021; Deng *et al.* 2021); (ii) the cognitive city, that is the interplay of humans and technology in smart city initiatives, augmenting cities' possibilities to learn and adapt to changes (Hämäläinen 2021); (iii) technologies of smart cities, which the debates around UDTs are closely related to (Charitonidou 2022).

For that very reason, even though they are still in an experimental research-action phase, UDTs make a paradigm shift in urban modelling practices and policies potentially possible. This could lead to governance by technology that, selecting and ordering information, has the power to emphasize certain aspects of the socio-technical assemblage in which it operates (Nochta *et al.* 2019).

There are several fields of use of UDTs for sustainable urban development (Deng *et al.* 2021; Charitonidou 2022; Allam and Jones 2021; Hämäläinen 2021; Yarime 2021; Alva *et al.* 2022; Suffia 2022), on wider (urban; metropolitan; regional) or narrower (district; neighbour; block) scales. Fields may include utilities, infrastructures, logistics (e.g. freight, reducing the undesirable effects of last mile deliveries, Marcucci *et al.* 2020), ener-

gy consumption, telecommunications, water, food and waste, disaster and security resilience, urban planning (e.g. land use, urban development initiatives, building construction), mobility and transportation (e.g. traffic congestion and improved air quality, Nochta *et al.* 2019).

UDTs uses range from decision-making autonomy, normally regarding only short-term management of operational and maintenance systems to decision support in human strategic-level decision-making, even in the form of evaluations for the long-term future.

When used for decision support, which does not (yet) entail technology as an active stakeholder making decisions and shaping urban governance (Cugurullo *et al.* 2024), UDTs can provide policymakers – political authorities, private stakeholders, or citizens involved in practices of participatory democracy or civic engagement (Alva *et al.* 2022; Caprari *et al.* 2022) – with insights for capacity building and data-driven, evidence-based decision making (CABB 2019). This normally implies the reframing of high-level policy goals into practical policy and management problems. A model can suggest solution options (Nochta *et al.* 2021) by simulating alternative choices in a virtual environment before final implementation, so to get reliable predictions of the consequences (Marcucci *et al.* 2020) for the short and long-term future (Callcut *et al.* 2021). Then, the verified measures can be applied to the real world (Hämäläinen 2021; Yang and Kim 2021). This implies visualising complex cause-effect relations, e.g., to what extent policy design principles from theory applied to the urban case in question are met by the proposed plan or project, as well as predicting and optimising urban agents' behaviour before and after a policy is implemented (Marcucci 2020).

UDTs can potentially integrate city planning and management in a single tool (Ferré-Bigorra *et al.* 2022), within one specific sector or implement a city-wide model that incorporates a multitude of systems. This may help to counteract the negative effects of fragmentation and silo-isation of urban policy (Nochta *et al.* 2019), for example identifying inconsistencies between sectorial actions and supporting interdisciplinary policy design (Nochta *et al.* 2021).

### 3. POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF URBAN DIGITAL TWINS: THE SCIENTIFIC DEBATE ON POTENTIALITIES, CONSTRAINTS AND RISKS

UDTs have been studied from different perspectives: technical (engineering-oriented), socio-technical (merging social and economic processes with the built envi-

ronment and linking functional and physical processes to socio-economic representations: Batty 2018; Nochta *et al.* 2019); law and philosophy of law (issues of security, democracy and sovereignty and compliance with standards: Suffia 2022); philosophical (trying to demonstrate the ontological flexibility of plural approaches and practices of UDTs, rooted in different philosophical paradigms: Al-Sehrawy *et al.* 2023). However, empirical studies on the effects of UDTs on policymaking and urban governance and on factors on which they may depend have so far been limited, primarily because the actual use of UDTs is still in its infancy. To date, scholars have addressed both potentials for improvement of policymaking and the possible problems of UDTs, making the best of the analysis and comparison of some cases. The most cited ones are those of Herrenberg, Helsinki, Zürich and Singapore (for example: Ye *et al.* 2023).

Within these studies, we identified two main policy implications of UDTs.

First, improvement of policymaking and urban management occurs when policymakers can harness the predictive potential of UDTs, in particular the ability to forecast behaviour and reactions to policy measures implementations, providing reliable descriptions of likely scenarios (Marcucci *et al.* 2020). This allows to make more informed and faster decisions and to enable policy impact assessment, so that UDTs act as a sort of strategic planning sandboxes (Ferré-Bigorra *et al.* 2022). Using UDTs smart city practitioners can bridge multi-stakeholder urban design teams (quadruple-helix; academia-public-private-civil society) including the participation of citizens, committees, etc. This participation in the use and development of UDTs models, including the choices of data (Nochta *et al.* 2019) and digital platforms may improve the quality of public debate, as well as transparency and trust among actors. UDTs can also overcome the contracting-out of knowledge needed for policymaking from public administrations to consultants (Nochta *et al.* 2019), reducing the risk of vendor lock-in and the dominance of multinational corporations in smart city development (Hämäläinen 2021).

Second, UDT may be affected by problems and implementation gaps, which make their potential benefits unclear. These problems can be technological and logical, as well as organisational and political, especially when linking functional and physical processes to socio-economic representations (Batty 2018). For example, incorporation in the technical design of models of applied knowledge about cities and human agents produced by sociopolitical actors, as well as of social interactions, norms, regulations, culture, politics, democracy, human rights, ethics, and non-material qualities is needed to develop and use

UDTs' predictive capabilities (Nochta *et al.* 2021; Charitonidou 2022). Limits can be imposed on citizens' participation in UDTs design and use, which is highly likely to follow the top-down method of the past (Yang and Kim 2021). For all these reasons, final users should be included in UDT initiatives to gain "public acceptance" (Weil *et al.* 2023) especially in an EU in which citizens' rights to privacy are protected by the GDPR.

Several contributions have also focused on three kinds of factors that can influence how UDTs are adopted and deployed.

First, organisational cultures and issues of governance, as they unfold locally in specific cities. These aspects regard city processes, structures, and practices, the patterns of relationships between actors, which may hinder or favour multi-level collaboration and cross-sectoral integration among departments as well as local government employees' attitudes and skills (Weil *et al.* 2023: 10).

Second, the design, legitimization, and implementation of UDTs and their incorporation into local governance processes may depend on several factors. They include existing formal rules, informal regulations, and institutional logics of appropriateness (Nochta *et al.* 2019; Hämäläinen 2021) as well as the historical use and experience of urban models to support decision-making and the institutionalised roles of public, private, and third sector stakeholders (Nochta *et al.* 2019).

Third, ethical concerns such as: the risk of adopting a paradigm of "the city as a computer" instead of a living organism (Suffia 2022); the legal question of who is accountable if the UDT makes a wrong decision (Ferré-Bigorra *et al.* 2022); problems of data property and sovereignty, including threats to the privacy of individuals (Papsyshev and Yarime 2021; Alva *et al.* 2022; Barresi 2023).

#### 4. THE LOCAL POLITICS OF URBAN DIGITAL TWINS FOR SUSTAINABILITY: OUR RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHOD

Each of these factors, taken individually, may indeed prove important. However, our aim is to understand from a political sociology perspective how these and other factors can shape local politics of UDTs for urban sustainability by combining them into a comprehensive model. This model focuses on several aspects and factors emerging from the current literature and rearranges them into four analytical dimensions (frames, context, regulation, and data governance) that inform empirical analysis. Each dimension, which is based on an underlying theoretical perspective, makes it possible to provide preliminary answers to research questions:

- a) *Frames*. From a perspective based on policy frames, framing processes (Rein and Schön 1994), and the role of ideas and discourses in political change in institutional contexts (Schmidt 2010), we wanted to know what cognitive and normative frames legitimise the attempts to establish algorithmic governance of cities using UDTs in policy and administrative processes and how these frames are affected by concrete social relations.
- b) *Contexts*. From a perspective based on the idea that (local) "history matters" in the explanatory role of territorial and institutional contexts – the political, economic and cultural environments of cities, including path dependency on previous actions (March and Olsen 1989; Hall and Taylor 1996; Pierson 2000; Greener 2005) – we wanted to know how the local use of AI systems for sustainability may depend on factors, such as: the political and territorial environments, that is the patterns (actors and relations) of urban governance; the formal rules, informal regulations and institutional logics of appropriateness, including local government administrative organisation and culture and previous initiatives for the digitisation of urban policies.
- c) *Regulation*. Taking the political and scientific debates on AI sustainability ongoing at the national, international, and supranational (EU) level and focusing on regulation, legal frameworks, rights and standards (Kuziemski and Misuraca 2020; Suffia 2022) into account, we want to know if there is room for "AI localism" (Verhulst and Sloane 2020) in the regulative context of the EU (AI Act 2023; EU GDPR 2016; EU Data Act 2023). How do actors address at local scale trade-offs between innovation and risks, i.e. pursuing AI sustainability and at the same time governing with AI?
- d) *Data governance and value*. In power relations between public actors and the private and knowledge sectors data and the public interest are also at stake. From this perspective, we wanted to understand the role of these actors in pursuing a "public-centred data governance": what instruments do local administrations use to ensure public use of data? How do they deal with "the promise of using data as a resource to create value for citizens" (König 2021)? How do they balance this promise with the interests of the private companies involved as data providers and users?

We tried to answer through the comparative analysis of two UDT development projects in Italy, the DTs of Milan – *Ecosistema Digitale Urbano* – and Bologna,

*Via della Conoscenza* project (section 4). The comparison was based on an intensive binary research strategy (Morlino 2005, Lanzalaco Prontera 2012) in which the two cases were analysed in depth. The choice of the two independent cases (Fideli 1998) was motivated by the relevance of the projects with regard to the state of development, the scale of application (urban), the use cases<sup>1</sup> related to urban sustainability, and the kind of actors promoting them. The comparative analysis was conducted in two empirical phases, desk and field. The first phase was inspired by the “all is data” dictum (Glaser 2001) of the Grounded Theory approach. Heterogeneous materials on the UDT projects (press articles, institutional releases, audio-video recordings of public events, policy documents) were collected and analysed to reconstruct UDTs features (chronology; actors involved; data sources; types of technologies developed/acquired; presence of AI algorithms; use cases; policy areas; public funding sources), to trace the contexts in which the projects are embedded and to reconstruct the communicative discourse (Schmidt 2008) by which UDTs are legitimised and communicated to the general public and/or specialised circles.

In the second phase, between March and May 2024, interviews were conducted with the aim of analysing “in depth” the UDTs’ policy frames, path-dependencies or discontinuities, regulatory issues, and power relations between public and private actors; pursuit of public interest. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with privileged witnesses involved in the two projects<sup>2</sup> operationalising variables concerning the four dimensions of analysis (section 3). The texts were then analysed according to a process inspired by the “open coding” of Grounded Theory to label the most significant extracts of the interviews and open up directions of meaning (Strati 1997, Natalini 2023).

<sup>1</sup> The expression ‘use case’ comes from computer engineering and indicates a usage scenario for a software (situations in which it may be useful) and a potential scenario in which a software receives an external request. It thus describes the interactions between users and systems. In a broad sense, ‘use cases’ are considered here as specific and defined areas of experimentation of a UDT for public policy purposes.

<sup>2</sup> Milan: 1. Board per l’Innovazione Tecnologica e Trasformazione Digitale, 2. Sistema Informativo Territoriale – Municipality of Milan, 3. Technology Officer – Municipality of Milan, 3. Technology Officer - ESRI Italia. Bologna: 1. Executive Councillor Local Government, 2. Direzione Generale Settore Innovazione Digitale e Dati – Municipality of Bologna, 3. Dipartimento cultura, sport e promozione della città, Unità intermedia cabina di regia progetto Gemello digitale – Municipality of Bologna; 4. Cineca, project coordinator; 5. FBK, project coordinator; 6. Università di Bologna, project coordinator; 7. Università di Bologna, Professor and Research Fellow.

## 5. THE CASE STUDIES OF BOLOGNA E MILAN: DESCRIPTION

UDT projects are rapidly developing globally, in Europe and Italy. In August 2023, the *Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technology* of the European Commission surveyed 135 UDT projects in the European Union. This study classified UDTs using the categories of the DUET Digital Twin Maturity Model<sup>3</sup>: Awareness of Twins (political commitment verified, but no implementation); Experimental Twins (predictive scenarios based on time series); Predictive Twins (predictive scenarios based on real-time data); Intelligent Twins (AI-based self-learning capability). Most projects (49%) were classified in the Awareness category, 42% as Experimental, and none as Intelligent (DG Connect 2023). These data therefore show the nascent state of the phenomenon in Europe and the lack of advanced implementation processes.

The survey identified 12 initiatives in Italy, from which we selected the cases of Milan and Bologna. Both cases concern two Italian metropolitan cities and concern the application of DT technology to the entire urban area. The two projects are in the early stages of development, so no actual effects on policymaking and impacts on urban sustainable development can yet be observed. However, the design process, the initial stages of implementation, and the potential implications for urban sustainability can already be observed. In the following sub-sections, two summary descriptions of the two cases are provided, concerning key facts, such as: chronology, public funding lines, relation to other local policies, actors involved, types of data and technologies, and use cases (table 1). Moreover, subsection 5.3 briefly highlights the implications of UDTs for urban sustainability and the commonality between the urban policy agendas of Milan and Bologna on this issue.

### 5.1. Milano

The Milan UDT project was started by the local administration in 2022. The implementation phase was entirely financed (about EUR 3 million) with funds of the EU from the PON metro 2014-2020 related to the project: *Digital services to foster the economic and social development of the municipalities of the Milan Metropolitan City*.

The UDT is part of a wider local policy started by the municipal administration in 2020 (DCC No. 620, June 2020) and aimed at developing a “Digital Urban

<sup>3</sup> DUET Digital Twin Maturity Model: <https://www.digitalurbantwins.com/digitaltwinmaturitymodel>

**Table 1.** UDT projects in Milan and Bologna: key facts.

<i>UDT</i>	<i>Milan</i>	<i>Bologna</i>
Chronology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Started in 2022 (but earlier in the Smart City policy and reporting system)</li> <li>Funded with PON metro 2014-2020 (EUR 4 million)</li> <li>2023 March-April: testing of mobile mapping technology (Street Hive) by Cyclomedia</li> <li>2023: presented at Milan Digital Week on 6 October, event “The Digital Twin of the City - City Digital Twin,” City of Milan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Started in 2020 with a proposal for NRRP</li> <li>2021: municipality-University agreement</li> <li>2022: EUR 7 million PON Metro 2014-2020 grant</li> <li>2022: agreement on UDT development between University of Bologna, City Council, and CINECA</li> <li>2023: public presentation with partners</li> <li>2026: planned full operation</li> </ul>
Broader Municipality's programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Digital Urban Ecosystem' (DUE) - DCC No. 620, June 2020</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Flagship Project “Via della Conoscenza”</li> </ul>
Main actors involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Municipality of Milan</li> <li>ESRI Italy - platform provider</li> <li>Cyclomedia - Area Mapping</li> <li>Milano Smart City Alliance's partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Municipality of Bologna</li> <li>Alma Mater University</li> <li>Bruno Kessler Foundation</li> <li>CINECA</li> <li>Fondazione Innovazione Urbana</li> </ul>
Use Cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>land-use authorization processes</li> <li>compliance with land-use regulations</li> <li>elimination of architectural barriers</li> <li>identification of ramps and accessible paths</li> <li>energy containment</li> <li>maintenance decision-making</li> <li>irrigation control</li> <li>roof cooling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>mobility (new infrastructures: Tram, Passante, Bicipolitana)</li> <li>energy (response of the city's building stock, simulating the impact of including new projects in urban plans)</li> <li>climate change (case study on hydrogeological instability)</li> </ul>

*Source:* Authors' elaboration.

Ecosystem” (DUE), defined as: «the set of public and private digital platforms that produce data related to the city's territory, both in relation to citizens' actions and environmental conditions» (p. 26). The DUE policy is managed by the Municipality's Board for Technological Innovation and Digital Transformation, which was established in March 2022 to replace the former Department for Digital Transformation. The Board results from an organisational innovation undertaken by the local administration, acts across different administrative departments, and is directly related to the centre-left mayor's (G. Sala) policy agenda<sup>4</sup>.

The system of actors of DUE policy has a strong public-private connotation and involves, through a

memorandum of understanding, the Milano Smart City Alliance (MSCA)<sup>5</sup> – an initiative of the Assolombarda Foundation (territorial association of industrial firms). The MSCA involves major private players from the entrepreneurial system of Milan<sup>6</sup> in “smart city2 projects, providing services according to the 4 P model (public-private people partnership). These projects regard a range of urban policy areas that reflect the companies' fields of activity. The collaboration between MSCA and the City of Milan is based on the sharing on the one hand of material resources (data and projects), and on the other hand of cognitive and normative resources (the data-driven city governance paradigm) (section 7.1).

<sup>4</sup> Board Innovazione Tecnologica E Trasformazione Digitale: <https://www.comune.milano.it/board-ited>; the Board consists of: 2 members from the municipal administration, 2 academics and 9 members of the business milieu.

<sup>5</sup> For further information: <https://milanosmartcity.it>

<sup>6</sup> Partners of MSCA: A2A Smart City, Accenture, ATM, Cisco, Coima, Dassault Systèmes, Enel X, Fastweb, IBM, Siemens, Signify, TIM e Assolombarda.

Data providers of DUE are the municipality and other public bodies that carry out activities on the municipal territory, companies, citizens and city users, freelancers, Civic Hackers – citizens involved in participatory practices and third sector associations (Ibidem: 26-27). On the one hand, the DUE is expected to act as a “data provider” to the UDT; on the other hand, the UDT will be the tool to manage, process, and thus “capitalise” data for the purposes of the public administration, citizens and businesses. Therefore, the development of a UDT needs the interoperability of public and private data, which should be made possible by software such as the Application Programming Interface (APIs).

In 2023, the company Cyclomedia carried out an “Area Mapping” activity to integrate and update 22 cartographic databases of the municipal administration, a spatial data asset on which the DT platform will be based. These data are hosted in the ArcGIS platform owned by ESRI Italy, a Netherland-based multinational company, and technological partner of the Sistema Informativo Territoriale – Municipality of Milan. This platform allows «to integrate information, systems, models and flows in a spatial context, creating a holistic representation of environments, assets, networks and data in the city»<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the DT of Milan is an evolution of the preexisting GIS platform that, through AI technologies, will be able to create detailed and realistic urban models that simulate the behaviour and development of the urban environment over time.

## 5.2. Bologna

The idea of a DT of the city of Bologna dates to 2020, during the application phase of local government projects to the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). The UDT is part of the “Città della conoscenza” (Knowledge City), a flagship project of the municipal administration and of the political mandate of the centre-left Mayor M. Lepore. It represents «the main instrument of the city’s new digital strategy, a real hinge between the different dimensions of policies related to digital transition and Big Data, [...] which will act as an interface and platform for public data sharing on health, climate, environment, mobility» (Comune di Bologna 2022: 36). The “Città della conoscenza” and “Impronta Verde” flagship projects, “Missione Clima”, “Piano per

l’Abitare” policies are considered tools for realizing an inspiring vision that aims to make Bologna the “most progressive city in Italy” (Comune di Bologna 2023).

In the autumn of 2023, the local government presented the UDT project to the public and started its implementation based on a EUR 7 million PON Metro grant. The Bologna UDT is designed and developed by a consortium of public actors that shapes an ecosystem with a strong public-public connotation. This ecosystem was established through several agreements between the municipality and its partners that is going to last until the end of the administration’s political term.

This public ecosystem involves the following actors, each one with its own role and task: Municipality of Bologna, promoter of the project and strategic coordinator, decision-maker in the choice of use cases and user; Fondazione Bruno Kessler (FBK)<sup>8</sup>, technical coordinator and project manager, supplier of the data platform, co-leader in national policies about UDTs (section 5.2); Alma Mater University of Bologna, scientific manager and leader of research activities on ethics, legal and data management issues; Cineca<sup>9</sup>, technology manager, provider of calculation systems, deals with the processing of use cases; Fondazione Innovazione Urbana (FIU)<sup>10</sup> community manager, responsible for future citizen involvement actions.

The UDT project is based on the systematisation of a large set of data already in the possession of local administrations and consultable by citizens (Portal Opendata, Territorial System SiT - Metropolitan City of Bologna, Portal Invento - Infrastructure Cadastre) and of an already widespread digital sensor system, e.g. in the mobility sector. These databases will be integrated with the data assets of the ecosystem partners, particularly the University of Bologna. Furthermore, according to the interviewees, data integration will be conducted through a ‘concentric circle model’: data from the local administration and partners, public-owned utilities and, finally, also private companies.

The mayor and the executive councillor in charge of the project have often emphasised the UDT as an ambitious goal of the city government, which can be summarised as decision support based on advanced data processing and AI technologies, predictive scenario formulation, and unprecedented statistical inferences.

<sup>7</sup> ESRI Italia, *Il Comune di Milano presenta il progetto del Digital Twin*: <https://www.esriitalia.it/case-history/pubblica-amministrazione/920-il-digital-twin-del-comune-di-milano-per-la-smart-city>

<sup>8</sup> The Foundation is a private law body under public control (Autonomous Province of Trento).

<sup>9</sup> Cineca is a non-profit Inter-University Consortium with full public participation, for further information: <https://www.cineca.it/en>

<sup>10</sup> Centre established in 2017 by the Municipality of Bologna and the University of Bologna: <http://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it>.

### 5.3. UDTs for urban sustainability: use cases in Milan and Bologna

The survey conducted by the European Commission identified the main use case domains of UDTs<sup>11</sup> (DG Connect 2023). These domains have direct and indirect implications for the field of urban sustainability. Primarily, 41 projects are designed to mitigate environmental impacts and promote urban resilience practices. Secondly, most projects aim to improve the management of natural resources (e.g. water management), energy consumption, and traffic flows, which is one of the main sources of pollution in urban areas. As argued by DG Connect: «cities and communities can use DT to optimise energy consumption and achieve greater resource efficiency. LDTs can be essential tools towards sustainable urban planning decisions and operational maintenance that minimises the use of resources by predicting future needs [...] it can contribute to the monitoring of communities' environmental footprint» (*Ibidem*: 69).

The differences between the UDT projects in Milan and Bologna will be commented on in the following sections. Basically, they share use cases with important implications for urban sustainability. On the one hand, the Milan UDT aims to improve the delivery of public and private services to citizens, as well as land management policies and urban planning. On the other hand, the first use cases concern policies and decisions in the field of environmental and social sustainability (e.g. curbing energy consumption; cooling buildings through green roof solutions; eliminating architectural barriers). In Bologna, the UDT can be applied to decision-making in several policy areas. The first use cases concern the mobility sector – the management of traffic lights – and environmental policies aimed at reducing the energy consumption of the City's building stock.

More generally and independently of UDTs the political agendas of Milan and Bologna administrations share a strong focus on urban sustainability, as evidenced by several policies, particularly in urban mobility, participation in transnational networks of cities and involvement in the implementation of EU Green New Deal. For example, Milan was one of the first Italian metropolitan areas to introduce a congestion charge in 2012 (initially called “Ecopass”), and Bologna has implemented a significant intervention on private mobility (Bologna Città 30) in 2023, which includes stricter speed limits, the creation of new pedestrian and green areas,

<sup>11</sup> In order of occurrence: Urban planning and infrastructure; Urban mobility and traffic systems; Environmental management, sustainability, and resilience; Energy management; Community Engagement; Urban logistics; Water management.

and new bicycle lanes. Milan is also one of the leading cities in the C-40 network on climate change policies, one of the promoters of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact on the sustainability of food systems and, together with Bologna, one of the 112 cities involved in the European Commission's “Climate Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030” initiative<sup>12</sup>. In this regard, in 2022 the new Mayor of Bologna M. Lepore inaugurated the flagship project “Missione Clima”, a complex intervention to achieve climate neutrality strongly based on citizen participation<sup>13</sup> and the instrument of the “Climate City Contract” that defines commitments and priorities of the administration, actions and investments.

Thus, the UDT projects of Milan and Bologna fit into the established sustainability agendas of their respective local administrations. Although it is too early to assess its impact, the DT technology adds a new tool to the “twin transition” undertaken by the two cities, although through two different implementation models, as shown in the next sections.

## 6. RESEARCH FINDINGS: FRAMES, CONTEXTS, REGULATION AND DATA GOVERNANCE

The comparison of the two cases through our four analytical dimensions allowed us to identify common features and differences in the way the UDT technological tool has been incorporated into the policies and governance of Bologna and Milan (Table 2).

### 6.1. Frames

In both Milan and Bologna, the political legitimacy of UDTs – that did not cause political contention in the city councils – is provided on the one hand by the policy paradigm of urban sustainability and, on the other hand, by the increasing worldwide diffusion of expectations and trust in technical tools such as AI and DTs to address sustainability challenges. However, this paradigm is subject to different declinations. In Bologna, it is presented as a democratic and progressive green and digital transition, based on the connection

<sup>12</sup> The initiative, which is part of the implementation of the European Union's Green Deal, aims to deliver 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030 and ensure that these cities act as experimentation and innovation hubs to enable all European cities to follow suit by 2050.

<sup>13</sup> In 2022, the first Climate City Assembly was established involving randomly drawn citizens involved in deliberative processes on the climate policies of the city administration. More information is available at link: <https://www.comune.bologna.it/partecipa/percorsi/assemblea-cittadina-per-il-clima>

**Table 2.** Two patterns of local politics of UDTs.

<i>Milano</i>	<i>Analytical dimension</i>	<i>Bologna</i>
Data-Driven City	Frames	Knowledge City
Private-driven innovation		Innovation through public autonomy
Organisational change	Context	Organisational continuity
Network: public-private		Network: public-public
Multi-scalarity by firms		Intergovernmental multi-scalarity
Defensive compliance	Regulation	Invention of soft-law tools
Public and market oriented	Data governance and value	Public oriented

Source: authors' elaboration.

between urban sustainability, digital transition, and the “City of Knowledge” development strategy. In Milan, more emphasis is placed on the economic dimension of urban dynamics and policies, prioritising efficiency and innovation in service delivery in a “Government as a Platform” perspective (Cordella and Paletti 2019). These goals can be achieved by a “data-driven city”<sup>14</sup> (interviews), defined by M. Flowers (2013: 186) «a city that intelligently uses data to better deliver critical services. [...] smarter, risk-based resource allocation, better sharing of information agency-to-agency to facilitate smart decision-making, and using the data in a way that integrates in the established day-to-day patterns of city agency front line workers. Being data-driven is not a primarily challenge of technology; it is a challenge of direction and organisational leadership».

This differentiation can be explained by considering the respective systems of action of the UDTs. Although both are led by their respective municipalities, in Bologna the idea originated in academia and the FIU and has so far only been developed by public (local and national) actors, without the involvement of private firms. This choice is also motivated by the intention to ensure political control over the UDT’s technologies and processes and to avoid lock-in situations with privately owned data (interview). The legacy of the Smart City paradigm and actions concerns the physical infrastructure (e.g. IoT sensors) and the public data assets that feed the UDT. In Milan, on the contrary, the idea of UDT is exogenous to the public sector and comes from lessons learnt from the private sector, especially from technology service provider partners. The corresponding system of action builds on and further consolidates the network and system of values and goals of the pre-existing MSCA. Companies play a key role in the whole process: they provide knowl-

edge and AI systems (the platform of the UDT, an evolution of the geoportal, provided by the same private partner), they collect and enter urban geospatial data, and they too can benefit from the processed data. Furthermore, they bring networking and legitimisation resources into the UDT project, playing an important role in communication processes where practices and use cases are shared and in events promoted by the Municipality, such as the Milano Digital Week<sup>15</sup>, and other events aimed at increasing the urban attractiveness for technology companies.

## 6.2. Context

In both cases, the UDT is realised within systems of pre-existing relationships, public-private in Milan and public-public in Bologna, in which few elements of discontinuity are introduced. Also, for this reason, the project management induced fewer organisational changes for the public administration of Bologna. The management is entrusted to two pre-existing organisational units of the municipality, with the technical external coordination of FBK (an element of discontinuity), which was established by public actors and specialises in AI. The organisational articulation is multi-scalar: local; regional (the Emilia-Romagna ‘data valley’ policy and its Technopole); national (the role of the UDT in spoke 9-Digital Society and Smart City, National Research Centre in High Performance Computing, Big Data and Quantum Computing), funded with NRRP-NGEU funds. The solutions for the overall co-ordination of the UDT project are based on the habit of these actors of working together. This is the product of the consolidated cooperation between the Municipality, the Univer-

<sup>14</sup> Il progetto Data-Driven City di MSCA: <https://milanosmartcity.it/projects>

<sup>15</sup> Milan Digital Week edition 2023: <https://www.milanodigitalweek.com/index.html>

sity, FIU, and Cineca, which allows for public autonomy with regard to the cognitive and technological resources needed, while the “local political entrepreneurs” of the UDT project - Mayor M. Lepore and the councillor in charge of the UDT program provide political leadership and legitimacy.

In Bologna the involvement of private companies (a fabric of mostly local SMEs) is envisaged (interviews) only at later stages of the UDT project’s implementation. In Milan business actors (with the presence of innovative big firms) are included in the decision-making processes through formal (the memoranda of understanding between the Municipality and MSCA companies) as well as informal (events such as Milano Digital Week or the ESRI Italy Conferences<sup>16</sup>) and organisational instruments. In the city administration, the Board for Technological Innovation and Digital Transformation serves, on the one hand, to promote coordination between sectoral organisations of the municipality and overcome the silo effect in digital innovation policies and actions. On the other hand, the Board helps to institutionalise the leading role of knowledge and private actors, who are directly involved in the city government. So, the board gets political legitimacy from its direct relationship with the mayor but is also a privileged venue for the public-private partnership. Resources and data are made available to all partners, who benefit from them for public policy on the one hand, and for business strategies on the other. In this way, the UDT project becomes one of the pillars of a wider DUE (see section 5.1), developed by the local government and MSCA players. A problem concerning the autonomy of public actors is not perceived by those involved in the UDT project in Milan, since the goal is to promote an open infrastructure to create public and private value (interviews). Unlike in Bologna, an extra-local articulation of the UDT action system is provided by the spatial and scalar extension of the private companies involved in the UDT project as providers of technologies, which may facilitate the establishment of networks of cities that employ the same proprietary technologies and exchange their experiences on DTs.

### 6.3. Regulation

UDTs in Bologna and Milan and the AI models and systems they use are facing some of the same ethical and legal problems, which are the subject of regulatory efforts almost all over the world. Moreover, the two UDT projects share the same regulatory context of digi-

tal technologies and their use for public purposes, consisting of national and, above all, EU highly articulated systems of legal norms and standards. Their existence reduces and simplifies local actors’ challenges of governing technological innovation while governing through technology, as the problems are largely limited to compliance with superordinate norms. On the other hand, this same regulatory system introduces constraints for local actions. In other words, there is no considerable room for an ‘AI localism’ (Verhulst Sloane 2020) such as that characterising local AI experiences where institutional arrangements leave more autonomy to sub-national decisions, as it happens in the USA. In Bologna, the university is drafting guidelines (a kind of soft law) to adapt compliance with European standards to the specific data management and uses of the UDT, which are still partly to be specified, and to establish a “civic guarantor” and an “ethics committee” for the UDT. It is to be expected that such proposals may find their own space for experimentation within the ‘regulatory sandboxes’ of the EU AI Act (Art. 57). In Milan, attention was paid to compliance with current privacy regulations (in particular the GDPR) when collecting images to train the UDT.

### 6.4 Data governance and value

The issue of how to govern the data used for UDTs has been addressed differently in Bologna and Milan, in a manner consistent with how consolidated public-public and public-private coalitions structure the aims, forms of coordination and organisational cultures of urban governance in the respective urban settings.

Public governance of data to create public and citizen value (König 2021) is a priority of the Bologna UDT project. Consistent with this priority is the intention to develop accountability and involvement tools aimed at citizens (although still to be implemented). If data assets are public and protected from interference by private interests (as providers of both data and technology), their use must be co-decided between political authorities and citizens. The latter will not only be able to evaluate the decisions resulting from the UDT elaborations but also to express themselves on its use. The planned behavioural change and nudging interventions based on the UDT will also have to be supplemented with citizen engagement tools (interviews). To design the tools of participation, it is planned to make use of the “citizen science” expertise of the university and FIU.

In Milan, data governance is public-private and the issue of citizens’ participation is more blurred. They will be able to benefit from the knowledge provided by the

<sup>16</sup> The Esri Italy Conference 2024: <https://www.esriitalia.it/news-ed-eventi/eventi/conferenza-esri-italia>

UDT and use the services based on it, but they cannot take part in its design and decisions on its implementation. The public value of data is interpreted in a market exchange logic: the UDT will enable innovative services for citizens and city users. In return, citizens can generate value by making their data available to the UDT platform. The public value of data benefits all policy-takers through the possibility of basing city government decisions on objective data and knowledge (data-driven city).

## 7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: TWO PATTERNS IN THE LOCAL POLITICS OF URBAN DIGITAL TWINS

Our comparison made it possible to draw some conclusions about the political implications of UDTs' uses in processes of urban policy and governance aimed at sustainability. We have seen that local agency leads to different approaches and, potentially, different outcomes. This emerges from the analysis of design (platforms, data, uses, rules) and early implementation activities of UDTs and confirms that relations between digital/AI technologies and the political, administrative, economic, and cultural environment of cities affect the local use of AI systems (Nochta *et al.* 2019).

What provides local actors with room for manoeuvre in these two cases of UDTs? First, the diversity and plasticity of UDT models, systems, and purposes (sections 2, 3). Second, the two main global sources of political legitimation of the UDT. On the one hand, the paradigm of sustainable urban development confirms its elasticity and adaptability to different spatial contexts and policy goals. On the other hand, there is a growing global expectation and trust in multi-purpose digital instrumentation, including AI and UDTs, to address sustainability challenges. Combined, they compose a significant part of the mainstream metaframe of contemporary urban policies. In both cities the political leadership favours an alignment to this metaframe, but the differences we have noted shed light on two different hybridisations that, to some extent, reflect the variegation of neoliberal urban governance (González *et al.* 2018) and produce two patterns of local politics of UDTs:

(i) in Milan, the “data-driven city” imaginary that synthesises the political meaning of the UDT is closer to an idea of algorithmic governance of urban sustainability and coherent with a private-driven innovation and a public and market-oriented value of data;

(ii) in the vision prevailing in Bologna different dimensions of the uses of technology for sustainability seem to be kept in balance by the “Knowledge City” imaginary, which gives more power to citizens and

knowledge actors and less to market actors to make choices concerning such uses and their control, as well as more importance to the public value of data, limiting the access of business to the design, control and use of UDT and its algorithms.

On what do these different ways of exploiting the margins of place adaptation of paradigms and technology through the local politics of UDTs depend? We have tried to answer this question through the lenses of frames, contexts, regulation, data governance, and value (sections 4, 6). The most important factor that contributes to differentiating these aspects and producing two patterns of local politics of UDTs consists of the relationships between politics and society in urban governance. More specifically, this regards the different economic characteristics of private interests, their capacity for cultural influence within urban systems, and the intensity and forms of their involvement in governance processes. These factors influence the different composition of the UDT action systems in the two cities. Corresponding to this composition are the logics of appropriateness underlying common action, which have similar degrees of institutionalisation, but are different from each other in terms of values and beliefs.

In Bologna they make evident an attempt to assert the pre-eminence of politically legitimised actors in defining the purpose and control of urban resources and, therefore, also of technologies and algorithms. Although at a later stage of UTD development local private interests are also supposed to benefit from this technological infrastructure, they will not have established its operation. Moreover, the expected role of citizens in the future use of the UDT reproduces two pillars of the “Bologna Model” (Massari and Orioli 2023): a diffuse and horizontal vision of the powers of the administration in a paradigmatic context for social capital and civic engagement; an approach to the planning and development of the city based on the strategic vision of the interests of the community. Also in Milan, the sense itself of technological innovation in urban policies derives from the encounter between the mainstream policy paradigm mentioned above and the system of values and beliefs the local pattern of governance and urban political economy is based on, which is based on the involvement of private actors and consequently more inspired by market values and beliefs (d'Albergo *et al.* 2022; Andreotti and Le Galès 2019). In each of the two cities, this transfer of logics of action, practices, and forms of coordination from the broader systems of relations between local politics and urban society to the more circumscribed systems of action of the respective UDTs is mediated by the pathways realised in the field of digital innovations in urban

policies and governance, primarily with the configurations assumed by Smart City experiences.

As we have seen, the implementation of UDTs in the two cities is still taking its first steps. On the one hand, contextual factors, such as the foreseeable rapid technological transformations and further developments in European and national AI strategies and regulations, and on the other hand, the learning that will be made possible for local actors from the implementation of the projects, will offer the possibility to monitor continuities and transformations in the local politics of UDTs.

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## Social Sustainability in Europe. Pre- and Post-Pandemic Crisis

SIMONA GOZZO, ROSARIO D'AGATA

**Abstract.** This paper aims to clarify the meaning and related dimensions of the concept of social sustainability, with reference to the Western European context. Social sustainability refers to the capacity to ensure fairness and equality, guaranteeing collective conditions of widespread well-being over time. Its outcomes being equity, empowerment, accessibility to public services, participation, sharing, cultural identity, and institutional stability. Changes of this magnitude are expected to have a significant impact on the social cohesion of each territory but also the potential attractiveness of the area. Given these premises, the work will use different (statistical) models of Bayesian networks built on European Social Survey data, distinguishing relationships between the selected indicators and describing the associated dynamics and processes. The goal is also showing importance of the context, considering the efficiency of European Social Model (ESM). Compare the pre- and post-pandemic Bayesian models is also one of the aims, so to detect conditions and political choices that might have shown resilience when facing a challenge such as a global emergency.

**Keywords:** social sustainability, European Social Models, social cohesion, bayesian network.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable development was originally proposed by the so-called *Brundtland Report*, published in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), which defined it as a kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising those of future generations. Since the beginning, the issue was declined along three lines: environment, economy, and society, soon producing what are today referred to as the three pillars of sustainability. Social sustainability, hence, refers to the need for development that guarantees equity, accessibility, participation, cultural identity and institutional stability (European Commission 2001).

The key points of social sustainability can be traced back to the realization of conditions for social progress, the improvement of collective well-being and living conditions, the strengthening or creation of social cohesion as well as the production of a competitive social market economy. The realization of the European Social Model is originally based on these premises, but it encounters several limitations due to cultural legacies, contextual con-

ditions, and nationally defined political priorities (Cavalli and Martinelli 2015). The proposal of a single social model of reference for the European Union has certainly initiated a process of institutional isomorphism, avoiding in some contexts the worst in terms of social risks and socio-economic inequities. Nevertheless, it is difficult to define, at present, a Single Social Model (Sapir 2006; Moro 2017).

All things considered, social sustainability remains at the same time both desirable and a difficult political objective to achieve. Its complexity is mainly due to the hope to apply it in different sociocultural contexts, sometimes polarized. It is this contextual relativity which has a direct impact on its feasibility. Hence, no single course of action and direction can be assumed. The concrete implementation of the same social policies may prove to be appropriate, desirable, inappropriate or even counter-productive, depending on the contexts. Furthermore, the principle that the three pillars of social, economic, and environmental should be integrated into a single development model, although politically desirable, is not supported by empirical findings that, on the contrary, have led to a distinction between indices and related indicators rather than proposing a single synthetic sustainability measure. Kaivo-Oja et al. (2014), in examining the interrelationships between the different dimensions of sustainability as measured by the Sustainable Society Index, show the existence of a strong negative correlation between human and environmental wellbeing, while the relationship between economic and ecological wellbeing is reduced. Thus, a balance is sought that remains fragile and requires an evaluation of priorities and a normative approach. Following this perspective, the focus here is on the social meaning of sustainability.

Based on these considerations, the literature on social sustainability makes the selection of indicators relative and contextual. This is due both to the concept of social sustainability itself being presented as flexible and the need to balance the various demands (social, economic, and environmental) to meet the needs of each specific context. The idea refers, in any case, to the realization of social practices, collective choices, and cultural dimensions that produce a sense of community, social well-being, and commonality. Seeing these conditions as materialized can take different ways and turn into something very close to social cohesion only in the case of developed countries.

While within these contexts social problems mainly derive from the lack of social cohesion, the marginalization of certain vulnerable groups, and the existence of socio-economic inequalities. Hence, social sustainability

indicators and dynamics are closer to the social cohesion ones. In developing areas, instead, social needs are closely linked to basic needs and cannot be separated from them: unless access to resources and the satisfaction of basic needs is guaranteed for the entire population, it is difficult for higher needs to emerge<sup>1</sup> (Maslow 1954; Tullio-Altan 1974; Inglehart 1983, Vallance *et al.* 2011).

## 2. COHESION AND SUSTAINABILITY

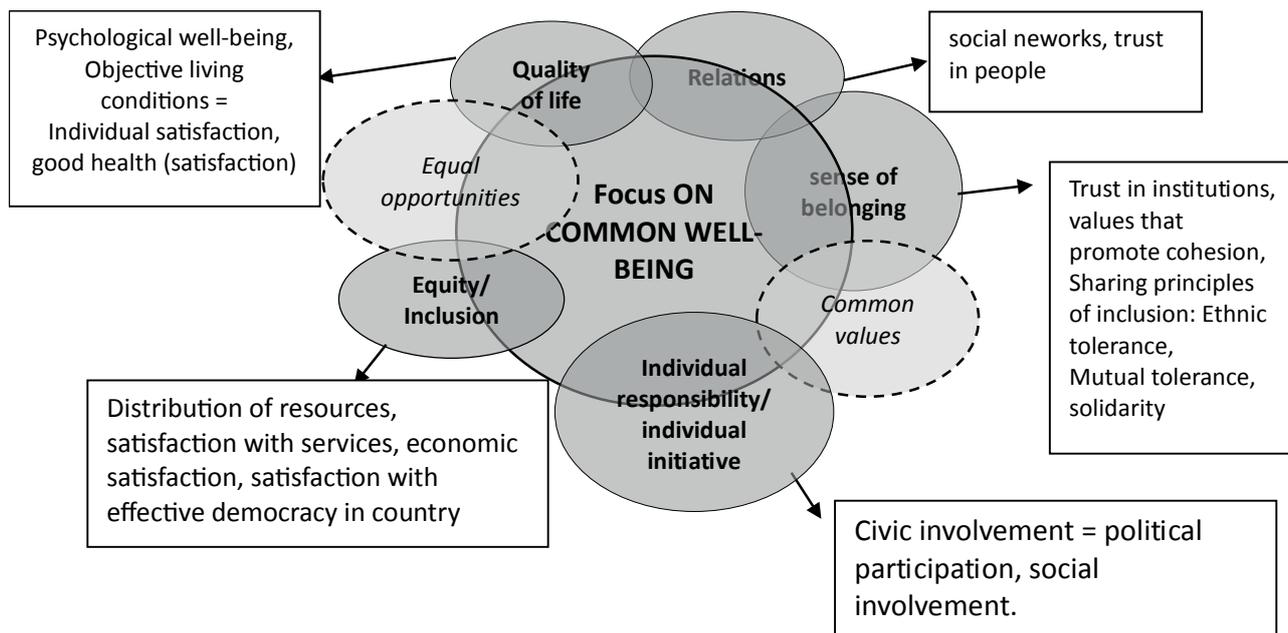
Social cohesion is considered one of the most important outcomes of policies oriented towards social sustainability. While the attainment of cohesion does not explicitly emerge as a goal of the 2030 Agenda, several conditions are necessary for its establishment.

The achievement of social sustainability refers, in fact, to the materialization and improvement of collective well-being in the long term and in different contexts. This implies economic and social security, health protection, human relations, equality, and equal opportunities. Referring specifically to the goals of the 2030 Agenda (SDGs), policies against poverty, in support of health and collective well-being, promoters of quality education, equity, gender equality, and strength of institutions are related to social sustainability. Briefly, socially sustainable contexts are characterized by equity, inclusion, equal opportunities, individual initiative, and responsibility. These elements ensure at the same time a socially cohesive context. The crisis of cohesion thus implies conditions of social malaise that are often detrimental to the parameters of social sustainability. At the same time, the realization of social policies oriented to guarantee fair conditions and social welfare favours the emergence of social sustainability in its various forms.

The attainment of social sustainability postpones the realization and improvement of collective well-being in the long term and in different contexts. This implies guarantees of economic and social security, health protection, personal relationships, equality, and equal opportunities. Referring specifically to the 2030 Agenda Goals (SDGs), anti-poverty policies, promoters of quality education, equity, gender equality, and efficiency of institutions are traced back to social sustainability. In a nutshell, socially sustainable contexts are characterized by equity, inclusion, equal opportunity, initiative, and individual responsibility. These elements, at the same time, promote a cohesive context.

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<sup>1</sup> Maslow defines five levels of needs as a hierarchy. The basic needs like food, water, and safety must be collectively satisfied because of the emergence of the higher needs, as love/belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.



**Figure 1.** Social Cohesion and Social Sustainability. *Source:* Own reworking on Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) and McGuinn *et al.* (2020).

The crisis of cohesion underlies conditions of social malaise that are often detrimental to the parameters of social sustainability. In fact, social cohesion has certain conditions that are strongly linked to those necessary for ensuring social sustainability:

- it is the outcome of spreading equity and equal opportunities.
- promotes conditions of well-being in the long term.
- it is a precondition for advocating minority rights, equality, and equal treatment (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017).

This emerges most clearly when the concept of social cohesion is operationally defined. Despite the term has been used in different contexts and meanings, i.e. both with respect to the pragmatic goal of guiding social policy programming and in academic analyses, there are common traits in both. At a policy level, primary referents are Canada (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Bernard 1999; Jackson *et al.* 2000; Jeannotte *et al.* 2002; Jenson 1998, 2010; Stanley 2003; Toye 2007), the European Commission (Berger-Schmitt 2000; European Commission 1996, 2001, 2007), and the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 1998, 2005; European Committee for Social Cohesion 2004), but important interventions have also been made in Australia (Jupp *et al.* 2007) and the United Kingdom (Home Office Community Cohesion Unit 2003). Here we focus on a specification of the referents and analytical definition of social cohesion.

Following Schiefer and van der Noll's (2017) own considerations, there are six distinguishable domains attributable to the social cohesion debate that commonly appear in publications: social relations, identification, orientation toward the common good, shared values, quality of life, and (in)equality. Some of these dimensions, however, overlap. Looking at the reconstruction of the analysed literature (Fig. 1), most of these domains or concepts can in turn be distinguished into more concrete and empirically assessable components<sup>2</sup>.

Social relations, sense of belonging and solidarity are here considered constitutive dimensions of social cohesion. Besides, tolerance and multicultural orientation play an important role too when studying aggregating dynamics in the context of democratic Europe. Here being open to diversity – differently to what happens in small contexts, where this is perceived as dangerous – is necessarily associated with social sustainability. Another important element is the ethical one (Fig. 1): values of identification with a community can contrast with those of tolerance and solidarity and turn into a negative trait. Thus, in reconstructing the semantics of social cohesion, the sense of belonging and values such as tolerance (in particular towards immigrants) and solidarity can become two conditions that respond to aggregating

<sup>2</sup> This is the approach also followed in this work, which, however, proposes indices referring to the domains defined by extracting some components through factorial analysis, while Schiefer and van der Noll identify semantic dimensions through content analysis of texts.

logics of a different nature. The topic will be discussed again by referring to the weight of the contextual plane and thus to European Social Models.

If social cohesion is the aim, a context is as much tolerant as the concept of reciprocity is spread, especially in multi-ethnic contexts (Sartori 2000). This can impede micro-attachments – bonding social capital – oriented to emphasize the in-group/out-group differences (Friedkin 2004). The spread of bridging social capital, on the other hand, produces inclusion and propensity to acceptance of differences, leading in turn to integration or acceptance of migrants – here defined as ethnic tolerance.

Still considering the aim being more bridging, it must be specified that here shared values are considered more as a common and generic pro-social ethical dimension in the specific meaning of ethnic tolerance, solidarity and trust toward others - reciprocity based on democratic values than sharing the same culture.

Based on the same logic, the sense of belonging is here considered as a broad belonging (nation, democratic context) and not to micro-belongings, localisms or separatist logics that end up producing exclusion or isolation.

The other dimensions characterizing social cohesion are more consequences of it than constitutive elements of cohesion itself, like general well-being or satisfaction with the quality of institutions and services.

### 3. EUROPEAN SOCIAL MODELS

It will be clear at this point that the strength of social sustainability, partially depending on social cohesion, can be generated through multiple paths. Many inter- or trans-disciplinary studies end up distinguishing, describing, and analysing regimes of social cohesion (Green and Jannmaat 2011).

The intention here is to analyse the structure of social sustainability in Europe with specific reference to the European Union area (including England). This choice depends on the fact that the contexts are democratic and similar in many respects but with different orientations in public policy management. Social cohesion is considered here as one of the most important outcomes of policies oriented toward social sustainability. While the achievement of cohesion is not a goal of the 2030 Agenda, the discussion and specificity of dimensions become crucial here.

Once the indicators and related indices have been defined, strengths and weaknesses of social sustainability will be reconstructed, both comparatively in different contexts and considering the effects of the pandemic cri-

sis (thus longitudinally). The conditions of each area will be distinguished to assess differences and commonalities, resilience, and limits of social sustainability.

The theme of sustainability has highlighted two conditions – usually overlooked – within social cohesion:

- a) a longitudinal plan, i.e. the political need to provide conditions that can be resilient and, thus, socially sustainable in the long run.
- b) a contextual plane, i.e. the need to take into consideration local differences and specificities, fostering a path – or more paths – to social sustainability that might also be contextually dependent and not generalizable.

Following these assumptions, the intention here is to reconstruct what are the strengths and weaknesses of social sustainability. The need that emerges is to consider the contextual plan as a key element in defining possible interventions and evaluating their outcomes. The debate on social sustainability has highlighted the need to consider contextual plans as key elements for defining interventions and evaluating long-term outcomes. Following this thesis, third-world areas and developed areas are not comparable in these terms as social sustainability indicators will be different between the two (Vallance 2011), as also stressed by the literature related to the topic which has, as a peculiarity, the use of a relativistic perspective centred on the idea of contextual dependence. This paper is focused on democratic and developed Western Europe only, which justifies the usage of the same indicators to evaluate the presence, diffusion, and strength of social sustainability. However, even within similar contexts, strengths and weaknesses might slightly differ.

The policy plan becomes of particular importance, due to different priorities and needs. One problem precisely concerns the conceptualization of social cohesion derived from the policy discourse, which is often driven by pragmatic and/or contingent concerns.

The World Bank, for example, addresses social cohesion in the EU by focusing on economic development and poverty reduction (Ritzen 2001; Easterly *et al.* 2006), while the United Kingdom and Canada focus on cultural diversity (Cheong *et al.* 2007). In national policy debates, actors with different political ideologies use the term “social cohesion” for or against cultural diversity, promoting homogeneity of values, acceptance of diversity, or a return to traditional values or nationalism (Boucher and Samad 2013; Cheong *et al.* 2007). How about the indicators and dimensions of social cohesion? There are several analyses of this concept, and they all show a contextually dependent definition. The social democratic context focuses on equality and solidarity as essential elements for

social cohesion, while Eastern Europe centres on shared history and the sense of belonging with a limited propensity for ethnic tolerance. Here national history and traditional values would produce, according to our hypothesis, a structure of social sustainability with social cohesion which takes the form of national identity, satisfaction in institutions, and exclusive social capital. Liberal views, in turn, emphasize the importance of equality in terms of individual opportunities (Green *et al.* 2009; Green and Janmaat 2011). The continental area of Europe corresponds to Esping-Andersen's (1990) corporative welfare and differs from the liberal regime for the importance given to shared values and participation in national political life (Green *et al.* 2009). The Mediterranean model (Ferrera 1996a; Bonoli 1997) has a welfare system that is deficient in many ways (Ferrera 1996b; Naldini 2007). Specifically, the fact that the protection of individual welfare depends mostly on the primary network brings about great inequalities, dependence on the financial support of the family and the social status of the individual, reproducing inequalities of gender, ethnicity, social class, etc. This can certainly produce strong trust and solidarity, but mostly within each social class or family. Without structural support and policies focused on "de-familisation", mainly a strong exclusive social capital emerges (with a strong dependence on the family, low level of inclusion, low social participation, no ties between citizens and so on).

These considerations intersect with others related to the traditions of welfare financing (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1999) and, more recently, to the debate on whether the European Social Models (ESMs) should be diversified. Sapir (2006) shows the internal differences of the ESMs distinguishing among models that he named as: Nordic, Continental, Anglo-Saxon and Mediterranean. Thus, Esping-Andersen's division persists (Esping-Andersen 1999).

To understand what emerges from the data analysis, we consider the structural and socio-cultural balance achieved in the different areas deriving from the peculiar declinations of the European Social Models (ESMs) as proposed by Sapir (2006), adding the context of Eastern Europe. This is here defined as a further, specific, ESM. Currently, there is a huge debate about this question. An interesting work is that of Pöder and Kerem (2011). The authors' considerations are connected to a more general orientation of convergence towards a Single European Social Model, which has modified the policy in a liberal sense generating changes not only for Eastern European areas. The authors specify that the Eastern European commodification process cannot be compared to the Nordic one because it only indicates workforce flexibility, but also has a negative effect on

social contributions. The commodification of Eastern Europe combines workforce flexibility with low incomes and employment security.

Each of the ESMs will produce structural balances or imbalances, due to choices in the distribution of resources, opportunities, risks, and needs. These choices derive, in turn, from a certain widespread cultural climate and from orientations sedimented over time.

A context of greater equality and fairness produces a major propensity to relate to others and a climate of greater trust, necessary for bringing and strengthening social cohesion, solidarity, and tolerance. The possibility of being in a relationship and living shared experiences depends on these conditions as it is more likely between subjects who are in similar socio-economic conditions and who perceive each other as equal (which entails the absence of prejudice and discrimination). Instead, the concentration of resources in the hands of a few subjects and the relative increase in inequalities will produce an increase in mistrust towards others and towards institutions, and a decrease in participation in social and political life, as well as the division into exclusive groups.

#### 4. DATA AND METHOD

The European Social Survey (ESS) databases were used for the analysis, considering round 9 and round 10. Specifically, round 9 covers a period from 30/08/2018 to 27/01/2020 while round 10 surveys started on 18/09/2020 and ended on 03/09/2022. Within the two datasets (ESS 9 and ESS 10), areas attributable to the ESMs described above were selected. Some nations present in dataset ESS9, however, are not present (n.p.) in dataset ESS 10 or vice versa. This resulted in a downsizing of the sample in round 10, which has 5222 fewer cases than in round 9. Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of respondents by nationality and welfare model.

The continental model features Belgium, France, Austria and Germany. The last two, however, are not present in round 10, which, therefore, features only Belgium and France. Similarly, as far as the Mediterranean model is concerned, Spain is present only in round 9 and Greece only in round 10. The Nordic model in round 10 does not include Denmark and Sweden. The Eastern countries<sup>3</sup> model is more homogeneous, adding

<sup>3</sup> The decision to add these States, even though they are not always provided for in the best-known existing classifications, is linked to the idea that the politically similar pasts of these may offer new insights. The debate on whether there should be a unitary ESM in these areas is wide-ranging and there are multiple positions (see Pöder K. and Kerem 2011; Katarzyna and Gavin 2018).

**Table 1.** Distribution of interviewers for States and ESMs.

States	ESS 9	ESS 10
<i>European Social Model: Continental</i>		
Austria	2499	n.p.
Belgium	1767	1341
Germany	2358	n.p.
France	2010	1977
Total	8634	3318
<i>European Social Model: Mediterranean</i>		
Spain	1668	n.p.
Italy	2745	2640
Portugal	1055	1838
Greece	n.p.	2799
Total	5468	7277
<i>European Social Model: Nordic</i>		
Denmark	1572	n.p.
Finland	1755	1577
Norway	1406	1411
Sweden	1539	n.p.
Total	6272	4458
<i>European Social Model: Anglo-Saxon</i>		
United Kingdom	2204	1149
Ireland	2216	1770
Total	4420	2919
<i>European Social Model: East Europe</i>		
Bulgaria	2198	2718
Czechia	2398	2476
Estonia	1904	1542
Hungary	1661	1849
Lithuania	1835	1659
Slovenia	1318	1252
Slovakia	n.p.	1418
Total	11314	12914
TOTAL	36108	30886

Source: Authors' elaboration.

only Slovakia in round 10 while no change in the Anglo-Saxon model, which includes the United Kingdom and Ireland in both surveys.

Thirty-five items were considered and summarized into 10 indices. Principal Component Analysis for categorical data (CatPCA) was used for synthesis. This technique transforms ordinal-scale (hence monotonic) variables into interval-scale (latent) variables by maximizing the variance explained by the selected principal components (Gifi 1990). The most methodologically relevant aspect of CatPCA is its being free from assuming either linearity of relationships between variables or multivariate normal distribution of the data (Michailidis and

**Table 2.** Dimension of social cohesion.

	ESS 9	ESS 10
<i>Social Trust</i>		
Mostly looking out for themselves - Most of the time people helpful		
You can't be too careful - Most people can be trusted		
Most people try to take advantage of you - or try to be fair		
<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>	0,79	0,814
<i>Variance explained (%)</i>	70,4	72,8
<i>Relations</i>		
Important to have good time		
How many people with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters		
How often socially meet with friends, relatives, or colleagues		
Take part in social activities compared to others of same age		
<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>	0,59	0,59
<i>Variance explained (%)</i>	59,7	59,8

Source: Authors' elaboration.

de Leeuw 1998). It transforms variables' categories into numerical values by implementing optimal quantification (Linting *et al.* 2007).

Based on the above considerations and resuming the previous paragraph, we proceeded to identify the dimensions related to social sustainability. The first dimension refers to the conditions of social cohesion and specifically consists of two indices that we have named as *Social Trust*<sup>4</sup> and *Relations* (Table 2)<sup>5</sup>.

A second dimension is institutional support. It includes trust in institutions and satisfaction both towards institutions and government. This dimension also underlies the perception of a national system in which democratic principles function and are also respected concretely, through the effectiveness of government actions.

With respect to the civic involvement dimension, three indices were chosen. From a methodological point of view, political participation (Tab. 4) synthesizes the values of 4 dichotomous variables (yes/no) and one variable measured on a Likert scale that, after the recoding

<sup>4</sup> The direction of all items was preliminarily homogenized where necessary, to arrive at scales that all went in the same direction (e.g., from distrust to trust).

<sup>5</sup> The value of Cronbach's alpha in our work does not always reach the threshold of 0.7 used in the literature as the threshold for acceptance of internal consistency between items. This certainly represents a limitation; however, given the main objective of the analysis we chose to proceed even in the absence of reaching this threshold.

**Table 3.** Dimension of institutional support.

	ESS 9	ESS 10
<i>Institutional Trust</i>		
Trust in Country's parliament		
Trust in the legal system		
Trust in the police		
Trust in the European Parliament		
Trust in political parties		
Cronbach's Alpha	0,86	0,86
Variance explained (%)	64,5	64,3
<i>Satisfaction for Institutions</i>		
How satisfied with the way democracy works in country		
How satisfied with the national government		
Cronbach's Alpha	0,77	0,8
Variance explained (%)	81,6	83,5

Source: Authors' elaboration.

intervention operated, ranges from 0 (not at all interested) to 4 (very interested). Similarly, the social involvement index consists of 3 items measured on a Likert scale with 4 levels. Also, within the civic involvement dimension, it appeared useful to observe the component related to ethnic tolerance, which basically refers to the level of acceptance of migrants (Tab. 4).

A further domain related to social sustainability refers to the quality of life, that includes both equity and inclusion. Here, we identify a dimension related to perceived quality. The items of the individual satisfaction index attempt to detect elements of personal satisfaction that pertain to a psychophysical dimension, while the items of economic satisfaction point to economic elements, functional to the quality of life (Table 5). Another feature is that one of satisfaction in public services, distinguishing satisfaction with the education system and with the state of medical-welfare services.

Considering the average score of each index, calculated by aggregating the nationalities of respondents by welfare model, the main longitudinal changes can be reconstructed. What is, then, the overall effect of the pandemic crisis? The largest increase in social trust occurs in the Anglo-Saxon model, with a value more than doubled. This also happens in Eastern countries, despite remaining negative. In the same countries, there is some increase in the average score on the relations index too. The largest increase on this index is observed in the Continental model, which witnesses the largest decrease in the institutional trust index too (taking negative values in the second survey too). In contrast, the largest increase in the institutional trust index is

**Table 4.** Dimension of civism (civic involvement).

	ESS 9	ESS 10
<i>Political Participation</i>		
Worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker last 12 months		
Signed petition last 12 months		
Taken part in lawful public demonstration last 12 months		
Boycotted certain products last 12 months		
How interested in politics		
Cronbach's Alpha	0,87	0,59
Variance explained (%)	47,2	38
<i>Social Involvement</i>		
Important to care for nature and environment		
Important to help people and care for others well-being		
Important to understand different people		
Cronbach's Alpha	0,87	0,67
Variance explained (%)	79,3	60
<i>Ethnic Tolerance</i>		
Immigration bad or good for country's economy		
Country's cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants		
Immigrants make country worse or better place to live		
Allow many/few immigrants of same race/ethnic group as majority		
Allow many/few immigrants of different race/ethnic group from majority		
Allow many/few immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe		
Cronbach's Alpha	0,89	88,5
Variance explained (%)	64	63,5

Source: Authors' elaboration.

observed in the Nordic model. Except for the Eastern and Mediterranean countries<sup>6</sup>, political participation declines in all analysed models, with the States in the Nordic model going from a score of 0.517 to a score of -0.487. However, the Nordic model shows a reduction in political participation that is not matched by a reduction in social participation (which instead is the case for the Anglo-Saxon and corporative models). The Continental and Anglo-Saxon models also present the highest increase in the average score of the ethnic tolerance index. We also notice a significant decrease in the value of this index on the Mediterranean model. It seems interesting to note how precisely the Mediterranean model is the only one that shows a significant decrease

<sup>6</sup> However, these areas have usually low values of political participation.

**Table 5.** Dimension of quality of life (equity, inclusion).

	ESS 9 ESS 10	
<i>Individual Satisfaction</i>		
How happy are you		
Subjective general health		
How satisfied with life as a whole		
Cronbach's Alpha	0,74	0,72
Variance explained (%)	65,5	64
<i>Economic Satisfaction</i>		
How satisfied with present state of economy in country		
Feeling about household's income nowadays		
Cronbach's Alpha	0,53	0,5
Variance explained (%)	68	66,7
<i>Satisfaction for Services</i>		
State of education in country nowadays		
State of health services in country nowadays		
Cronbach's Alpha	0,66	0,74
Variance explained (%)	70,8	53

Source: Authors' elaboration.

in the individual satisfaction index (from -0.071 in round 9 to -0.145 in round 10), and it is also the only one that shows a decrease in the value of both the economic satisfaction index and the service satisfaction index. In this context, therefore, there are particularly difficult conditions for ensuring sustainability and social cohesion.

Having identified 10 synthetic dimensions, we want to understand what kind of interaction occurs between them. We use Bayesian networks as these offer the possibility of graphically representing the probabilistic relationship between a set of variables<sup>7</sup> (Koller *et al.* 2009). In Bayesian logic, each element (node) is a random variable and the link between two nodes (called "parent" and "child") represents the dependence in probabilistic terms of the relationship between the two random variables. Thus, a "child" node is associated with a conditional probability dependent on the linkage with the 'parent' node. A child node can, in turn, be a parent, producing a network structure<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> To better understand the conditional distributions, the 10 factorial scores were transformed into 10 ordinal variables with categories 'low' (0 to 33rd percentile), 'medium' (33rd to 66th percentile) and 'high' (66th percentile to the highest value).

<sup>8</sup> For further methodological discussion, see Heckerman (2008) and Cowell *et al.* (2006).

## 5. SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND CONTEXTUAL EFFECTS

The hypotheses we propose will be tested for each area associated with a specific ESM, before and after the pandemic. We want to verify three hypotheses:

H<sub>1</sub>-The presence of a general neo-liberal isomorphic orientation.

H<sub>2</sub>-A pole of attitudes that precedes that of behaviours.  
H<sub>2.1</sub>- In particular, ethnic tolerance assumes a central role as it mediates between pro-social attitudes and behaviours (this may be less relevant immediately after the pandemic due to the sudden change in the political agenda and the blocking of migration flows).

H<sub>3</sub>- Significant differences between pre/post-pandemic occur, mediated by the role played by the European Social Model and related economic and social support actions put in place (isomorphic process – not only in Europe).

Before analysing the network structures of each welfare model, a comparison of the two surveys to the overall Europe seems useful (Fig. 2). The main change emerges from the origin of the network: during the first survey (before the pandemic), the main parent node is economic satisfaction (*Econ\_Satis*) and social participation (*Social\_Involv*) derives from political participation (*Political\_Involv*). In the second survey (affected by the pandemic), it is trust in institutions (*Trust\_in\_Instit*) that generates the entire network. Thus, indications emerge about the possible path to resilience of social sustainability in Europe. It seems that widespread trust or mistrust in institutions and economic satisfaction play a crucial role in this regard and in general. Economic satisfaction, in fact, still plays an important role because it mediates between trust in institutions, satisfaction with the quality of services (*Satis\_Pub\_Services*) and institutions (*Satis\_Instit*), and individual satisfaction (*Individ\_Satis*). More generally, while in the network of round 9 economic satisfaction generates satisfaction with services and institutions, in round 10 the relationship reverses.

Consistent with the thesis that sustainability (in its various forms) is a context-dependent condition, the Continental model presents a specific structure (Fig. 3). Before the pandemic, in this context, it is political participation that generates the network structure by directly acting on the propensity to welcome immigrants, satisfaction with public services, and social relations.

In the post-pandemic survey, social trust generates trust in institutions, economic satisfaction, and individual satisfaction.

Looking at the Anglo-Saxon model (Fig. 4), it is social trust and trust in institutions that generate the network, both in the first and second surveys. Notewor-

Round 9

Round 10

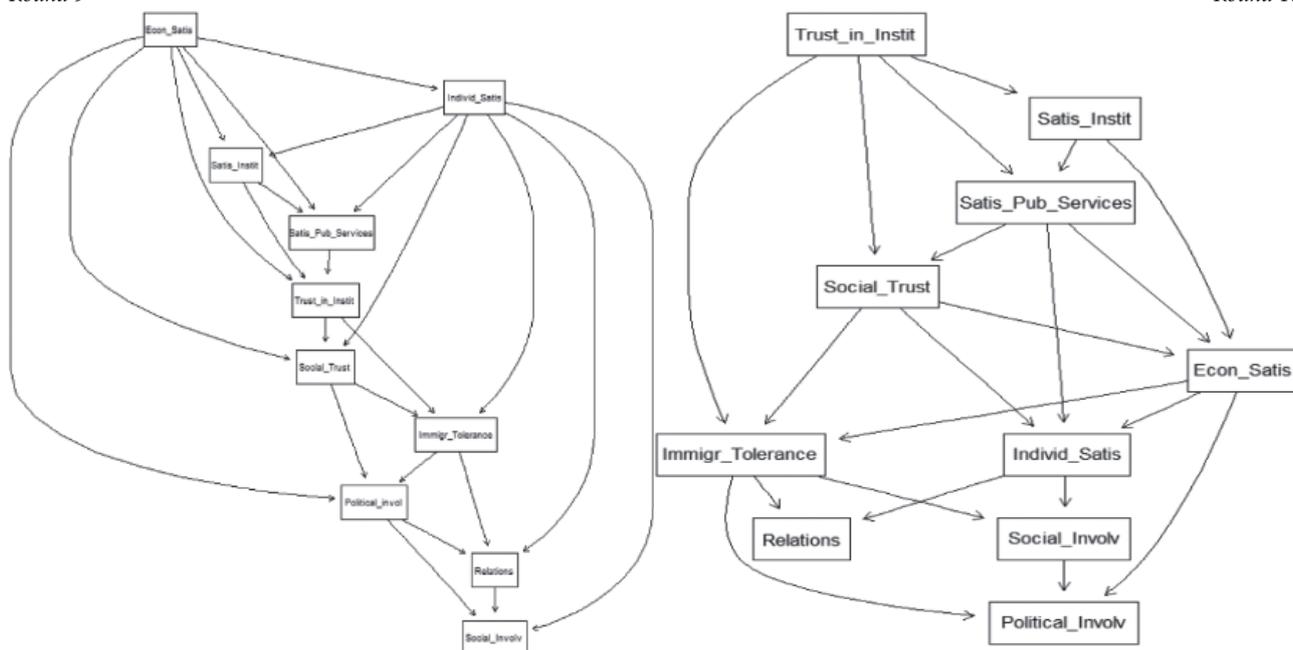


Figure 2. Europe: Structure of networks. Source: Authors' elaboration.

Round 9

Round 10

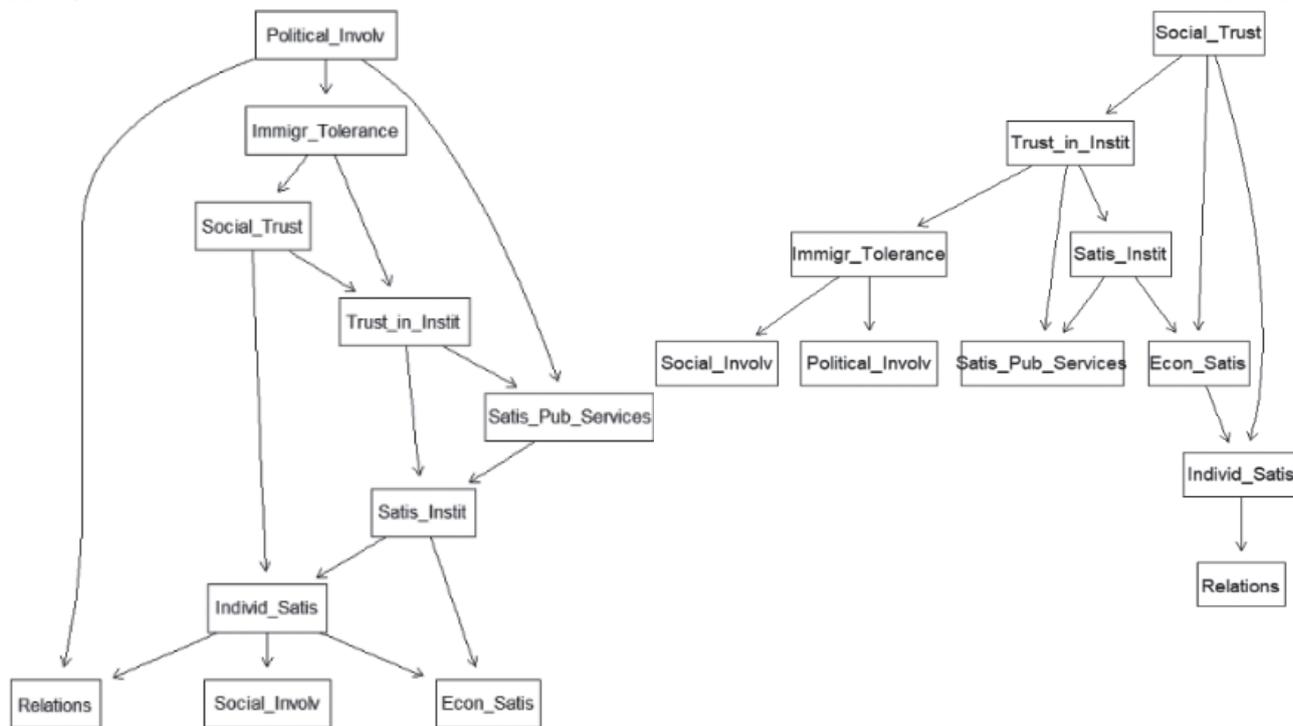
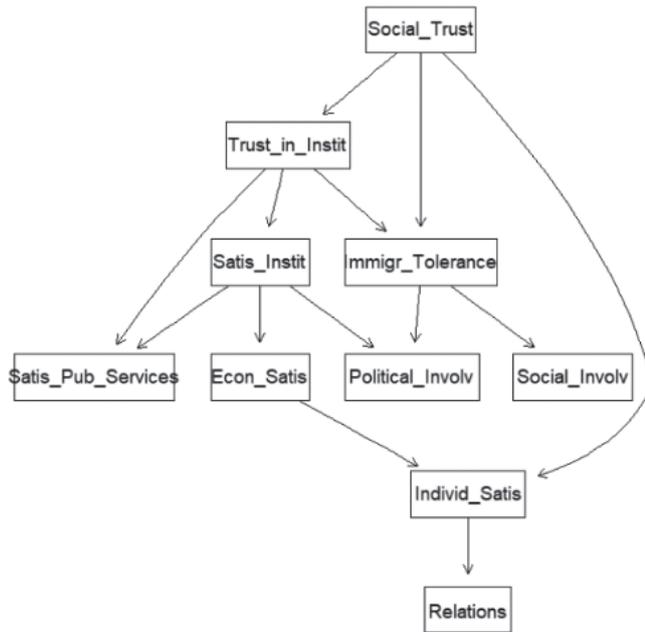


Figure 3. Continental ESM: Structure of networks. Source: Authors' elaboration.

Round 9



Round 10

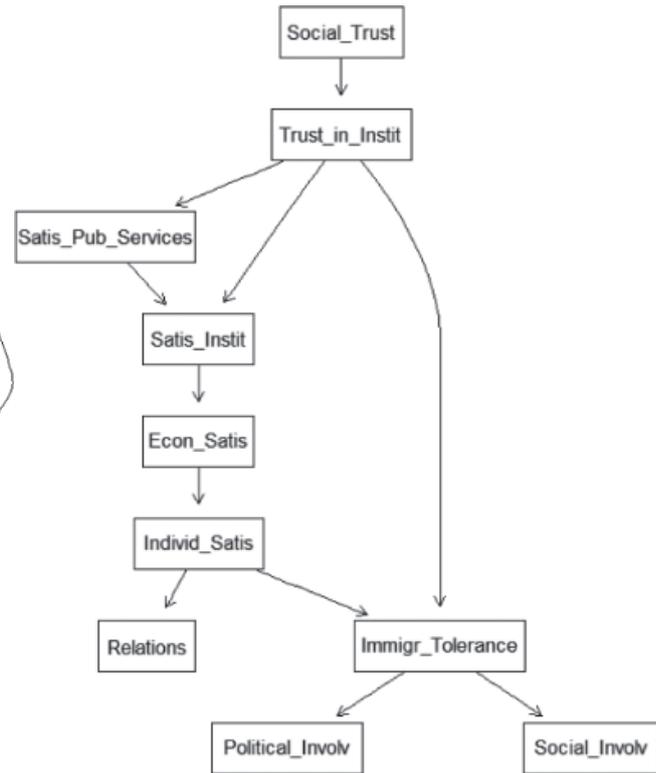


Figure 4. Anglo-Saxon ESM: structure of networks. Source: Authors' elaboration.

thy how political participation and social participation are outcomes of the structure, especially in the second round and, in both cases, produce no effect. After the pandemic, there is also a higher incidence of satisfaction with public services in the network structure.

The Nordic model probably shows the least change between the two surveys (Fig. 5). This might indicate greater stability and less difficulty in ensuring socio-economic sustainability and cohesion.

This context, on the other hand, also shows changes: although social trust always generates network structure, only in the first survey does social involvement appear to depend on relationships. Thereafter, relationship structure produces no effect and depends on individual satisfaction.

At the base of the network structure in the Mediterranean model we find, in both surveys, the Relations index (Fig. 6). However, before the pandemic, economic satisfaction is at the end of the network structure and does not generate any nodes. After the pandemic, however, economic satisfaction generates individual satisfaction (reversing the relationship observed in round 9) and political involvement. Moreover, economic satisfaction connects institutional satisfaction with individual satis-

faction and political involvement. This shows the importance of having individual resources to access political participation. Those who have more time, money and education have much higher probabilities of participation. Social trust, thus, appears to be more of an outcome than a vector of cohesion.

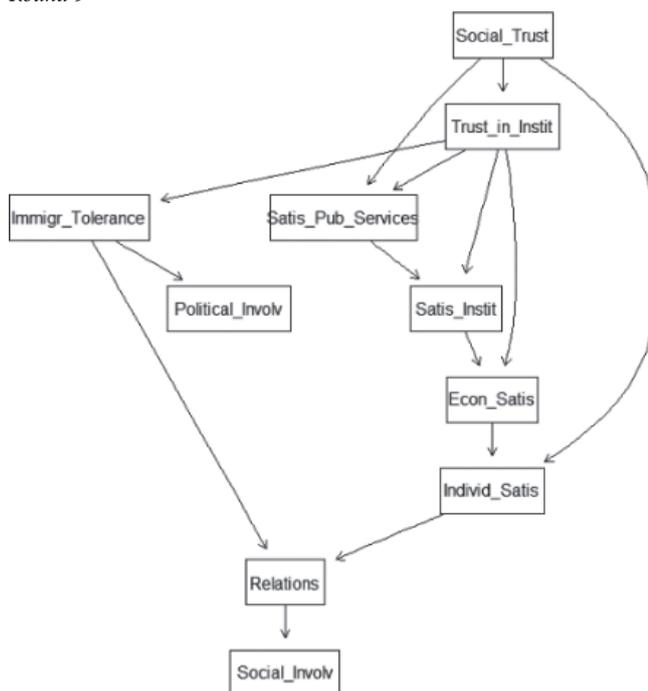
Finally, the Eastern countries (Fig. 7). In the first survey, tolerance toward immigrants appears at the end of the network structure. In the second, this index is generated by economic satisfaction and individual satisfaction and generates, in turn, political participation, reversing the relationship from what was observed in the previous round.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the hypotheses identified are confirmed. It emerges that the pandemic crisis has accelerated an isomorphic process in the liberal sense.

Indeed, the crisis is configured, above all, as economic and relational. After the pandemic, networks depend more on economic satisfaction and less on relational involvement. However, the importance of the role

Round 9



Round 10

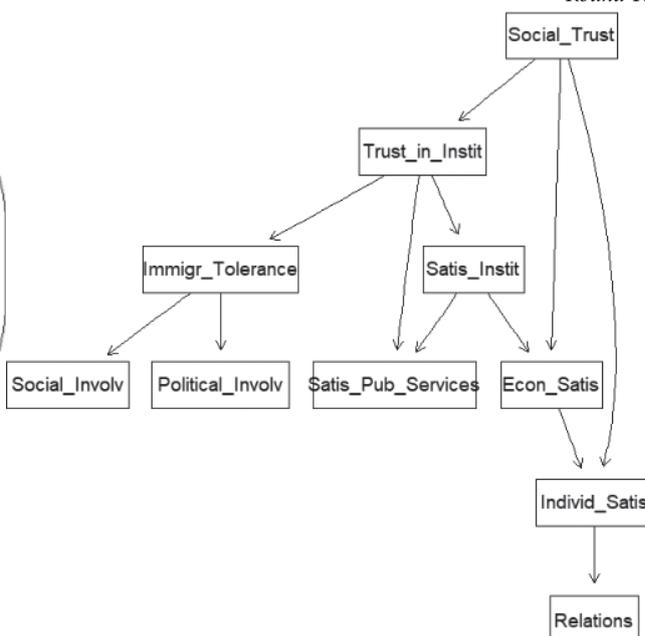
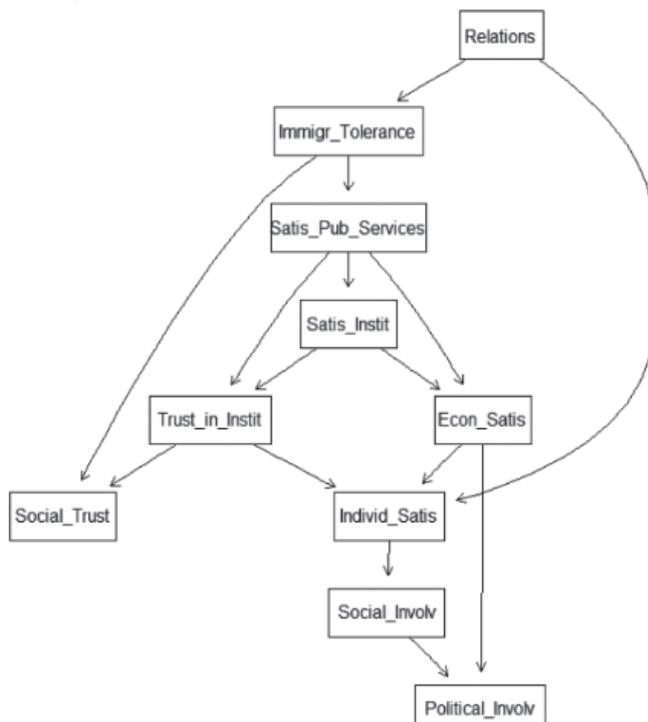


Figure 5. Nordic ESM: structure of networks. Source: Authors' elaboration.

Round 9



Round 10

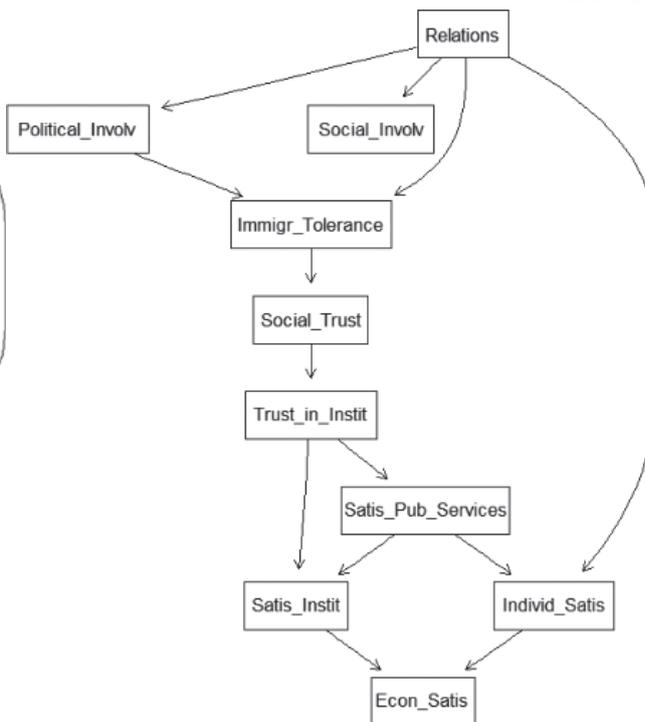


Figure 6. Mediterranean ESM: structure of networks. Source: Authors' elaboration.

Round 9

Round 10

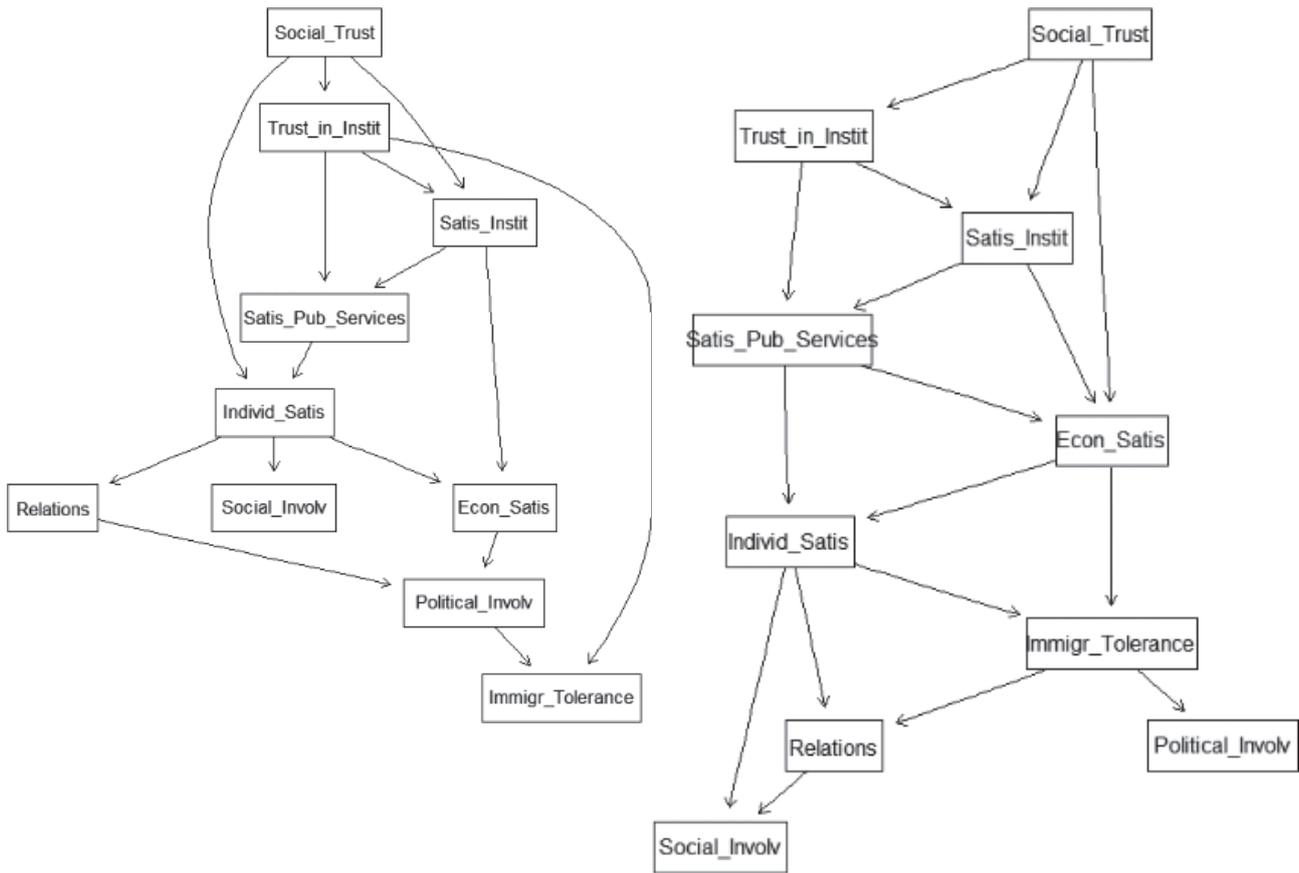


Figure 7. Eastern ESM: Structure of networks. Source: Authors' elaboration.

of trust is confirmed. The Mediterranean and Eastern European areas, in particular, present more distrust orientations. Both cohesion and social sustainability are at risk in these areas.

For the continental model, the pre-pandemic network shows significant differences from what we would expect. Three of four hypotheses (see par. 5) hold only after the pandemic. This is a context that changes a lot. Before the pandemic, the structure is governed directly by political participation. This means that there are probably other causes of political participation that are not controlled (actual income, high education, etc.). This condition is important because it promotes pro-social attitudes and tolerance to the point of generating social participation and economic satisfaction. Immediately after the pandemic, the network structure changes. The network in 2020-22 is derived from trust and pro-social attitudes, and economic satisfaction goes from irrelevant to tolerance and participation. After the pandemic this dynamic looks similar in all areas, replicating the conditions of a typical liberal model.

Table 6. Hypothesis (H) for each ESM.

H	Eu	Cont	Ang	Nord	Med	East
H <sub>1</sub>	Only ESS 10	Only ESS 10	Y	Y	Only ESS 10	Y
H <sub>2</sub>	Y	Only ESS 10	Y	Y	Only ESS 10	Y
H <sub>2,1</sub>	Y	Only ESS 10	Y	Y	Y	N
H <sub>3</sub>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Low

Source: Authors' elaboration.

What happens, then, in the case of the Anglo-Saxon model? The weight of liberal politics is evident here. Economic satisfaction is always crucial because it links the pole of attitudes and behaviours. Network structure always depends on trust (social and institutional) and satisfaction (personal, toward institutions and services). Moreover, social and political participation become only chain outcomes, dependent mainly on tolerance (or intolerance) toward immigrants. After the pandemic, however, individual satisfaction and economic satisfaction produce a set of conditions that favour or inhibit

both political and social participation. Perceived well-being directly affects attitudes of in/tolerance toward immigrants and indirectly affects opportunities for political and social involvement (which depend primarily on the trait of ethnic tolerance). These traits occur often and in different contexts, with some minor variation. It could be said that the pandemic has created a context in which, all things being equal, both the equity and solidarity/tolerance planes are reduced.

The Scandinavian context is the one on which the pandemic had the least impact, but even in the Nordic model, there is a direct and prioritized relationship between tolerance and socio-political involvement after the pandemic. Before 2020, the plane of political participation depended more on tolerance toward immigrants while social involvement derived from pro-social attitudes and orientations. After the pandemic, all forms of participation (political and social) depend on tolerance or prejudice toward immigrants. The latter is configured as separate from that of individual satisfaction, which is more related to the economic and relational sphere. Economic satisfaction in this context continues to play no important role in conveying forms of mobilization.

In the Mediterranean model, consistent with the assumption of the familyist model, everything is generated from the relational plane, and this is a trait that persists even after the pandemic. Economic satisfaction, which before 2020 did not affect the network, after the pandemic becomes the condition that most strongly affects individual satisfaction and political participation. It increases, in other words, the importance of individual resources (time, money, education) for access to political participation. There are, however, low probabilities of satisfaction and participation. Social trust becomes, on the other hand, an outcome and not a cause of the identified dynamics. These conditions seem particularly difficult for the creation of a socially sustainable environment.

Finally, the Eastern European context presents limited changes but shows different conditions from those recorded so far and, in particular, ethnic tolerance does not seem to be relevant while the dynamics producing political and social involvement are split.

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## Sustainability Culture, Environmental Activism and Political Ideology Among Young Adults: A Survey on Students at the University of Ferrara

VIVIANA ASARA, ALFREDO ALIETTI

**Abstract.** The 2018/2019 climate mobilisation have vigorously questioned the consensus about the sustainability paradigm that has been hegemonic since the 1980, politicising the environmental issue in the public debate, and representing a ‘political epiphany’ for an entire generation. How has this movement influenced young people’s interest for environmental issues, what is the extent and type of their environmental concern, what are their cognitive interpretations of the ecological crisis and solutions to it, and how they relate to environmental mobilisations? This article aims to address these questions by means of a survey distributed to students at the University of Ferrara (1005 responses), relating these factors to political ideology. It finds that young adults are extremely concerned about the ecological crisis. A majoritarian belief can be discerned that structural solutions are deemed as required, such as prioritising environmental protection even at the cost of economic growth, transforming the mode of production and consumption, and reducing social inequalities. Furthermore, while climate sceptical positions are by far marginal, there is a widespread critical position towards the capability of science and technological innovation to tackle the climate crisis, and a sweeping belief of the necessity of individual lifestyle changes. With the notable exception of the latter two, all these beliefs are correlated with political ideology, showing the importance of political positioning vis-à-vis the environmental question. Finally, a broad feeling of hopelessness and ‘agencylessness’ towards the future can be discerned, with a low confidence about the transformative role of social movements vis-à-vis the ecological transition, which is however balanced by two fifth of students mobilising in environmental protest.

**Keywords:** environmental concern, young adults, environmental activism, social movements, political ideology.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The new climate movements that emerged since 2018/2019 have represented the birth of a new wave of environmental mobilisations. The rapid emergence of the Fridays for Future (FFF) movement inspired by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg’s school climate strikes combined with the rise of other transnational environmental groups such as Extinction Rebellion and nationally-based movements such as the Gilets Jaunes in France and the Sun-

rise Movement in the USA have constituted a new cycle of environmental activism which is unprecedented in its global reach. With the pandemic, the movement entered into a latency phase, however subsequently regaining visibility with the emergence of spin-off climate groups such as Last Generation and End Fossil, which entered universities by claiming for the rejection of funding from oil multinational corporations, and by building coalitions with the workers struggles and with the feminist movement in some countries. In addition to the capability to mobilise people without previous activism – especially many school and university students– these movements display a powerful return to state-addressing forms of political claims, despite the low confidence in governments’ ability to address the climate issue (de Moor *et al.* 2020).

Given that school and university students make up the bulk of participants, following political socialisation studies, we could expect these movements to represent a «political epiphany for an entire generation» (Boulianne and Ohme 2022: 772), a vector of youth politicisation, impacting young adults’ framing of the environmental crisis, with profound and lasting effects on identity formation processes, and on how new generations perceive their “agency” in the political system (Boulianne and Ohme 2021: 772; De Moor *et al.* 2020; Wahlström *et al.* 2019). For example, studies on high school pupils (D’Uggento *et al.* 2023) have shown that, in the months following the FFF mobilisation peak (February 2020), students believed that climate movements could help effectively combat climate change by exerting an influence on policymakers.

In the constellation of the “multiple crises”, a deadlock in international environmental governance and politics (Swyngedouw 2022) or a “crisis of crisis management” (Brand and Wissen 2012) is increasingly apparent. Despite scientific consensus about the anthropogenic nature of climate change and its intimate relationship with fossil-based, consumer (capitalist) economy, the continuous erosion of climate parameters (IPCC 2023) and the appalling insufficiency of countries’ mitigation commitments to reach the Paris Agreement objective of 1.5°C temperature increase, and despite robust evidence that decoupling economic growth and resource consumption/environmental degradation is unfeasible on a global scale (Hickel and Kallis 2020; Wiedenhofer *et al.* 2020; Haberl *et al.* 2020), the sustainability paradigm has maintained its hegemony since the 1980s in international governance, policy, and institutions, purporting to harmonise economic growth, social welfare, and environmental protection (Asara *et al.* 2020; Blühdorn 2022). Through its various incarnations in akin concepts

such as sustainable development, green growth, and green economy, eco-politics has been reduced to a techno-managerial issue – built around the unquestioned imperative of economic growth – which can be solved by technological solutions and market mechanisms (Pellizzoni *et al.* 2022), by means of a displacement (or denial) of the real socio-ecological processes (Swyngedouw 2022) that drive the socio-ecological crisis.

Within this framework, the focus and responsibility for the “ecological transition” are shifted from national state regulation and public planning to individuals, civil society, and private initiatives which have to internalise the necessary environmental behaviour (Gómez-Baggethun and Naredo 2015; Thörn and Svenberg 2016) – understood mainly in consumption terms and according to market and efficiency rationalities – and become resilient to cope with social and environmental catastrophes that are increasingly perceived as unavoidable (Blühdorn 2022). By turning ecological limits into an opportunity for market-led valorisation, the ecological transition is thus transformed into a “new orthodoxy” (Brand 2016), slipping into a post-democratic governance built around consensual governing and a mainstreamed environmental discourse that attempts to erase social antagonism (Pellizzoni *et al.* 2022). But is the environment a consensual, non-divisive issue, beyond political viewpoints and ideological differences?

One could argue that it is this alleged consensus that the (not-so-new anymore) youth climate movements seem to have questioned. As Greta Thunberg declared at the UN Climate Action Week in September 2019: «how dare you pretend that this can be solved with just BAU and some technical solutions». A way out of the crisis thus lies with “system change not climate change” – to put it with a climate justice slogan. As she reiterated at the Youth4Climate meeting in Milan in September 2021,

*the climate crisis is of course only a symptom of a much larger crisis – the sustainability crisis, the social crisis – a crisis of inequality that dates back to colonialism and beyond – a crisis based on the idea that some people are worth more than others and therefore have a right to exploit and steal other people’s land and resources – and it is very naive to believe that we can solve this crisis without confronting the roots of it.*

This new wave of climate activism has put forth a vigorous critique of institutional “environmental” politics and governance and of the paradigm of sustainability, contending that the UNFCCC institutional framework is not effectively dealing with the climate crisis.

While trust in the capacity of institutions, from local to national and international (EU and UNFCCC)

levels to deal with environmental problems seems quite bleak (De Moor *et al.* 2020), some fundamental cleavages at the core of sustainability debates – such as the role of economic growth, technological innovations, social inequalities/justice, and the transformation of the mode of production and consumption – which were previously relegated in the climate justice radical flank of the climate movement, have acquired renewed importance in the discourses and frames of the new movement (De Moor 2018), permeating discourses in the media, with effects on public opinion (Fritz *et al.* 2023; Scruggs and Benegal 2012). For instance, a recent study (Fritz *et al.* 2023) found that the FFF movement and Greta Thunberg positively influenced the environmental concern and behaviour of Swiss residents.

In this article, we aim to understand beliefs related to the environmental problem, solutions to it, and the ecological transition process among “educated” youth, as represented by university students, focusing on: a) what are the issues of environmental concern and its extent, b) how do they interpret the ecological crisis and what do they see as possible solutions, e.g. scrutinising the perceived role of social inequalities, economic growth, science and technology, and on changes to lifestyles and the mode of production and consumption; c) the extent of their environmental activism, beliefs on their agency and level of confidence on the role of social movements for tackling climate change; d) how are all these factors related to political ideology.

We investigate these questions by means of a survey carried out through an online questionnaire sent to the entire student population of the University of Ferrara. The analysis undertaken is mostly of a descriptive kind, aiming to provide a discussion of these cognitive beliefs and how they relate to political positionings. We are aware that the descriptive bent can represent a limit, but it is a first necessary step that allows us to offer a general understanding and overview of the research results, so as to later deepen specific issues in a more sophisticated manner.

The rest of this paper first reviews the literature on environmental attitudes and behaviour, identifying some key findings as well as research gaps that emerged in this body of work; then research methods are briefly explained, followed by a description of the main findings, which are discussed in the last section.

## 2. ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN, ITS DETERMINANTS AND CONSEQUENTS

Literature on environmental attitudes and concerns has garnered a conspicuous amount of scholarly atten-

tion over the past half century, and increasingly so since the 1990s, involving an interdisciplinary field comprising sociology, psychology, political science, anthropology, and communication (Cruz 2017; Telesiene and Hadler 2023). According to a recent survey of the literature covering environmental attitudes and behaviour (Telesiene and Hadler 2023), since 2000s the field has been slowly witnessing a relative increase in the use of sociopsychological (individual) level constructs and behavioural variables, typical of psychology studies, as compared to sociostructural variables. The New Ecological Paradigm, originally proposed as New Environmental Paradigm in late 1970s by Dunlap and van Liere (1978; see also Dunlap *et al.* 2000), is the most employed theoretical approach within this field. The central thrust behind this framework was the idea that environmentalism implied a challenge to fundamental views about nature and humans’ relationship to it, thus attempting to carve out “primitive beliefs” about the nature of the earth and humanity’s relationship with it” (Dunlap *et al.* 2000). One of the most cited definitions of Environmental Concern (EC) is provided by NEP scholars (Dunlap and Jones 2002: 485), who define it as «the degree to which people are aware of problems regarding the environment and support efforts to solve them and/or indicate a willingness to contribute personally to their solution».

The other two most popular theories within the field of environmental attitudes and concern are the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and the Theory of reasoned action (TRA). These have offered behaviour models that can be utilized for explaining the reasons of pro-environmental intentions – such as willingness to pay – and behaviour (EB) such as green consumerism and lifestyles, providing a rational-choice account of behaviour as the result of individual attitudes, social norms, intentions and evaluation of its consequences (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980; Ajzen 1991; Suarez *et al.* 2021).

Research in this field has followed two main routes: on the one hand, a considerable amount of work has focused on the determinants of environmental concern (Arshad *et al.* 2020; Cruz 2017; Liu, Vedlitz and Shi 2014; Post and Meng 2018) while another large corpus of literature has addressed the consequents of EC, that is pro-environmental behavior (Calculli *et al.* 2021; Chuvieco *et al.* 2018; Fielding and Head 2012; Rampedi and Ifegbesan 2022; Suárez-Perales *et al.* 2021; Tezel, Ugural and Giritli 2018). In the first body of studies, three main factors at the individual level have been analysed as determinants of EC: worldviews and values about human-nature relationships, sociodemographics, and political orientations (Liu, Vedlitz and Shi 2014). These will be deepened in the next section.

### 2.1. Determinants of EC

The NEP scale has been the most popular measurement of ecological worldviews and EC, focusing on beliefs about human capacity and right to upset the balance of nature and rule over it, and the existence of limits to growth. According to this framework, EC is a multifaceted construct consisting of two conceptual components: the environmental – the substantive content of EC, operationalised by a set of environmental issues such as pollution, biodiversity or climate change – and the concern component, which can be expressed by attitudes, beliefs, intentions, and behaviours (Dunlap and Jones 2002). It includes a set of questions, which have later been updated by their proponents, as well as revised in a shortened version by many researchers (Dunlap *et al.* 2000; Liu *et al.* 2014). However, it has been subject to criticism for being «overly simplistic and outdated» and for holding «low face validity» (Cruz 2017: 83; Lalonde and Jackson 2002).

Research on sociodemographic determinants of EC has focused on characteristics such as gender differences, age, race/ethnicity, and social class status (as measured by income, education and occupational prestige, see Van Liere and Dunlap 1980). Evidence on these factors is, however, not conclusive. While in general women have been found to hold higher levels of EC than men (Liu, Vedlitz and Shi 2014, exceptions can be found e.g. in Clements 2012), the evidence is mixed with regards to social class status – although education generally plays a positive role for EC (Clements 2012; Fielding and Head 2012; Chuvieco *et al.* 2018; Post and Meng 2018; Rampedi and Ifegbesan 2022) – and for race/ethnicity (Clements 2012; Liu, Vedlitz and Shi 2014). With regards to age, a majority of studies has found youth to display greater environmental concern than adults and lower levels of climate scepticism (Valdez, Peterson and Stevenson 2018; Liu, Vedlitz and Shi 2014), apart from a few exceptions (Partridge 2008). This has been explained by youth's lower integration in the dominant economic system (Van Liere and Dunlap 1980), generational changes and experience (*Ibidem*; Kanagy *et al.* 1994) and higher education about environmental issues (Howell and Laska 1992).

Research on the third set of determinants of EC, i.e. political orientation, has increasingly demonstrated the partisan and ideological divisions underneath public perceptions on environmental matters. Political ideology describes the political position one falls on the spectrum of political beliefs, ranging from left to right, while political partisanship or political party affiliation refers to the major political party with which someone identifies (Cruz 2017). Political ideology has a multidimensional nature, comprising values and beliefs around issues of social order, stratification, and the role of business and government. For example, the range of ideological dimensions have included support for welfare-state policies, civil liberties and social justice, regulatory laissez-faire or policies, business interests, social stability and traditional values (Dunlap, Xiao and McCright 2001). While some early studies conducted in the USA in the 1970s reported little if any relationship between ideological preferences/political partisanship and environmental attitudes among the general public (Buttel and Flinn 1974; Buttel and Johnson 1977; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1981), this has been attributed to environmentalism starting out as a consensual issue partly because much of the country's landmark environmental legislation was promulgated during the Republican Nixon and Ford administration with considerable bipartisan support (Dunlap *et al.* 2001). While a few other early studies casted doubt on this consensual finding, even for the USA (Cruz 2017), it is later literature that has set the ground for the general consistency of the statistically significant relationship ( $p=.005$ ) between political ideology/party affiliation and environmental concern, at least in developed, capitalist nations (*Ibidem*; Nawrotzki 2012; Fobissie 2019; Davidovic *et al.* 2020). However, while the great majority of studies has been conducted in the USA, those focusing on beliefs about solutions to the ecological crisis are relegated to a few national case studies (Dunlap *et al.* 2001; Nawrotzki 2012; Taniguchi, Aldikacti and Marshall 2018). Furthermore, as explained in the next section, the great majority of ideology studies has focuses on environmental intention and (individual) behaviour, rather than collective action/environmental activism. It would be thus salient to understand how these factors relate with political ideology.

2.2. Consequents of EC: pro-environmental behaviour and collective action

### 2.2. Consequents of EC: pro-environmental behaviour and collective action

A second body of work within literature on environmental attitudes and concern has focused on the consequents of EC, that is pro-environmental behaviour (PEB) and intentions. EC (and environmental knowledge) was originally considered as a powerful determinant of PEB and/or PEB intentions (Tezel *et al.* 2018), most notably in psychology-driven TRA and TPB models; however, such a linear relationship was increasingly questioned by a few studies, that highlighted that more environmental concern did not translate automatically into PEB due, for instance, to cultural differences (Kollmus and Agyeman 2002).

Only a minority of studies has focused on collective and public action rather than individual pro-environmental behaviour, scrutinising the role of intervening variables such as the self-perceived political efficacy of political action, institutional and generalised trust or the influence of sources of information such as education in universities and schools or of mainstream and social media as drivers of environmental activism (Hickman *et al.* 2021; Besel, Burke and Christos 2015; Boulianne and Ohme 2022; Feldman *et al.* 2017; Mudaliar, McElroy and Brenner 2022). Within this subset of literature, a few studies have underlined that EC does not translate in environmental political action: most young adults engage in individual, everyday, short-term action, such as green consumerism, eschewing political activities (Gallagher and Cattellino 2020; Harris, Wyn and Younes 2010; Mudaliar *et al.* 2022). This is due to several interconnected factors: a general sense of disillusionment with politics, distrust with the possibility and political efficacy of political action, and the individualisation of responsibility typical of neoliberal environmental governance (Gómez-Baggethun and Narredo 2015; van Meer and Zografos 2024; Thörn and Svenberg 2016). Young people are thus pushed out of traditional politics while being pulled in by political consumerism, due to higher perceived internal political efficacy of the latter linked to a distrust of institutional political actors (Kyroglou and Henn 2022).

Studies on the FFF movement conducted in the aftermath of mobilisations have found a positive impact of the movement on the general public's environmental concern and behaviour, on willingness to engage in climate activism as well as on discourses (Venghaus *et al.* 2022; Blüh-dorn and Deflorian 2021), due to a positive evaluation and trust in the potential of environmental movements, and more particularly of the FFF movement and Greta Thunberg, which acted as an inspiring leverage for mobilisation (De Moor *et al.* 2020; Fritze *et al.* 2023). However, it is unclear whether these evaluations and impact are enduring 5 years after the peak of mobilisations, following the reduction of the movement's visibility in the media. In addition, the contextual conjuncture has much changed since then, with new intersecting crises coming in – pandemic, geopolitical and energy crisis, and new wars bordering the European and Mediterranean areas. For example, according to a study, this has led to the importance of a “climate peace” approach in young people's environmental activism, featuring a focus on climate justice and claims for systemic change (Bowman and Pickard 2021).

In this article we aim to analyse two sets of different questions. On the one hand, the extent and type of environmental concern on the part of university students and their cognitive beliefs about solutions to the crisis

and their relationships with between political ideology. On the other hand, we aim to find out what is the extent of environmental activism, students' perceived influence upon the process of ecological transition and the confidence they place upon social movements to counter the climate crisis, and impact Greta Thunberg exerted on their interest in climate change. Our hypothesis is that political ideology not only is correlated with young adults' environmental concern, but also to perceived solutions to the climate crisis and transformative potential of movements, and to political participation.

### 3. METHODS

This paper uses survey data collected from end of October 2023 to January 2024. The online survey was sent via email to all university students enrolled in 3-year Bachelor's degrees (Laurea Triennale), 2-year-Master's degrees (Laurea magistrale) and 5-year-single cycle degrees, comprising a total of 30,600 students. A total of 1005 online questionnaires were collected of which 710 were fully completed. While our sample has the traditional limitation of self-selection of responses, thus failing to meet the requirement of data generalisability, the results can be valuable for their sociological interest given the breadth of the sample and the fair distribution among the three disciplinary areas of reference of the entire education offer: health, scientific-technological and humanistic-social disciplines covered respectively 35%, 29.3% and 35.7% of the total number of participating students. As far as course type is concerned, the majority of respondents falls into the three-year bachelor's degree category (50%), 15.3% of respondents attend (2-year) master's degrees, and 34.7% of students are enrolled in (5-year) single-cycle degree courses. In terms of gender, we have a marked preponderance of female students (73.8%) compared to male students (26.2%). This gender asymmetry of the self-selected sample is in line with other research carried out at the university. In terms of age, almost 78% of students fall within the 2000-2005 age group. The questionnaire is composed of 38 questions, many of which are constituted of several sub-questions, but for this study we will be drawing only on a subset of questions.

### 4. RESULTS

#### 4.1. Descriptive statistics

Respondents were asked to rate their level of concern for five specific environmental issues (biodiversity

loss, climate change, pollution, deforestation, and land consumption) using a scale from 1 to 5: not at all, a little, a moderate amount, a lot, a great deal. Tab. 1 shows that the majority of students report high and very high levels of EC. Multiple response items on ecological concerns show that, considering the ensemble of 5 environmental problems, 71.2% of students reported high or very high levels of concern at least for one item. The results also show that pollution and climate change are by far the environmental problems that arouse the highest concern, with 86.2% and 83.4% of respondents being either highly or very highly concerned and only 1.9% and 3.4% of students being little or not at all concerned. The environmental issues that show the highest environmental concern, following the climate change and pollution items, are, in descending order, deforestation (72% of high and very high concern), biodiversity loss (63.2% of high and very high concern), and, lastly, land consumption (51.3% of high and very high concern). It is apparent that environmental problems displaying strongest concern (climate change, deforestation and pollution) are those topics gaining most media attention, but those harnessing less concern still arouse important apprehension.

The results of the climate change concern question combine well with those of two other statements (Tab. 2). On the one hand, the great majority of students (84.3% of respondents) rejects the statement (S1) that “climate change has been exaggerated by environmentalists and scientists”, with only 4.5% of students strongly and greatly agreeing with this thesis. This reinforces the argument that the climate crisis is an issue of high concern and taken very seriously, showing an attitude of confidence towards scientific evidence about climate change. On the other hand, this confidence about the seriousness of the climate crisis is associated with some sense of hopelessness about the prospects of climate change mitigation (which might explain students’ strong concerns). Indeed, a significant part of students (38.7%) does not agree or shows little support for the statement (S2) that “CO2 emissions have reached such a level that we cannot reduce them in an efficacious manner but can only adapt to the state of being”, 23.7% of them strongly or greatly agree with this statement, and 37.6% moderately agree with it, thus showing a majority of young adults (61.3%) being somewhat disillusioned and resigned about having to simply adapt with the scenario of a climate-altered world.

A subset of six questions dealt with cognitive interpretations of the ecological crisis and potential solutions to it, asking how much students agree with a series of statements (Table. 3). Two of them were partly inspired by

**Table 1.** Environmental concern.

	<i>Not at all, a little</i>	<i>A moderate amount</i>	<i>A lot, a great deal</i>
Biodiversity loss	7,2	29,7	63,1
Climate change	3,4	13,2	83,4
Pollution	1,9	11,9	86,2
Deforestation	4,9	23,1	72,0
Land consumption	17,5	31,2	51,3

*Valid cases:* 833.

**Table 2.** Climate scepticism and prospects for climate mitigation.

	<i>Agreement</i>		
	<i>Not at all, a little</i>	<i>Moderate amount</i>	<i>A lot, a great deal</i>
Climate scepticism (S1)	84,3	11,2	4,5
Climate adaptation (S2)	38,7	37,6	23,7

*Valid cases:* 833.

NEP modified scale (La Trobe and Acott 2000; Dunlap *et al.* 2000; Liu *et al.* 2014; Clements 2012) and asked the level of agreement on two statements: “it is necessary to give priority to environmental protection, even at the cost of reducing economic growth/production and consumption levels” (S3); “science and technological innovation will be able to solve the effects of climate change” (S4). A third statement investigates attitudes towards Artificial Intelligence, asking to provide one’s opinion on whether “AI offers high potential to tackle the environmental crisis” (S5). The other three questions asked the level of agreement with a series of statements about actions that are necessary to pursue if the ecological crisis is to be tackled seriously: “to reduce social inequalities” (S6); “to transform the mode of production and consumption” (S7); “to change lifestyles and behaviours” (S8).

It is noteworthy that the two items gathering the most agreement as potential solutions to tackle the ecological crisis (around 87% answered agreed “a lot” and “a great deal”, with less than 2% of students disagreeing) are statements about the necessity to transform the mode of production and consumption (S7) and to change lifestyles and behaviours (S8). If we consider these beliefs in pair with the following statement receiving most agreement (66,5% of strong and very strong agreement, and only 5.4% of disagreement), we can deduce that the majority of students believe that solutions to the ecological crisis should involve both a structural transformation of the growth-oriented economic

**Table 3.** Actions to solve the ecological crisis.

	Agreement		
	<i>Not at all, a little</i>	<i>Moderate amount</i>	<i>A lot, a great deal</i>
Prioritisation of environmental protection (S3)	5.4	28.1	66.5
Science and technological innovation (S4)	21,9	45,8	32,3
Artificial Intelligence (S5)	37,1	44,9	18
Reduction of social inequalities (S6)	15,4	29	55,6
Transformation of the mode of production and consumption (S7)	1,2	11,7	87,1
Change of lifestyles and behaviours (S8)	1,8	10,6	87,6

*Valid cases:* 820.

model and changes at the individual level of lifestyle behaviour. For slightly more than half of students, a major component of these transformations should also involve the reduction of social inequalities as part and parcel of the ecological transition (S6), thus revealing the importance of a social justice approach as inextricably linked to environmental outcomes (climate justice). The role of science and technological innovation is instead ambivalent, as only 32.3% of students perceive them as solutions able to tackle the climate crisis, against 21.9% of students perceiving them as of little or no relevance, with the majority of students located in a middle-ground position (S4). Such ambivalence turns into an even more critical position and diffidence towards technocratic solutions when AI is called into question (S5), as only 18% of students strongly/very strongly agree that such a technological innovation offers a viable solution to the environmental crisis.

Finally, we have scrutinised students' perceptions of their influence on the ecological transition process and the extent of their political participation in environmental protests. Only 11.9% of respondents believe they have a lot or a great deal of influence on the ecological transition process, while more than half of them (53.1%) perceive they have no or little influence upon it, and around one third (35%) of respondents believe they have a fair amount of influence (valid cases: 754). Furthermore, 36.6% of students have not at all or little confidence in the capability of social movements to tackle climate change, and only 25.9% have high and very high confidence in their potential for climate change mitigation.

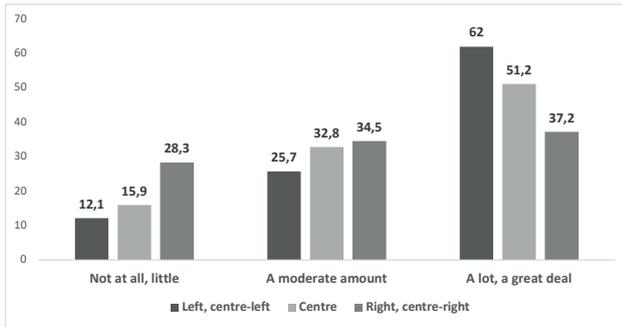
Despite these figures, which reveal a picture of considerable perceived "agencylessness" on the part of students, two-fifths of students (38.55%) have participated in at least one environmental protest or demonstration in the last five years, showing that a conspicuous part mobilises notwithstanding the low confidence in the transformative potential of collective action. It is note-

worthy that only 22.1% of students assert that Greta Thunberg exerted "a lot" or "a great deal" of influence on their interest in climate-related issues, while more than half of students (51.2%) declare she had no or little influence, and 26.7% of students declare a fair amount of influence.

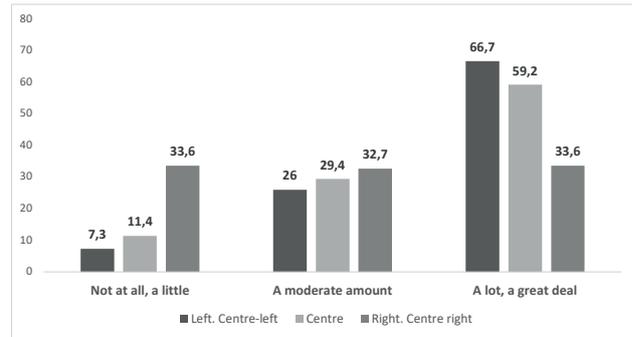
In the next section, we will look at the role of political ideology, measured on a scale from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right), which will be analysed by different tables of contingency with a high level of correlation between the variables (99% of significance).

#### 4.2. *The role of political ideology*

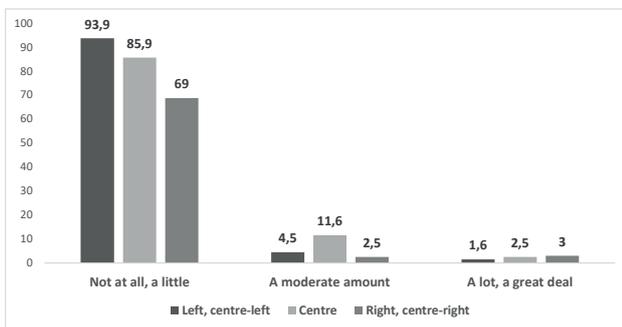
In line with many studies' findings on the determinants of EC (see section 2.1), our study shows that political ideology is correlated with all types of environmental concern, with those on the left side of the political spectrum showing higher levels of EC. However, the correlation sociologically holds little significance because the great majority of the sample is (very) strongly concerned about environmental issues, beyond ideological positions. Only for one type of environmental issue, land consumption, the correlation is sociologically relevant because, in this case, EC displays a consistent quota of people with low and moderate levels of concern: 62% of students self-declaring as either left or centre-left are a lot or greatly concerned about land consumption, as compared to only 37.2% of students with right and centre-right political positions (Fig. 1). Conversely, only 12.1% of the former group is not at all or little concerned about land consumption, as compared to 28.3% of students belonging to the latter group.



**Figure 1.** Contingency table of land consumption by political ideology. *Valid cases: 559 (p=0.005).*



**Figure 3.** Contingency table of necessity of reduction of social inequalities (S6) by political ideology. *Valid cases: 559(p=0.005).*



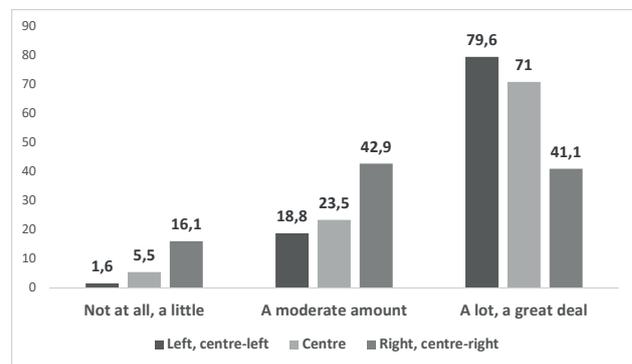
**Figure 2.** Contingency table of climate scepticism (S1) by political ideology. *Valid cases 557 (p=0.005).*

Furthermore, within a general non-sceptical orientation (S1), leftist students display a relatively higher level of strong/very strong disagreement with the climate scepticism hypothesis (93.9% of them strongly/very strongly disagree), as compared to rightist students (69%) (Fig. 2).

With regards to actions and solutions to tackle the climate/ecological crisis, our study confirms what might seem intuitive, i.e. political ideology is correlated with the belief that social inequalities should be reduced if the ecological crisis is to be tackled seriously (S6): two thirds of students self-positioned on the left side of the political spectrum declare high/very high levels of agreement as compared to only one-third of students located on the right side of the political spectrum (Fig. 3).

A similar correlation is also found between the perceived necessity of giving priority to environmental protection (even at the cost of economic growth) and political ideology (fig. 4). In this case, our sample shows that the leftist group is more inclined to prioritise environmental protection than the rightist group (79,6% vs. 41,1%) (Fig. 4).

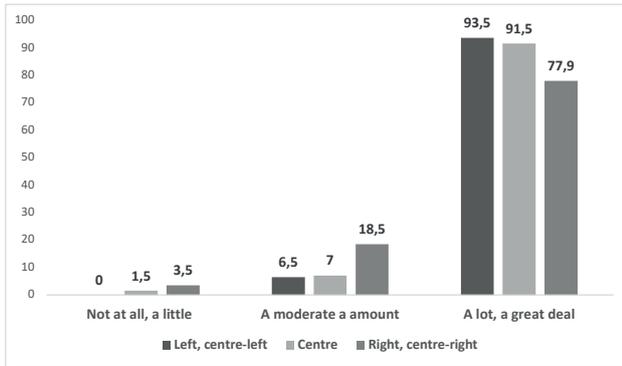
Instead, with regards to the necessity to transform the mode of consumption and production (S7), while



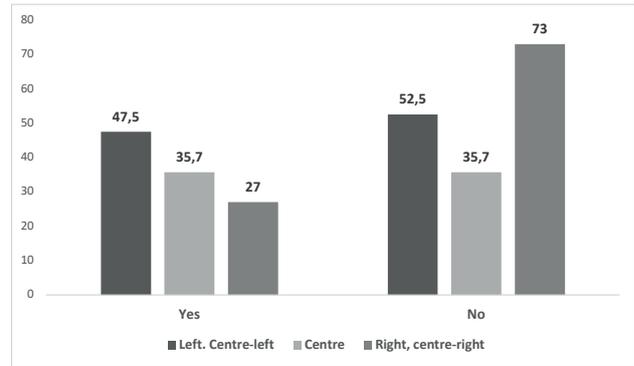
**Figure 4.** Contingency table of prioritisation of environmental protection (S3) by political ideology. *Valid cases: 557 (p=0.005).*

there is a significant correlation, implying that there is a higher agreement on the part of centre-leftist and leftist students, it is noteworthy that the share of rightist and centre-rightist students which are highly favourable to transform the mode of production and consumption is nonetheless substantial (77.9%) (fig. 5).

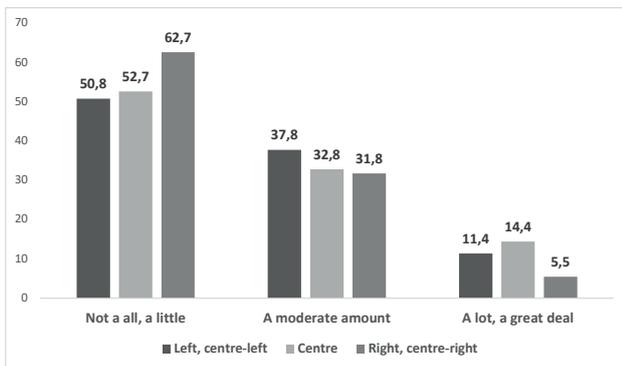
What is interesting is that the change in lifestyle and behaviours (S8) as a solution to the climate crisis is not correlated with political ideology, as it emerges as a transversal belief across ideological positions. Other two variables are not correlated with political ideology: the perceived confidence to mitigate climate change (S2), which is homogeneously distributed across political partisanship, and the confidence in the capability of science and technological innovation to solve the effects of climate change (S4). While prospects about the possibility of curbing global warming rest beyond ideological divisions, political orientation does correlate, although not strongly, with the perceived influence exerted upon the ecological transition process (Fig. 6): 62.7% of rightist students believe they have little or no influence on the



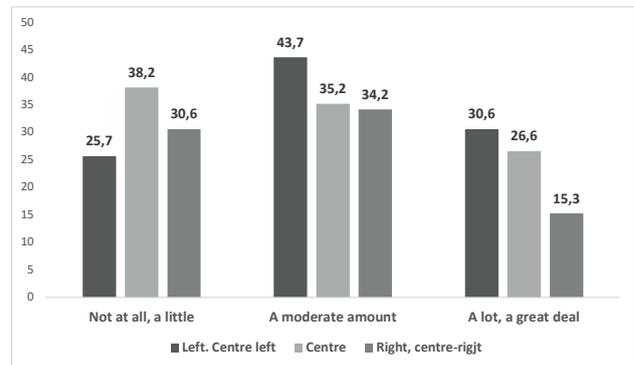
**Figure 5.** Contingency table of transformation of the mode of production and consumption (S7) by political ideology. *Valid cases: 558 (p=0.005).*



**Figure 7.** Contingency table of participation in environmental protest by political ideology. *Valid cases: 559 (p=0.005).*



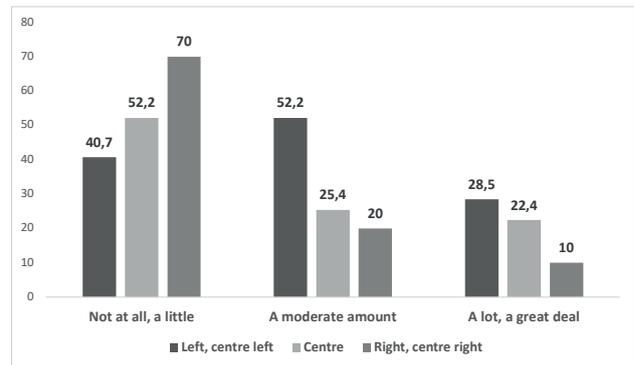
**Figure 6.** Contingency table of perceived influence upon the ecological transition process by political ideology. *Valid cases: 557 (p=0.005).*



**Figure 8.** Contingency table of confidence in the potential of social movements by political ideology. *Valid cases: 555 (p=0.005).*

process of ecological transition, as compared to 50.8% of leftist students.

Finally, political participation and confidence in the role of social movements are examined. Participation in environmental protests is correlated with political ideology. In the below table of contingency, we can observe that 47.5% of leftist students have participated in at least one protest in the last five years, as compared to only 27% of rightist students. Leftist students also display higher levels of confidence in the capability of social movements to tackle climate change (Fig. 8), with almost a third of leftist students (30.6%) declaring a lot/a great deal of confidence in the potential of social movements, as compared to only 15.3% of rightist students. Lastly, as expected, the influence Greta Thunberg played on students' interest in climate-related issues also varies according to political positioning (Fig. 9), as 28.5% of leftist students declared she had a strong/very strong influence (against 40.7% declaring no/little influence) as



**Figure 9.** Contingency table of Greta Thunberg's influence on climate-related issues by political ideology. *Valid cases: 556 (p=0.005).*

compared to 10% of rightist students declaring so (and a sweeping 70% of rightist students claiming no or little influence).

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Young adults are strongly concerned about the ecological crisis, especially about issues that are in the spotlight in the media debate, i.e. climate change, pollution, and deforestation. Within this widespread strong concern for environmental issues, which is corroborated by the very low levels of climate scepticism, we can discern a correlation effect with political ideology, which is sociologically relevant, nonetheless, only for land consumption, whose levels of low/moderate concern are not insignificant.

There is by far a majoritarian belief that for the climate crisis to be tackled, marginal adjustments, or incremental policies and technological solutions will not do: structural solutions are deemed as required, such as prioritising environmental protection at the cost of economic growth, transforming the mode of production and consumption, and – less so, but still important, with two-thirds of strong agreement – reducing social inequalities. All these solutions are ideologically differentiated, especially with regards to the trade-off between economic growth and environmental protection and the social justice/inequalities dimensions, which show high agreement only from 41.1% and 33.6% of rightist students, respectively. However, it is remarkable that even a wide portion of rightist students see a change in the mode of producing and consuming as required (77.9% strongly agree). We could interpret the structural changes in the mode of production and consumption to feature two different visions: a leftist critical viewpoint that envisions systemic changes embedded within a social justice approach, and a rightist vision that aims at structural changes within the existing capitalist market economy, where the reduction of social inequalities is a priority requirement only for around a third of the sample (and another third of students moderately acknowledge it). The rise of inequalities during the neoliberal era has been appalling, and intimately tied to the climate crisis (Oxfam 2022; Chancel *et al.* 2022) – the world's richest 10% are responsible for almost 50% of all emissions (*Ibidem*). The debate on the nexus inequality-climate crisis that has found a place also in mainstream media could potentially explain the recognition by even a minority of rightist students that addressing large inequalities in carbon emissions is essential for tackling climate change.

Furthermore, only a third of students have high confidence in the potential of scientific and technological innovations to solve the effects of the climate crisis (plummeting to 18% when AI is called into question), a somewhat critical stance that, on the one hand, rejects the hypothesis of scientisation (De Moor *et al.* 2020: 26) and, on the other hand, reinforces the interpretation that

solutions need to be structural rather than contemplating marginal adjustments by means of technological fixes. Indeed, the science & technology question is one of the two only solutions that are “ideologically neutral”. The other solution to the ecological crisis that is not ideologically skewed is the perceived necessity of lifestyle and behaviours changes (S8). This statement, together with the one on the structural transformation of the mode of production and consumption, is the one that receives the most support (87% of strong agreement). How to interpret these findings? We will reflect on this element after having discussed the political participation findings.

It is difficult to note the sweeping feeling of ‘agencylessness’ towards the future: more than half of students believe that whatever action they undertake, it will have no or little influence upon the ecological transition process, with collective action being valued as politically efficacious only by a quarter of students. This finding stands in contrast with studies undertaken right after the peak of FFF mobilisations (D’Uggento *et al.* 2023; Fritz *et al.* 2023; De Moor *et al.* 2020) and signals a partial shift in FFF perceptions 5 years later, whereby only around a fifth of students have reported an influence exerted by Greta Thunberg and around half declared no or little influence. This widespread hopelessness can also be found in the considerable diffusion of the belief that it may be too late to act to prevent climate mitigation in an efficacious manner, having to live with climate adaptation as a sole strategy (only 38.7% of students do not agree with this statement). While confidence placed in the role of social movements as well as personal agency vis-à-vis the ecological transition process is ideologically skewed towards leftist students, the feeling that climate adaptation is the “only game in town” is homogeneously distributed across ideological positioning.

In this scenario, if political hope is an important condition for social and political engagement (Goldman 2023) – and the perceived effectiveness of the action is a driver of environmental activism (Brunsting and Postmes 2002; Ajzen and Fishbein 1980; Ajzen 1991) – collective action might appear to be at risk. However, despite these challenges, two-fifths of students (38.55%) have taken part in at least one environmental protest in the last five years – not a wide portion but still a considerable one – possibly indicating that evaluation of the consequences of political efficacy is not the sole spur to mobilisations. Who are these politically active students? Although we don’t have information on when they did mobilise, e.g. whether this was during the FFF peak of mobilisation, before the waning of their political hope, or whether they protested despite distrust in the possi-

bility of making an impact, of any sort – we know that leftist students are more likely to mobilise and take part to environmental protests, with almost half of them having taken part to an environmental demonstration, as compared to only 27% of rightist students.

Going back to the perceived solutions to the ecological crisis, what is striking is the sweeping belief of the necessity of voluntary lifestyle changes (S8) – beyond ideological positioning – and of the structural transformation of the mode of production and consumption (S7) as key actions to solve the ecological crisis, gathering the most agreement. On the one hand, one could see the role of lifestyle changes as a result in line with studies underlining the prevalence of private, individual pro-environmental behaviour due to a pervasive neoliberal context of individual responsabilisation and a sense of distrust with traditional politics. On the other hand, this interpretation is tempered when combined with cognitive beliefs about the need for structural changes in the mode of production and consumption, for a social justice approach, and a “beyond growth” orientation sceptical of technological fixes.

What this research makes clear is the ideological underpinning of cognitive beliefs about the ecological crisis and solutions to it, and its salience for understanding environmental activism and attitudes around it, rejecting the hegemonic hypothesis that the ecological transition is a consensual, non-divisive issue. Future analyses should deepen the role of institutional trust for environmental activism and visions of ecological transition.

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## Political Consumerism and Fairtrade: Some Critical/Theoretical Points

FEDERICO MONTANARI, MASSIMILIANO PANARARI

**Abstract.** In the past decades, fairtrade and political consumerism became two paradigms of sustainability at large. And above all, in the context of social metamorphosis, they reflected another chapter of postmaterialist values update's. Then, could we talk about a sort of “gastropolitics” (or, better, “gastropolity”)? And could we talk about this subject inside the frame of a political sociology of sustainability? Political consumerism refers to the deliberate purchase or avoidance of products, goods, or services for political reasons. And political consumption is a field of research at the intersection of consumer research and political sociology. Political consumption means the consideration of ethical or political motives in the decision to buy certain kind of products and to choose certain typologies of goods. Political consumerism is mainly expressed through boycotts and buycotts by consumers who want to make clear their political, ethical and environmental concerns. With this paper we would like to try to use some of these categories to discuss some examples and models of Fairtrade as a paradigm that has emerged in recent years in public discourse, disputing on what are possible critics and “objections” concerning so-called “Fairtrade debate”. And finally, we would like to use, on the other hand, as concrete case studies, two examples that although rather “classic”, studied in the relevant literature, serve us to critically explore the edges and involutions of the fairtrade and consumerism paradigm. Two very different brands that nevertheless seem to embody the extremes of this paradigm: on the one hand that of Slow food and on the other that of Whole Food.

**Keywords:** fairtrade, political consumerism, sociology of consumptions, gastropolitics.

### 1. POLITICAL CONSUMERISM AND “GASTROPOLITICS”

Could we explore emerging new hybrid forms of “gastropolitics”<sup>1</sup>? (see Appadurai 1981; Low 2021; Montanari 2021; Marrone 2014) Or, better to say, “gastropolity”? This is one of the suggestions we propose in this article, which seeks to trace some interpretative hypotheses around the interweav-

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<sup>1</sup> As is well known, the term “gastro-politics” was coined by Appadurai: see his seminal article, Appadurai (1981). For a discussion, see Low (2021). Let us recall that for Appadurai the semiotic, thus meaning-creating, forms of food take on particularly intense characters within the contexts of “gastro-politics” where food becomes a kind of “medium,” a translator of discourses, often of conflicts and within sets of values, of a given community, culture or social context. Sometimes acting as a “homogenizer of actors” mediator, sometimes as an accelerator, creating “heterogeneous” perspectives among them.

ing between political consumerism and lifestyle politics (and also identity politics). We examine these dynamics in the context of the contemporary crisis of the imaginaries of historicized political ideologies. “Food politics” is nothing new, of course; we can refer, for example, to the debate in *Sociologica* 1 (2009) about Johnston and Baumann’s article *Tension in the Kitchen. Explicit and Implicit Politics in the Gourmet Foodscape*. In this article, the two authors stated that a «sandwich doesn’t display its party affiliation, although it may send out important messages about the eater’s commitments to sustainability, animal welfare, or local food processors» (Ivi: 1). A snapshot that precisely “captures” the meaning of political consumerism.

Political consumerism refers to the deliberate purchase or avoidance of products, goods, or services for political reasons. Political consumption is a field of research at the intersection of consumer research and political sociology. Political consumption means the consideration of ethical or political motives in the decision to buy certain kinds of products and to choose certain typologies of goods. This transformation, which took place in the mentality, practices, and lifestyles of increasingly wider sectors of public opinion, can be considered as one of the effects of globalization and the structuring of the so-called Network Society, also studied from this point of view by Castells. The WTO’s decisions about good markets and transnational political economy, the growth of material well-being and comfort, the expansion of consumption alternatives, the development of the Internet, globalized media, digital communication devices and the allurements of mass self-communication (Castells 2002) create the conditions for the diffusion of such concerns. Political consumerism is mainly expressed through boycotts and buycotts by consumers who want to make clear their political, ethical (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2005) and environmental (Jallinoja, Vinnari and Niva 2019; Bossy 2014) concerns (Becher *et al.* 2022).

Although political consumption carries social and political values, it is above all an individual participation form (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2005), implemented through a series of spending and consumption choices. But, at the same time, actions within political consumerism have collective goals, they can be performed both individually or collectively (Bossy 2014), and increasingly take place according to the logic of individual action. In this manner, political consumerism is also a lifestyle choice, and it is fully within the horizon of post-materialist values that scholars such as Inglehart have highlighted as characteristic of the postmodern condition. It is precisely the post-materialist dimension, in a key

of cleavage and dichotomies, that can be used to understand some of the highly successful phenomena that distinguish food culture and food politics. These aspects are at the center of the interests of “foodies” (i.e. people with a serious interest in eating and learning about food, but who are not professionals in that field).

From another point of view, however, consumerism is also a form of collective action. It also involves actions favoring public interests, subject to commentary, sharing, and social influence through social networks. Furthermore, political consumerism is a form of identity politics. By using the market as a venue to express political and moral concerns, political consumerism is a manifestation of what Bennett (1998) has termed “lifestyle politics.” It reflects the broader tendency to see political meaning in recreational experiences, entertainment choices, fashion decisions, and other personal happenings. As Sapiro (2000: 4) explained, political consumerism can be readily adopted because it involves the «use of repertoires or familiar languages of action and interaction» (see also Frank 1994; Traugott 1995). As “politics by other means”, it reflects a movement away from institutional and formal modes of engagement. Instead, it is grounded in the belief that day-to-day action might be a more effective way to achieve political ends by using the market to influence public policy (Sapiro 2000). Past research indicates that women, young people, and more educated individuals are particularly likely to make consumption decisions based on political and ethical considerations. Political consumerism has been linked to factors known to explain political participation such as religiosity, partisanship, and government trust, but it is also associated with post-materialism and a sense of moral obligation, namely orientations more closely tied with lifestyle politics (Bennett 1998; Inglehart 1997; Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2005).

### 1.1. Political consumerism and Fair trade

At the same time, as it is very well-known and as stated by other authors, theories of lifestyle politics are premised on discussions of modernization (Giddens 1991), individualization (Beck 2007), and value change (Inglehart 1997). According to these theories, broad societal changes, including globalization, have resulted in the breakdown of traditional institutions and led to a newfound emphasis on “self-reflexivity and political expression”. As de Moor (2017: 180) writes, «Lifestyle politics depart from a realization that one’s everyday decisions have global implications, and that global considerations should therefore affect lifestyle choices». Lifestyle politics also differs from elite-directed acts because

mobilization tends to be spontaneous, targets multiple actors, and relies heavily on digital media use (Bennett 2012; Stolle and Micheletti 2013).

But why “gastropolitics”, therefore? According to Marrone (2023), gastronomy has always been a political space, both physical and proxemic. Consider the invention and spread of restaurants, and more famously, cafés before, during, and after the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Today, gastronomy takes on the role of a “generalized mediating” discourse and media, in a Luhmannian sense. And, even more, following Latour, as well as other sociologists and anthropologists, gastronomy and gastropolitics become a space for inventing new relationships between natural and cultural dimensions.

In political consumerism, as we know, we can find many movements and orientations that consumers may join, such as veganism, organic and agroecological products, and slow fashion, among others. In the Italian context, the most well-known is *Slow Food*.

Political consumerism refers to the practices of using one’s purchasing power to support or boycott products and companies based on their political or social values and positions. This includes buying products from companies that support causes such as environmental sustainability, and social justice, as well as avoiding products from companies that engage in practices considered harmful or unethical. The practice of political consumerism has become more prominent in recent years as consumers are increasingly aware of the impact of their purchases on broader social and political issues. However, some critics argue that political consumerism may not be an effective means of achieving radical social or political change, as it can be difficult to accurately assess companies’ policy positions and the impact of individual purchasing decisions. More importantly, it sometimes appears to involve sectors of society that have the (economic) “availability” that enables them to adopt such practices.

## 2. POLITICAL CONSUMERISM, FAIR TRADE: TWO VERY WELL-KNOWN EXAMPLES, SLOW FOOD VS (&) WHOLE FOODS?

### 2.1. *Slow Food*

While we acknowledge that *Slow Food* has been extensively studied, we aim to undertake a critical analysis of specific elements within this movement (Andrews 2010). *Slow Food*, recognized commercially as a brand, encompasses activities that align with the paradigm of Fair trade. This paradigm, along with sustainability, forms a core component of *Slow Food*’s program-

matic principles. Notably, *Slow Food* identifies itself as an “international non-profit association”, a designation that reflects its broader social and ethical commitments. However, as Micheletti and Stolle (2008) point out, this definition also incorporates elements of what can be described as fashionable social justice that spurs consumerism. By examining these dynamics, we hope to illuminate the complexities and contradictions inherent in *Slow Food* approach to promoting ethical consumption and sustainability.

Our analysis aims to explore how *Slow Food*’s initiatives and branding strategies both support and potentially undermine its stated goals of social justice and sustainability. We critically assess some ways in which the movement’s commercial aspects interact with its ethical commitments, providing a nuanced understanding of its impact and significance in the contemporary food landscape.

As it is well known, the association was born in the Langhe, in that triangle of agricultural resources and a tradition of “high quality” food which lies between Bra, Alba, and Barolo, and which today represents a very rich food and wine tourism area. We are speaking of the same Langhe where, in 1986, 19 people died for drinking wine with methanol, a traumatic event from which a sort of widespread questioning arose within the public discourse around the theme of food sophistication and the implications for human health and that of the ecosystems of the race for profit that orients not only the food industry but also smaller-scale and “neighborhood” productions. A closely related issue is the quality of what one eats.

*Slow Food*’s roots can be found in the post-1968 extra-parliamentary left and, in some ways, also in the post-1977 one. *Slow Food* was born in Piedmont as a local version of the national acronym of *Arcigola*, and in a political area – due to the background of its founders – contiguous to the leftist groups and newspapers *Il Manifesto* and *Lotta Continua*. In its ability to collect and re-elaborate some requests coming from the previous season of political mobilization, it contributed to realizing a typical trajectory of the so-called Italian “riflusso”. It contributed to the reactivation of eccentric issues compared to the strongly ideologized phase of the Sixties and Seventies. A reactivation that also passes through the contamination – in this case, “reversed” in sign and “subverted” in sense and meaning – with the consumerism and the hedonism of the 1980s, of *Reaganomics* and, in Italy, “Craxism” (and “Pentapartito”). But this kind of movement has also signified another form of “resistance” to mainstream consumerist capitalism, through food and new forms and styles of life.

An analysis of speeches, statements, and articles by Carlo Petrini (2005), the founder, and leader of

Slow Food, particularly those published in the Espresso Group newspapers (*La Repubblica* and *L'Espresso*) and *La Stampa*, provides valuable insights for critically examining this success story and its broader political and cultural implications. Petrini's discourse reveals several specific and critical points regarding the Slow Food movement. Firstly, we encounter various oxymorons, dichotomies, and cleavages within the narrative. These are characteristic of "postmodern" paradoxes that juxtapose seemingly contradictory elements: for instance, the movement unites metropolitan intellectuals and affluent Western gourmets with farmers from developing countries. This juxtaposition highlights the complexities and inherent tensions within Slow Food's mission and constituency. Furthermore, Petrini's rhetoric often navigates the delicate balance between promoting traditional, local food practices and engaging with the global food market. This duality raises questions about the movement's ability to maintain its ethical commitments while operating within a commercialized and often exploitative global food system.

By critically analyzing these paradoxes and contradictions, we can better understand the intricate dynamics that define Slow Food. This analysis not only sheds light on the movement's successes and challenges but also offers a deeper perspective on its role in shaping contemporary food politics and culture. Glocalization vs. Anglo-Saxon neoliberal globalization – the first term is accompanied by notions such as "km 0" (to guarantee the non-adulteration of the product by shortening the distribution chain between producer and consumer as much as possible) and food sovereignty (a concept subjected to transversal political appropriations). We find here the echoes of the critique of post-68 bourgeois science (epistemological anarchism). Paradoxically, official science is sometimes viewed with suspicion by Slow Food, because: 1. it is "reductionist" and "quantitative", and not "holist", 2. because it denies that some senses may support the interpretation of reality, as allied to "productivism", and 3. because it refuses to grant "equal dignity" to traditions and "traditional knowledge" (Simonetti 2012). Indeed, the association pursues the foundation of a "new gastronomic science".

Further specific and critical points concerning Slow Food culture are addressed in *Beyond Consumer Responsibilization: Slow Food's Actually Existing Neoliberalism*, by Thompson and Kumar (2018). The analysis reveals that several aspects of the association, often interpreted as signs of consumer responsabilization, are more accurately attributable to the organization's historical development. In particular, and somehow paradoxically, Slow Food's legacy of localized strategies of resistance (see,

e.g., Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Negri 2005). According to Thompson and Kumar, this historical orientation has led to a philosophical and political preference for forms of collective resistance to the dominant order that are characterized by being geographically dispersed, localized, autonomous, small-scale, and heterogeneous in their orientations and tactics (Hardt and Negri 2001). Rather than merely encouraging individual consumers to make ethical choices, Slow Food promotes a decentralized approach to challenging the prevailing food system.

The movement's emphasis on localism and autonomy reflects a broader critique of neoliberal globalization, advocating for diverse and context-specific solutions over standardized, top-down approaches. This preference for localized resistance aligns with theories of rhizomatic organization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), where power and influence, as well as forms of resistance, spread horizontally rather than hierarchically, allowing for greater flexibility and adaptability in the face of global challenges. By examining these critical points, we gain a deeper understanding of how Slow Food navigates the complexities of advocating for sustainable and ethical food practices within a neoliberal framework. This analysis also highlights the potential for Slow Food's strategies to contribute to broader social and political transformations, fostering a more equitable and resilient food system.

But, at the same time, «the commercial marketplace has become a primary social field for engaging in ethical identity work (as well as many other types of identity projects)» (Thompson and Kumar 2018: 16). However, this structural condition does not mean that such endeavors are a direct reproduction of neoliberal mandates. «In the case of Slow Food, its advocates reinforce the ethical authority of this cultural system through a nostalgic appeal to pre-modern traditions and by interpreting their culinary practices as passionate pursuits that can be shared and democratized» (*Ibidem*; see also Bertilsson 2015).

## 2.2. Political consumerism in political science: neoliberalism, forms of aesthetic resistance or leftist populism? Some critical reviews

On the one hand, Sassatelli and Davolio (2010: 227) write:

*Slow Food concerns a family of issues which refer to a politico-aesthetic problematization of food, dealing with taste, its education and its pleasures. [...] (SF initiatives) responded to an articulated political agenda, including the education of the public, the consolidation of a sense of*

*national identity (and superiority) and even the marketing of one's own national heritage. As an international but locally grounded network of associations SF clearly stands at some distance from such nationalistic concerns. Yet, it seems to represent the contemporary, humanistic, global and environmental version of a politico-aesthetic problematization of food consumption that is predicated on aesthetic experiences and food training.*

On the other hand, Simonetti (2012: 171) disputes: «the truth is that consumer needs are not standardized and uniform»; and, on the contrary, consumerism is driven not by a desire for uniformity, but for distinction. It is for this reason that anti-consumerist positions are so easily exploitable or recoverable from the system: because non-standard consumption confers distinction. «No such thing as “subversive” consumption exists» (*Ibidem*).

On the contrary, anti-consumerist and countercultural positions, according to other authors, «distracting the attention and passion of people from democratic institutions and from the drafting of truly effective reform policies, have facilitated the birth of a vociferous but practically ineffective radicalism» (Heath and Potter 2005, cited in Simonetti 2012: 171).

Again, according to Simonetti (*Ibidem*): «even a quick look at the kinds of individual behaviour praised by SF confirms this conclusion. Having personal relations with producers and suppliers, as well as spending time at the table in good company, are costly and time-consuming activities: in other words, they are luxury goods».

In this sense, SF embodies a modern, humanistic, global, and environmental take on the “politico-aesthetic critique of food consumption”, rooted in aesthetic experiences and culinary education. Eco-gastronomy, which combines environmental awareness with the enjoyment of food preparation and consumption, is SF’s hallmark. This concept is encapsulated by the motto, “eat less, eat better” (Sassatelli and Davolio 2010).



Figure 1. Slow Food and ecology. Source: <https://www.slowfood.com/>.

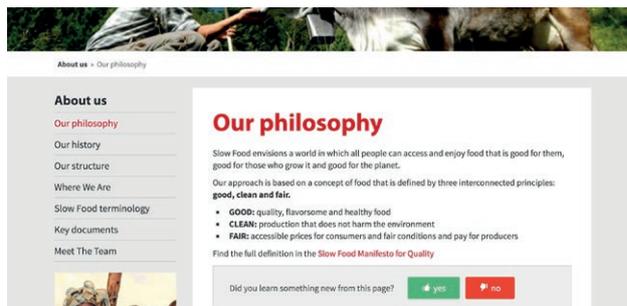


Figure 2. Slow Food and ecology. Source: <https://www.slowfood.com/>.

Regarding leftist values, Slow Food leader Petrini has maintained a pedagogical and critical function, blending it with a form of “leftist hedonism” that emphasizes both pleasure, aesthetics, and education. This vision starkly contrasts with the neoliberal paradigm of the *homo oeconomicus*, who is capable of making the best rational choices independently: a hyper-Enlightenment, individualistic concept. Neoliberalism assumes “voting (and eating) with your money”, but, in contrast, Slow Food introduces a hybrid paradigm of the consumer-citizen. In this framework, polarizing dichotomies often dissolve, and the friend-foe dynamic intersects with the theme of sustainability.

While acknowledging the limitations of typification, we also reference the figure of *homo ecologicus*, which highlights the connections and consequences of human behavior concerning the environment. This concept intersects with consumerism and Slow Food themes (see Figures 1 and 2), such as the promotion of local (kilometer 0) food and the fight against food waste. The term *homo ecologicus* or ecological citizen is explored for instance by Christoff (1996) in *Ecological Citizens and Ecologically Guided Democracy*. In this seminal piece, Christoff deepens the concept of the ecological citizen, a figure that embodies the integration of environmental consciousness with civic responsibility. Christoff argues that the ecological citizen transcends the traditional notion of citizenship, which is primarily concerned with political and social rights and duties within a given nation-state. Instead, the ecological citizen recognizes their responsibility toward the global environment, emphasizing the interconnectedness of local actions and global ecological impacts. This perspective shifts the focus from individualistic and short-term gains to collective and long-term environmental stewardship (see also van Lenteren 1997; Hay 2002). The concept of sustainability requires a more complex figure of the consumer, reflecting a variety of values and inter-

ests and encompassing behaviors that actively contribute to greater social justice and a new circular and sustainable economy.

### 3. POLITICAL CONSUMERISM AND FAIR TRADE. A QUICK LOOK TO WHOLE FOODS MARKET: FROM FAIR TRADE TO AMAZON... AND SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

Agriculture has long been a focal point of environmental activism due to its significant role in environmental degradation and greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, there is growing concern over rural decline and the disappearance of family farms. The fair-trade movement underscores the anti-corporate messages prevalent in global justice activism, highlighting that many of the worst abuses in the global system are linked to food production and distribution. Whole Foods Market (WFM), starting from its origins and founding in the late 1970s, as a small family-owned organic food retailer in Texas, has grown into a supermarket chain (similar in some ways to the industrial and commercial offshoot of the Slow Food movement, as the *Eataly* brand has been), to becoming a multinational corporation, recently turned into an Amazon property, and finally positioning itself as a kind of “ethical actor” in this context. Its shopping spaces offer a tangible example of the citizen-consumer concept in action (online and offline spaces, see Figures 3). WFM stores are designed to project an image of a feel-good business that is deeply engaged with the local community, committed to envi-

ronmental protection, supportive of local farmers, and dedicated to employee well-being. Above all, WFM caters to customers’ desire for delicious food they can feel good about consuming (with organic foods from all parts of the world).

WFM stores feature numerous displays promoting healthy living, organic agriculture, and the importance of local farmers, all of which are central to the company’s corporate activities. CEO and founder John Mackey describes WFM as pioneering a “new business paradigm,” which integrates ethical considerations into its business model. This approach not only aims to satisfy consumer demand for high-quality, sustainably sourced food but also strives to set a standard for corporate responsibility in the food industry. By framing itself as an ethical corporation, WFM illustrates how businesses can align profit motives with broader social and environmental goals. This model reflects a shift towards more conscious consumerism, where purchasing decisions are influenced by values such as sustainability, fairness, and community engagement. Although there are, admittedly, several differences from Slow Food, the mechanisms of evolution, values, stories, and discursive forms can be compared. As such, WFM serves as a case study in the evolving relationship between business practices and environmental activism, highlighting the potential for market-driven solutions to address some of the most pressing issues in the global food system:

*Rather than meeting the requirements of consumerism and citizenship equally, the case of WFM suggests that the citizen-consumer hybrid provides superficial attention to citi-*

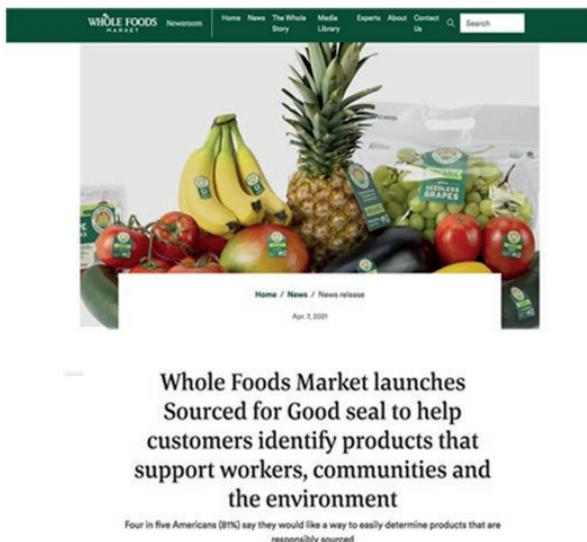


Figure 3. WFM and ethical consumption. Source: <https://media.wholefoodsmarket.com/>

*zenship goals in order to serve three consumerist interests better: consumer choice, status distinction, and ecological cornucopianism. I argue that a true “citizen-consumer” hybrid is not only difficult to achieve, but may be internally inconsistent in a growth-oriented corporate setting (Johnston 2008: 229).*

But in recent years, in addition to being bought by Amazon, Whole Foods has faced several accusations: of anti-union behaviour, of not respecting organic food standards, and, finally, of becoming a “big box” with online sales and supermarkets for hipsters. That sounds familiar and it is partially similar to some Slow Food characteristics. The unifying logic that integrates various strands of ethical consumer discourse posits that the choice of commodities can fulfill an individual’s desire for personal health and happiness while simultaneously fostering sustainability and social harmony for society at large. This perspective makes the concept of the hybrid citizen-consumer plausible—someone who can satisfy personal desires while also addressing social and ecological injustices.

The hybrid notion of a “citizen-consumer” is prevalent in both activist and academic literature. It suggests a social practice capable of reconciling the competing ideologies of consumerism – an ideal rooted in individual self-interest – and citizenship, which is grounded in collective responsibility toward social and ecological well-being (Johnston 2008). This dual role embodies a sophisticated understanding of consumption that goes beyond mere personal gratification to include broader ethical considerations. In this framework, consumer choices are not just transactions but acts of citizenship that contribute to the common good. Ethical consumption becomes a form of activism, where everyday purchasing decisions are imbued with political significance. This approach challenges the traditional dichotomy between self-interest and collective responsibility, suggesting that they can coexist and even reinforce one another. Furthermore, the “citizen-consumer” concept underscores the potential for market-driven solutions to address systemic social and environmental issues. By making informed and ethical purchasing decisions, individuals can drive demand for sustainable products and practices, thereby influencing corporate behavior and market trends. This dynamic creates a feedback loop where ethical consumption not only reflects but also shapes societal values and norms. That logic makes plausible the concept of the hybrid citizen consumer, able to satiate personal desires while simultaneously addressing social and ecological injustices.

The hybrid concept of a “citizen-consumer” is found in both activist and academic writing, and implies a

«social practice that can satisfy competing ideologies of consumerism (an ideal rooted in individual self-interest) and citizenship (an ideal rooted in collective responsibility to a social and ecological commons)» (Ivi: 232). Overall, the citizen-consumer embodies a holistic approach to consumption that integrates personal well-being with social and ecological sustainability. This paradigm shift seems to encourage a more conscientious and participatory form of consumerism, where individuals recognize their role and impact within a larger socio-economic and environmental context. But, most significantly, the WFM retail experience suggests that «the citizen-consumer goals of pleasurable and ethical shopping are accessible and never in contradiction». WFM offers delicious and highly varied food choices while employing the «feelgood and do-good message on everything from food packaging to in-store signage to paper napkins» (Ivi: 249).

In conclusion, there are two further important issues to consider that should be further explored but which we need only mention here for now: first, the importance of semiotics and rhetoric of certification. In this sense, Marston (2013) discusses how certification processes can act as both a loophole and a trap for producers, including artisans and farmers. Certification, intended to ensure fairness and quality, often becomes a double-edged sword, creating challenges and barriers that can undermine the very goals it aims to achieve. Second, the persistence of ideological divides. Gohary et al. (2023) explore the ideological influences on fair-trade consumption. Their empirical study confirms that conservatives are less likely to choose fair-trade products compared to liberals. This disparity is attributed to conservatives’ higher social dominance orientation, which conflicts with the principles of establishing an equitable society through fair-trade practices. The study highlights that conservative ideologies prioritize maintaining existing social structures, which contradicts the egalitarian goals of fair trade. More generally, beyond the seemingly obvious link between conservative ideology and anti-environmentalist and, at the same time, anti-consumerist positions, what is interesting is perhaps the presence of discourse, often under the radar, but that often tries to impose itself, even in public and political debate (e.g., during elections). A discourse that seemingly tries to steer and manipulate this public debate toward new forms of populism that, in criticizing elites, often criticizes the adoption of environmental measures, the concerns about a more equitable society, and even a more attentive approach to food quality.

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## Cultivating Trust in the Face of Crisis: Science as Moderator in Collaborative Forest Management

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**Abstract.** How is conflict over resources managed in the context of ecological, economic, and political crisis? Trust is noted by scholars as fundamental for collaborative forest management (CFM), a shared governance tool that brings together different stakeholders. This paper extends the literature on trust by foregrounding the use of science to lead decision making processes in the face of crisis. Through a case study of a CFM partnership in the American west, the analysis examines a once feuding group of political adversaries who decided to work together and “let the science lead.” The study examines how the partnership navigated economic crisis and historic wildfires against the backdrop of longstanding regional conflict termed the timber wars. The science-led governance model described includes science-led decision making, ongoing research on forest treatments, and communication of scientific findings to partners. The partnership’s approach, undergirded by relational and procedural trust, highlights the socio-political and relational dimensions of science-informed, sustainable resource management. The findings of this study have implications beyond CFM as they point to the importance of relational trust building in civic science. Generating buy-in and collaboration, especially among those with little to no formal science background, is especially pertinent given the polarization of science more broadly.

**Keywords:** civic science, collaborative forest management, collective action, environmentalism, political sociology.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Rural communities in the American west confront an increasingly complex socio-political ecosystem – assaulted by biblical wildfires, the impacts of climate change, and political polarization (Billings *et al.* 2021; Reilly *et al.* 2022). Collaborative forest management (CFM), a set of shared forest management practices involving governments and other stakeholders, has emerged as a dominant approach in the American west (Petheram *et al.* 2004). Research on CFM foregrounds the importance of trust for reaching an agreement on contentious topics and in times of crisis (Anderson *et al.* 2018; Davis *et al.* 2018). Though trust generates the social cohesion necessary to respond to pressing challenges, it is also inherently precarious. This paper advances the literature on trust in CFM by foregrounding science as a resource for moderating conflict and leading decision making.

Through a case study of CFM in Oregon, the analysis examines a once polarized group of political adversaries working together using a science as moderator collective decision-making process. Their science-informed decision model, undergirded by relational and procedural trust, points to the socio-political and relational dimensions of science-informed, sustainable resource management. Generating buy-in and collaboration, especially among those with little to no formal science background, is especially pertinent given the polarization of science more broadly (Gauchat 2012; Helmuth *et al.* 2016; Krause *et al.* 2019).

The paper proceeds by offering an overview of the literature on the role of trust in CFM. The importance of and challenges to science-informed decision making are then highlighted. The methods section provides an overview of the case selected and details the qualitative case study approach. The case study begins by offering a synthesis of the socio-historical context of the region, highlighting the emergence of the “timber wars” in the 1990s as a conflictual backdrop to the origins of the partnership. The case study then examines the partnership’s response to two major crisis points – the last mill in the region being threatened with closure and later, one of the worst forest fires in Oregon’s history. The sections that follow distill the structural and cultural aspects of their work. Their science-led governance model is described including science-led decision making, ongoing research on forest treatments, and communicating scientific findings back to partners. The promise and challenges of civic science and using science-as-moderator are then discussed. The paper closes by highlighting the implications of the study for understanding how science facilitates trust in CFM and the polarization of science more broadly.

### *1.1. The importance of trust in collaborative forest management*

CFM aims to produce win-win situations for human and ecological systems and to empower citizens to actively engage in resource management (Flitcroft *et al.* 2017). CFM facilitates a process that addresses ecological and socio-economic needs through shared governance models that allow a range of stakeholders to engage in collective decision making (Flitcroft *et al.* 2017). Practiced for centuries, it is currently used on every continent on Earth (Colfer *et al.* 2022; Petheram *et al.* 2004). The increased popularity of such models is rooted in an understanding that shared, large-scale problems are beyond the scope of a single stakeholder, political actor, or landowners such as floods, forest fires, climate change, disease, and invasive species (Flitcroft *et al.*

2017). Though promising, CFM often requires the collaboration of political enemies and stakeholders whose interests and worldviews are diametrically opposed. How then is conflict managed in the presence of both ecological necessity and political polarization?

Trust is a central component of successful CFM due to the complex nature of resource management in settings with a diverse range of stakeholders (Stern and Coleman 2014). Trust is defined by both relationship and mutual vulnerability as, «it involves an individual making herself vulnerable to another individual, group, or institution that has the capacity to do her harm or to betray her» (Levi & Stoker 2000: 476). Trust, then, is inherently conditional and precarious. More broadly, social and political trust have been in long-term retreat (Citrin and Stoker 2018; Levi and Stoker 2000).

Davis *et al.* sum up the literature on trust in collaborative forest management as, «multiple stakeholders participate in a dialogue that builds trust, which allows them to reframe their respective values and interests into collective agreement» (2018: 212). Thus, participation through dialogue is understood to build trust over time if certain conditional features are present. Davis *et al.*’s research on how trust grows or recedes affirms that «process features such as ground rules, facilitation, and field trips, as well as informal interactions, can successfully build a generalized sense of trust» (2018: 224). CFM is by its nature ongoing, not simply reactive in times of crisis (Anderson *et al.* 2018). As such, when crisis points inevitably arise, they are met with the scientific and civic capacity they demand. For example, given the necessity of fire planning in the American west, trust that facilitates timely response is paramount (LaChapelle and McCool 2011). The presence of trust during times of crisis is of heightened importance and can present moments of payoff for the mundane, long-term work of CFM.

### *1.2. The need for and challenges to science-informed action in collaborative forest management*

Scientific legitimacy and its commitment to objectivity are «crucial social resources for building consensus in ideologically polarized policy arenas» (Gauchat 2012: 168). The application of science in CFM is necessary for forest restoration, though how collaboratives access science and science-informed approaches vary (Colavito 2017; Esch *et al.* 2018). The need for scientific capacity to assess conditions and inform action has gained increased urgency in the face of accelerating climate change (Keenan 2015). Though science is an indispensable asset in this context, it currently faces a «polarization problem» (Gauchat 2023: 264).

To the polarization problem, trust in science among American conservatives has declined since the late 1970s – a trend that has accelerated in the last decade (Gauchat 2012; Helmuth *et al.* 2016; Kozlowski 2022). This is not limited to the United States; as anti-science views are part of the contemporary populist backlash globally (Zapp 2022). The partisan divide on science, when examined closely, shows conservatives remain sympathetic to scientific research as a process but are distrustful of the scientific community and of scientists (Mann and Schleifer 2020). Distrust of scientists on the part of conservatives impacts CFM given most work takes place in rural communities, which on the whole lean conservative (Gimpel *et al.* 2020; Hibbard *et al.* 2011). Researchers concerned with the loss of faith in science among conservatives argue that promoting science as a legitimate epistemological tool is unlikely to reverse this trend. Rather, efforts «humanizing the scientific community» (Mann and Schleifer 2020: 325) may prove more effective.

## 2. METHODS

The case study examines the work of the Blue Mountain Forest Partners (BMFP) of the Malheur Forest in Oregon, USA. The partnership self-describes as a “diverse group of stakeholder”, engaging in a process that is, “locally-supported, incentives-driven and that relies on the power of solutions that integrate the environmental, economic and social needs of communities” (Blue Mountain Forest Partners 2011, 2023). BMFP is comprised of over thirty organizations – coming from the ranching, forestry, and restoration industries, public natural resource management, the US Forest Service, environmental conservation groups, research entities, and local, regional, tribal, and state governments. The BMFP has been successful over a long period of time and has navigated multiple crises.

The BMFP was chosen as an exemplary case of collaboration in the face of conflict after a comprehensive national review. The qualitative case study draws on semi-structured interviews with 16 people and a rapid ethnographic site visit conducted in spring 2023. Case studies have the empirical advantage of illuminating how a social process unfolds and can be theory-generative (Small 2009; Yin 2009). Interviews allow one to uncover the meaning-making processes of participants (Cho 2017). This allows for increased «validity of fine-grained, in-depth inquiry in naturalistic settings» (Crouch and McKenzie 2006: 493). In the context of this study, the literature on scientific legitimacy points to the

need for «qualitative examinations of the conservative scientific repertoire» (Mann and Schleifer 2020: 323).

A rapid ethnographic field visit was done to John Day, Oregon in May 2023. Rapid ethnography was selected as a favorable methodology given the BMFP only convene in person a few times a year for intensive, multi day meetings. Rapid ethnography is characterized by short field visits, time intensity, and background knowledge. Rapid ethnography, sometimes referred to as focused ethnography, is narrower in scope in that it seeks to solve a more tightly defined empirical puzzle rather than traditional, long-term, grounded theory ethnography (Knoblauch 2005; Vindrola-Padros 2021).

In-depth semi-structured interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours in duration and were conducted with BMFP members (12), one member of the US Forest Service, and three concerned citizens. Leaders of the partnership were interviewed multiple times for a total of 12 hours. Interviews were done in person and over the phone, determined by interviewee preference and pragmatic constraints. For recruitment, all BMFP board members were contacted directly by email and asked for an interview. Other interviewees, including concerned citizens and a member of the US Forest Service, were recruited in person at BMFP events. All BMFP members preferred to go on the record and are quoted directly. Others are referred to in more general terms, for example, “concerned citizen”. Key interviews conducted prior to the ethnographic visit allowed the researcher to gain insights before the fieldwork. A review of internal and publicly available documents was conducted as well.

The week spent in John Day featured observation of both formal and informal gatherings offering a dynamic view of the working culture of the partnership. This included attendance of three days of intensive meetings, public presentations, a field visit to a work site in the forest with members, and corollary social events. Informal social time, occurring during coffee breaks, happy hours, barbeques, dinners, and in transit to the forest, facilitated conversations with members of the partnership, the Forest Service, their scientific collaborators, and members of the public in attendance at open meetings. Interviews and the rapid ethnography amounted to 68 hours of exposure, defined as total time spent in the setting and with research participants (Small and Calarco 2022). The research was approved by the Internal Review Board (IRB), an independent ethics committee for research on human subjects, in February 2023<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> “Strengthening Democracy by Strengthening the Agora” was approved by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board Office in February 2023 (IRB No. 00023010).

### 3. COLLABORATION THROUGH CRISIS

#### 3.1. *Backdrop to the Partnership*

The Malheur National Forest of Eastern Oregon is a sprawling 1.7 million acres of mountains, high desert grasslands, canyons, alpine lakes, and meadows. Climbing, grazing, and inhabiting the forest are deer, elk, cougars, antelope, black bears, badgers, big horn sheep, and mountain goats. The rivers are home to a range of trout and the skies host more than 70 species of birds. Human use of the forest dates back ten millennia (Aikens and Greenspan 1988). The American history of the region includes aggressive European-American settler expansion, the displacement, near-genocide, and ongoing persecution of the Northern Paiute and Bannock people, a mining rush for gold that drew Chinese and Europeans to Oregon, and the eventual establishment of a more industrialized approach to the forest (Gu 2020; Wilson 2022). Since the 1880s the timber industry, its mills, and logging systems brought laborers, and in turn economic vitality and growth to the rural towns. The Malheur National Forest was established in 1908 by conservationist US President Theodore Roosevelt (Dorsey 1995). Fire suppression was central to the work of the Forest Service along with the management of timber harvest and livestock grazing.

By the 1970s, deindustrialization brought a downturn to logging and economic strain to logging-dependent communities (Clucas *et al.* 2005; Langston 2003). An ascendant environmental movement also pushed new, contentious questions to the fore: Was timber a crop to be harvested or was the forest a complex and majestic ecosystem to be protected? As the environmental movement gained momentum activists across the American west were willing to put their bodies on the line—at times chaining themselves to trees or famously, camping out inside them (Fitzgerald 2002; Lee 1995). Direct actions generated standoffs between loggers and environmentalists popularly referred to as the “timber wars”. And outside the forest, another field of conflict grew: the courtroom. The Endangered Species Act of 1990 created an opportunity for environmentalists who wanted to slow logging: the old-growth forests were home to the northern spotted owl, an endangered species (Carroll 2019; Langston 1995).

Protection of the spotted owl facilitated the closing of large swaths of forest to loggers. In 1994, the Northwest Forest Plan expanded protections by including the necessity to survey and manage before an area could be logged, increasing the stringency of requirements. For loggers, in effect, this meant facing litigation each time they proposed a timber sale. Mills closed and the

loss of jobs was dubbed the “owl effect” by those sympathetic to struggling, logging-dependent rural communities already hobbled by slowing demand and automation (Carroll *et al.* 1999; Carroll 2019; Sitton 2015). The conflict resonated with broader tensions over a widening socio-cultural urban-rural divide in Oregon and the US (Hibbard *et al.* 2011; Nelson *et al.* 2017).

In logging towns, sentiment grew that their way of life was under attack by the urban majority who supported the environmental regulations (Walker and Hurley 2011). Media portrayals that depicted loggers as simple, backward, and responsible for their own demise fueled resentment (Carroll *et al.* 1999). By the early 2000’s litigation had slowed logging, leading the industry and its workers to feel increasingly under threat as jobs and federal tax revenue from logging the national forests declined. Though logging slowed, environmentalists grew frustrated as forest restoration work was incapacitated by the standstill (Sitton 2015). The Malheur is a fire-adapted landscape meaning that fire has been part of the ecosystem for millennia and that it is an integral part of the forest’s health. Indigenous forest stewardship included controlled burns for this purpose. European settlement put an end to this indigenous practice, embracing a fire-mitigation paradigm that viewed fire as a threat – a stance at odds with the ecological needs of the forest (Steen-Adams *et al.* 2019). The long-term consequences of fire-mitigation have been an ecological disaster resulting in fires that burn too hot – destroying the habitat and leaving little chance for regrowth. Restoration work through forest thinning and controlled logging has been shown to support the health of the forest (Johnston *et al.* 2021).

The partnership began with informal meetings between Grant County Commissioner Boyd Britton and Susan Jane Brown, a successful environmental lawyer based in Portland, who’d been instrumental in shutting down logging in Oregon since the 1990s. Brown described the first meetings as, “very difficult” and having “a lot of anger and baggage” on both sides. Brown (Interview, March 8, 2023) explained why she agreed to participate,

*The reason folks like me came to the table was because we were starting to see an increase in the extent and severity of wildfires, and those fires were burning up a lot of that habitat that we managed to save in the late nineties.*

Informal talks lasted three years, while they worked to understand if there were shared interests and a path forward. Executive Director Mark Webb (written communication, Aug. 3 2023) summarized the early years as such:

*It took several years of hard, painful work to begin to work together productively as diverse stakeholders to understand each other, our landscape, what ecologically informed active management across it should look like, and how stakeholders' values and expectations needed to change to accommodate that.*

### 3.2. The last mill threatened with closure

A crisis point came in 2012, when the last mill in John Day was threatened with imminent closure. This drew more people into the Partnership. Zack Williams (phone interview, 2023), BMFP board member, reflected on why he joined, quipping directly, “Desperation.” A fifth-generation Grant County resident, Williams comes from a long family tradition of ranching and lumber. And, as the father of a young family, the mill closing would have ended his livelihood, forcing a move out of Grant County. He explained, “It would’ve decimated the economy and just killed the community.” For environmentalists, the closure of the mill would end needed forest restoration work as the removal of dead, dying, or deteriorating trees, requires a mill to process the lumber (Antuma *et al.* 2014). The Partnership worked to keep the mill open with the advocacy of Susan Jane Brown. Her role facilitated newfound trust and a hard-won sense that working together did have its payoffs. Though not apparent at first—their economic and ecological futures were inextricably interwoven.

The successful collaboration resulted in winning federal funding through Congress’s Collaborative Forest Landscape Restorations Program (CFLRP) in 2012 along with a ten-year stewardship contract for accelerated restoration. In its first decade as a CFLRP, 150,000 acres or approximately 60,700 hectares of forest were restored. An authorized extension was signed in 2023, allocating monies for 200,000 more acres of treatments over the next decade. It is one of the largest and most ambitious CFLRP’s in the US. Economically, keeping the mill open saved 70 jobs and the restoration effort brought 35-50 more Forest Service employees to the Malheur. Contracting work for forest restoration also grew twofold. For rural communities – Grant County has 7,233 residents – these numbers are significant (US Census 2020). CFLRP projects move faster than traditional timber sales, resulting in higher industry wages.

### 3.3. Out of the ashes: A fire, a study, a way forward

The Canyon Creek Complex Fire ignited on August 12, 2015, when a dozen lightning strikes hit the forest. Fueled by strong winds, the fire took until November to

get under control, in the process destroying 43 homes and burning 110,000 acres, or approximately 44,515 hectares, of forest (Gunderson and Sickinger 2016). At its hottest, temperatures exceeded 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit or approximately 1093 degrees Celsius. Local journalists described it as a “wildfire catastrophe” (*Ibidem*).

In the wake of the fire, the timber industry and the local community wanted complete post-fire salvage logging, a practice that involves collecting timber that isn’t totally burnt. Environmentalists were opposed, concerned with how the practice would impact the vitality of local wildlife. At an impasse, the Partnership decided to study it. They gained funding for a four-year study in collaboration with the Forest Service, another forest collaborative, and a team of scientists, led by wildlife biologist Victoria Saab, to test a monitoring tool for maintaining woodpecker habitats during post-fire salvage logging (Latif *et al.* 2019; Watts 2019). Industry signed on, completing the salvage in a way that respected the needs of the scientific study, sacrificing a more cost-effective approach for what aimed to be a wildlife-neutral salvage.

Susan Jane Brown (Interview, March 24, 2023) explained the salvage logging and study:

*We remove some economic value, but not so much that it compromises wildlife populations. And that was a stretch for us [the environmentalists] as well, because the community wanted to log it all, and many in the environmental community didn’t want to log anything at all. And so, finding that middle ground was a challenge, but also really important for building trust and using science to help address socioeconomic and socioecological questions and concerns.*

Study findings were published by the United States Department of Agriculture and the model developed by Saab’s team has since been adopted in multiple regions of the American west (Watts 2019). The findings of the four-year study were also, in part, memorialized in the “Wildlife Habitat Zones of Agreement” voted unanimously in favor, at the May 2023 meeting. Prior to voting, a detailed, hour-long research presentation was offered by Trent Seager, Director of Science at Sustainable Northwest<sup>2</sup>. The “Wildlife Zones of Agreement,” a highly technical 148-page document, explains wildlife’s needs on the Malheur and crystalizes a set of best practices for wildlife-sensitive forest restoration and management to be followed by the Partnership moving forward (Blue Mountain Forest Partners 2023). The May 2023 field trip, attended by members of the forest service, scientists, and the Partnership, was to one of the sites of the salvage logging study. Reflecting on the approach,

<sup>2</sup> Fieldnote, May 18, 2023.



**Figure 1.** BMFP members visit a site of the Canyon Creek Complex Fire and discuss the results of their study on the impact of post-fire salvage logging on wildlife, May 18, 2023. *Source:* Author.

Executive Director Mark Webb asked reflexively, «what can we do that meets everybody’s needs?»<sup>3</sup>.

#### 4. GOVERNANCE THROUGH SCIENCE

The Partnership is led by eight Board Members and one full-time staff person, the Executive Director. Monthly meetings are open to the public and attended by voting and non-voting members of the Partnership. During late spring and early summer months – when the snow has thawed and the fires are not yet raging – BMFP convenes for three days of intensive meetings. The days are dedicated to public meetings, presentations, board meetings, socialization, bringing items to a vote, and a one-day field trip to a forest site to monitor and discuss ongoing projects. Their work is guided by a number of ratified bylaws and operations procedures publicly available on their website.<sup>4</sup> Guiding all processes is an ethos of mutual respect, civil communication, transparency, and openness to other’s perspectives with the aim of innovating mutually beneficial solutions (Blue Mountain Forest Partners 2011, 2017).

BMFP votes using a consensus minus one model that allows the group to move forward in times of deep disagreement. Though full consensus is ideal, it risks one dissident wielding veto power (Flitcroft *et al.* 2017). To remedy this, the model ensures one person cannot block the motion. Voting members also have the option to “stand aside” and not block the motion. When voting

in favor, the system allows members to express degrees of support including: “I agree with this decision and will publicly support it” to “I agree with this decision but will refrain from publicly supporting it” to “I can live with this decision (and will not disparage it in public)”. To become a voting member, one must sign the Declaration of Commitment that promises to honor established agreements and to advance the BMFP mission in addition to attending a minimum of three meetings prior to joining (Blue Mountain Forest Partners 2011, 2017).

The BMFP uses a “science-based zones of agreement” approach to forest restoration that is issue-based rather than project-based, allowing for efficacy that impacts much larger areas of the forest than a single grove of old-growth pines (McLain *et al.* 2014)<sup>5</sup>. In function, zones of agreement empower decision making at scale – impacting thousands of acres of forest. They “memorialize the best available science” and provide detailed knowledge on the forest, wildlife, and forest treatments (phone interview, March 2023). The partnership has zones of agreement for riparian zones, Aspen, and Mountain Mahogany restoration, among others.

#### 5. CULTIVATING TRUST

##### 5.1. Facilitating trust in a science-led process

The collaborative has agreed to “let the science lead.” In practice using science-as-moderator to inform decision making. Long-term science collaboration allows for a science-knowledge-action feedback loop that includes science-informed decision making, voting on zones of agreement, ongoing research and monitoring of forest treatments, and reporting impacts of treatments and forest health to the group.

To make science accessible, presentations are a regular feature. For example, during the May 2023 convening of the Partnership in John Day, one full day was devoted to scientific presentations about the Malheur and forest management issues.<sup>6</sup> Speaking to the value of learning from the scientists, Dave Hannibal (2023), BMFP Board Member and Base Manager of Grayback Forestry, Inc. offered,

*So, when they sit and listen to the science itself, it helps move them to the middle. If you’re just told, ‘Well, you’re going to now do it the opposite way you’ve always done it before because we decided that,’ versus hearing the science*

<sup>3</sup> Fieldnote, May 19, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> See (11/24): [bluemountainsforestpartners.org](https://bluemountainsforestpartners.org)

<sup>5</sup> <https://bluemountainsforestpartners.org/work/zones-of-agreement/>.

<sup>6</sup> Fieldnote, May 17, 2023.

*behind it. Once you hear the science behind it, it makes more sense.*

James Johnston (Phone interview, March 20 2023), scientist and Assistant Professor of Forestry at Oregon State University explained, “The field trip I always report my findings, do presentations. I’m deeply embedded as a member so a lot of this happens via informal interactions as well.”

### 5.2. A civic science?

The BMFP’s science-heavy approach allows for rigorous, ecologically sound decision making, but presents unique challenges in terms of accessibility for those with limited science background. The collaborative has learned to speak a shared language, and trust must sometimes fill the gaps when shared technical expertise is incongruent. Nonetheless, highly specialized language is, inevitably, alienating to ‘outsiders’ or non-specialists, and has the effect whether intentional or not of creating a small group of highly specialized insiders<sup>7</sup>.

As a collaborative, decisions that challenge orthodoxies have been met with criticism. Criticism has come from the broader environmental community with some questioning the science used and characterizing scientists engaged with the partnership as sell-outs. Other community members distrustful of federal overreach through the Forest Service have accused scientists in the region of falsifying data for political and economic ends<sup>8</sup>. Though it is outside the scope of this study to determine the veracity of the allegations, such challenges point to the hard path scientists walk in highly polarized settings. Further equipping scientists with skills and resources for translational, civic science for the broader public may foster legitimacy in the face of heightened polarization and distrust.

### 5.3. Relational trust

Relational trust cultivated through informal socialization allows goodwill to emerge. Referred to by one member as “the secret sauce” a significant amount of time is allocated for informal socialization. This includes eating lunch together during day-long meetings, taking shared snacks and coffee breaks, meeting for dinner and drinks at the local bar after the work is done, and

dinners hosted in members’ homes. Socialization allows for participants to relate to one another as people before position, bonding over shared interests be it humor, food, or family life. Glen Johnston (Phone interview, May 30 2023), BMFP Board President, lauded the long-term benefits of happy hour, «friendships were forged and it’s much easier to see the viewpoint of a friend than an enemy».

Informal time also allows creativity to emerge. And leaving spaces traditionally associated with conflict is beneficial. Field trips to monitor the progress and status of projects in the forest allow for informal discussions and a visceral reminder of their shared work (Antuma *et al* 2014). Glen Johnston highlighted the power of spending time in the forest together:

*If we sit around a business table, [a] big old meeting table, and we’re all sitting here in our positions, we’re playing this game, where it’s like, ‘Okay, I’m a logger and I want to cut trees,’ and, ‘I’m an environmentalist and I want to save everything,’ we just get stuck in our positions. But when we’re in the forest, now... it’s green; the sun’s shining. We’re looking at the trees and forest, and it’s easier to come to the middle and it’s easier to see the other people as the good human beings that they are rather than vilify them.*

The partnership is built on the mutual understanding that working together is the only path forward. As one Forest Service member quipped after a public meeting, “We either do something, or we do nothing, and it all burns”<sup>9</sup>.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This case study examines the work of unlikely bedfellows, once feuding adversaries, environmentalists and loggers cultivation of trust in the face of multi-dimensional crises. The BMFP was able to respond to complex socio-economic and ecological needs through their science-led shared governance model. They moved through moments of crisis—economic, political, and ecological – with an approach built on shared trust in one another and in their science-led process. Since their founding, there has been less litigation than before, demonstrating conflict mitigation impacts (McLain *et al.* 2014). Their work has resulted in the restoration of 150,000 acres or approximately 60,700 hectares of forest while promoting job growth for local communities (Webb, written communication, Aug. 3 2023). Their science-led process has also resulted in knowledge production beneficial

<sup>7</sup> The tension between fully participatory-democracy and specialized knowledge is a hallmark of organizations and a perennial concern. See Robert Michels “iron rule of oligarchy” (1911).

<sup>8</sup> Phone interview, June 1, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Fieldnote, May 17, 2023.

to understanding best practices on the Malheur and in other regions of the American west (Johnston *et al.* 2021; Latif *et al.* 2019; Watts 2019).

This paper advances the literature on trust in CFM by foregrounding science as a resource for moderating conflict and leading decision making. The analysis confirms Gauchat's assertion that scientific legitimacy and its commitment to objectivity are «crucial social resources for building consensus in ideologically polarized policy arenas» (2012: 168). Literature on the polarization of science emphasizes conservatives declining trust in scientists, concluding that conservatives «love the science, hate the scientist» (Mann and Schleifer 2020: 305). This case study has shown that trust can be built through science-led collaboration, leading conservatives to not only love science and the scientist but also become enthusiastic partners in the implementation of science-led forest management. The science-rooted process of the BMFP model has allowed conservatives in this context to grow increasingly sympathetic to both science and scientists, counting scientists among their friends. This points to the value of communicating science as a process to community members and highlights the trust-building potential such activities can imbue.

There are, however, limitations. In interviews, members of BMFP openly pondered if the same model could have traction elsewhere, humbly acknowledging the unique blend of personality and circumstance that facilitated gains. More, though the partnership draws a diverse range of stakeholders, settings characterized by highly asymmetrical power relations could face further challenges. Those historically marginalized, disenfranchised, or with little power would potentially lack the critical leverage necessary to bring powerful players to the table in a resource conflict setting.

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Passim

## Alcune note sociologiche (ma non solo) sulla mentalità dei genovesi

GIANFRANCO BETTIN LATTES

**Abstract.** Mentality, an ambivalent analytical category, is in fact a relevant resource from a cultural point of view due to its reflections on the concrete behaviors of both the individual and a community. The essay attempts to reflect sociologically on the mentality with reference to a specific case study: the Genoese people. Here focus only on three interdependent aspects, that traditionally contribute to the configuration of the Genoese mentality: avarice, grumbling and the fear of the new expressed in the lexicon of the *maniman*. Some banal stereotypes are thus dismantled. This preliminary exploration adopts an interdisciplinary methodology based on a plurality of sources and data in the hope of further insights.

**Keywords:** mentality, avarice, grumbling, *maniman*.

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*Son zeneize, riso ræo,  
strenzo i denti e parlo ciæo*

### 1. PREMESSA

In queste pagine si tenta di raggiungere un obiettivo, in apparenza, dai contorni nettamente definiti ma che si presenta, in realtà, come un obiettivo difficile da raggiungere. Si tratta di descrivere degli atteggiamenti tipici della popolazione genovese, cui sono attribuite caratteristiche peculiari al punto da stigmatizzarne l'identità nell'opinione pubblica. Come avveniva già con gli sferzanti versi di Dante Alighieri «Ahi Genovesi uomini diversi d'ogne costume» e sette secoli dopo con Fernand Braudel (1981) quando scriveva che «trovando i Genovesi dappertutto li riconosci per la loro diversità». Si tratta allora di analizzare quegli aspetti che hanno reso i genovesi una comunità antropologicamente peculiare e tali da legittimare una loro marcata caratterizzazione, il più delle volte tuttavia, in forma di stereotipo. Questo obiettivo reclama un metodo di lavoro che è associato al filone degli studi che si occupano della mentalità. Ora è noto che mentalità è un termine assai scivoloso dal punto di vista scientifico (Jacques Le Goff riteneva che fosse dotato di una «feconda ambiguità»). Mentalità è un concetto che ha trovato

spazio quasi esclusivamente nell'etnologia con gli studi di Lucien Lévy-Bruhl sulla mentalità primitiva (1922) ed in una corrente storiografica innovativa<sup>1</sup>. Lo storico delle mentalità collettive ha come oggetto di indagine precipuo un insieme di elementi cognitivi ed emotivi, di cui gli stessi titolari hanno un grado relativo di consapevolezza. Si tratta di abitudini e di comportamenti spontanei che rimandano a ciò che Lucien Febvre chiamava un'attrezzatura mentale e che meglio si potrebbero definire come le radici psicologiche delle pratiche culturali di una società. La storiografia deve liberarsi dalla "tirannia del presente" che affligge altre scienze come la sociologia. La riflessione sul passato è il presupposto necessario per un'analisi efficace della contemporaneità. Merita richiamare, perché sono metodologicamente utili ai fini della nostra riflessione, due principi fondamentali che guidano gli studiosi delle mentalità, i quali – da storici – sono interessati ad un approccio interdisciplinare che adotti la prospettiva antropologica insieme a quelle di altre scienze sociali<sup>2</sup>. Il primo principio è quello della irriducibilità delle "attrezzature mentali" proprie delle società tradizionali a quelle delle società contemporanee. Ne consegue che la mentalità come risorsa culturale è ancorata in un dato contesto ed è soggetta a mutamenti, sia pure di lunghissima durata. Il secondo principio è che al centro del cambiamento storico non stanno i mutamenti strutturali della società, ma il mutamento che si compie in un modo determinante ed in tempi lunghissimi, per l'appunto, nell'ambito delle mentalità.

Nel linguaggio corrente la mentalità viene definita con riferimento ad una pluralità di ambiti, alcuni sociologicamente significativi, come

*un modo particolare di sentire e di giudicare, che contraddistingue un gruppo o un cetto sociale. Un complesso di opinioni, di convinzioni, o di credenze, originate per lo più da esperienze o da pregiudizi comuni, proprio di una collettività. Un modo di considerare le cose, di reagire, di ragionare, di intendere la realtà dei fatti e le relazioni con il prossimo proprio di una singola persona* (Battaglia 1978: 94)

I dizionari di sociologia non riportano mai la voce "mentalità" che, invece, è considerata in tale chiave nel *Dizionario di filosofia* di Nicola Abbagnano (1971: 573-574) come: «Termine adoperato dai sociologi per indicare gli atteggiamenti, le disposizioni ed i comportamenti istituzionalizzati in un gruppo e adatti a caratterizzare il gruppo stesso». Infine, nei dizionari di psicologia la mentalità viene descritta come «insieme di disposizioni psicologiche e intellettuali, di credenze fondamentali e abitudini che caratterizzano un individuo, un gruppo, un popolo, un periodo storico o una fase dello sviluppo individuale e collettivo. In questa accezione si parla di mentalità infantile, di mentalità primitiva o di mentalità dell'epoca, che si traduce in comportamenti istituzionalizzati o in modi di vivere e di pensare tipici» (Galimberti 2020: 756). In sintesi il confronto tra queste tre definizioni, in buona parte sovrapponibili, incoraggia ulteriori riflessioni.

L'essenza semantica della mentalità si collega a dimensioni non facili da definire, anche se si pone come un fondamentale dato di realtà. Si può parlare infatti di "fattività" della mentalità, vale a dire dell'influenza effettiva che la mentalità ha sui comportamenti di chi ne è il portatore, individuo o gruppo che sia. La mentalità si relaziona con la storia economica e politica di una comunità ma pure con i dati morfologici e strutturali di un contesto che possono condizionare gli atteggiamenti e gli orientamenti che caratterizzano una popolazione. La mentalità è una risorsa culturale fondamentale che si forma nel tempo, tramite un lento processo di sedimentazione ed è costituita da un insieme specifico di rappresentazioni mentali della realtà. Tali rappresentazioni orientano l'agire in società senza richiedere una loro codificazione formale. La mentalità caratterizza, in modo tendenzialmente omogeneo, una collettività formata da individui invece assai differenti tra di loro per età, per genere, per professione, per classe sociale e per cetto. La mentalità è formata da opinioni, convinzioni e credenze che si traducono in uno stile di vita affine, nonostante le profonde differenze sociali. La mentalità è una *forma mentis* radicata in esperienze e in accadimenti che hanno un'influenza determinante nel processo di socializzazione di una popolazione e che contribuiscono, in ampia misura, a definirne l'identità. Questo habitus mentale si associa ad un modo di pensare che dà senso alla collocazione nel mondo di un individuo e della collettività cui appartiene. Il sentimento di appartenenza ad un dato contesto sociale è fondamentale per l'ordine sociale e si collega alla mentalità che opera, sia pure ad un livello latente, come un influente fattore di integrazione. La mentalità si può considerare una specie di codice valoriale che presiede alle azioni nella quotidianità e che agisce

<sup>1</sup> L'Autore ringrazia vivamente Giovanni Arena, Valter Giacomel e Silvestro Scifo che, con i loro preziosi suggerimenti, hanno tentato di migliorare queste pagine. Lo studio delle mentalità viene principalmente associato ad un rinnovamento importante in campo storiografico, dovuto alla rivista *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, fondata nel 1929 da Marc Bloch e da Lucien Febvre. La rivista, che ha mutato titolazione nel corso degli anni, ha motivato Febvre, nel 1947, a fondare un istituto di ricerca multidisciplinare che, nel 1975, è diventato l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales.

<sup>2</sup> Va ricordato che gli ambiti di ricerca propri degli studi delle mentalità hanno trovato un humus favorevole nella sociologia di Émile Durkheim e di Maurice Halbwachs.

come una sorta di bussola per l'intero corso di una vita. Questo codice *sui generis* si trasmette nel tempo, fra le generazioni, tramite la socializzazione familiare e, soprattutto, anche per effetto del contesto relazionale complessivo entro cui un soggetto si forma, vive ed opera. Naturalmente la mentalità non si configura in un modo del tutto omogeneo e contiene anche aspetti contraddittori; ma soprattutto può modificarsi, come si è già detto, sia pure in un modo molto lento nel tempo<sup>3</sup>. La mentalità si può anche ridurre ad un complesso di idee stereotipato, percepito da chi se ne ritiene immune come una *diminutio capitis*, uno stigma negativo che comporta distanza critica o, peggio, forme severe di emarginazione nei confronti dei suoi portatori. Normalmente questa situazione di distacco dalla mentalità corrente si manifesta nel confronto tra generazioni differenti.

Per indagare sulla mentalità si esplora una pluralità di fonti, differenti da quelle tradizionali adottate dagli storici, che permette di analizzare i modi di pensare e le forme di espressione relative. Oltre alle fonti scritte si valutano, infatti, racconti, leggende, simboli, linguaggi ed immagini che riflettono le concezioni mentali diffuse nella società considerata. Questo approccio osserva con attenzione anche il contesto sociale in cui vivono le persone, la sua storia, le dinamiche politiche ed economiche che l'hanno caratterizzato nel tempo. Naturalmente va tenuta in considerazione anche l'influenza degli stereotipi. L'attribuire dei tratti caratteriali ad un'intera popolazione, oppure solamente ad un suo segmento, opera, il più delle volte, come una generalizzazione indebita se non è suffragata da dati che la confermino in modo significativo. Qui ci si sofferma solo su tre aspetti, interdipendenti, che concorrono, tradizionalmente, alla configurazione della mentalità genovese: l' "avarizia", il mugugno e la paura del nuovo<sup>4</sup>. Dunque viene proposta

una sorta di esplorazione preliminare su un tema straordinariamente complesso che merita, per certo, ulteriori e più estesi approfondimenti anche verso altri ambiti espressivi delle mentalità.

## 2. AVARIZIA O PARSIMONIA?

«Parte dal Mediterraneo orientale la lunga storia dell'avarizia, vizio o peccato che riassume in sé molte valenze, cupidigia, profitto disonesto, eccessivo amore per il risparmio. L'avarico, vittima di una forma di idolatria che lo rende duro, insensibile e disposto a superare ogni limite di natura etica, è figura di tutti i tempi e di tutti i luoghi» (Airaldi 2021:18). Eppure lo stigma dell'avarico viene appioppato quasi esclusivamente ai genovesi. Uno stereotipo che li accomuna agli ebrei ed agli scozzesi. Si sa, tuttavia, che gli stereotipi hanno quasi sempre una relazione con degli aspetti di realtà e con alcune azioni che contribuiscono alla loro origine ed alla loro diffusione. L'avarizia ha a che vedere con la relazione che si ha con il denaro e soprattutto con i modi per procurarselo, con il suo possesso e con il modo di spenderlo. L'avarizia è anche, e forse soprattutto, un fatto mentale che si traduce in comportamenti pratici e che orienta la relazione con il prossimo. Ma la orienta nel senso che gli altri sono visti, in linea di massima, dall'avarico come strumenti da usare per incrementare la propria ricchezza. Avarizia, nel sentire comune, è una parola connotata negativamente. L'immagine dell'avarico si associa infatti ad un carattere cinico, interessato unicamente alla protezione ed al perseguimento dei propri interessi materiali. Se le cose stanno così, allora sembra opportuno dire che meglio sarebbe parlare, a proposito dei genovesi, di oculatezza nelle decisioni che riguardano sia l'uso del denaro sia l'uso di altri beni. Questo principio, che normalmente è stato definito il principio di utilità, va ribadito che viene regolato rigorosamente da un'ossessione per il risparmio e dal conseguente divieto di qualsiasi forma di spreco. Per certo si tratta di un principio costitutivo della mentalità genovese che trova ampio riscontro nella vita sociale quotidiana di ogni epoca ed arriva fino ai nostri giorni. Nel dialetto genovese la turcheria viene presentata sia in una forma scherzosa sia in un'accezione blandamente dispregiativa, ma di fatto viene vissuta come un valore che va salvaguardato. Può essere interessante constatare che per indicare l'avarico si adottano vari termini come *spilòrso*, *pigigiòzo* (pidocchioso), *pentemìn*

<sup>3</sup> Merita sottolineare che la mentalità specifica la sua natura complessa ed articolata, tramite gli aggettivi, i più disparati, che la qualificano e che alludono così alle sue molteplici e differenti possibilità di espressione. Si parla di mentalità, ristretta, aperta, vincente; di una mentalità provinciale, maschilista, imprenditoriale, burocratica, piccolo borghese, sorpassata *et aliud*.

<sup>4</sup> Dati e riflessioni frammentarie relative alla "genovesità" si possono rintracciare *sparsim* nei seguenti siti: [https://www.facebook.com/antonio.musarra/?locale=it\\_IT](https://www.facebook.com/antonio.musarra/?locale=it_IT)  
<https://www.amezena.net/>  
<https://dearmissfletcher.com/>  
<https://walloutmagazine.com/>  
[https://www.facebook.com/zeneixitae/?locale=it\\_IT](https://www.facebook.com/zeneixitae/?locale=it_IT)  
<https://www.lauraguglielmi.it/chi-ono/>  
<https://goodmorninggenova.org/>  
<https://www.ilmugugnoenovese.it/>  
<https://www.comune.genova.it/homepage>  
[www.francobampi.it](http://www.francobampi.it)  
[www.zeneize.net/grafia/index.htm](http://www.zeneize.net/grafia/index.htm)  
[https://telenord.it>scignuria\\_](https://telenord.it>scignuria_)

<https://genova.erasuperba.it>  
<https://www.genovatoday.it>  
<https://www.primocanale.it>

e *pigna*<sup>5</sup>. Il termine *pigna*, in particolare, è una simpatica metafora riadattata al contesto relazionale genovese. È noto che la *pigna* ha una tradizione simbolica antica associata all'eternità. La *pigna* richiama anche la fertilità e l'abbondanza perché è densa di frutti; nel caso genovese si allude, invece, alla sua forma chiusa che non permette di prendere facilmente i deliziosi pinoli incuneati nelle sue brattee<sup>6</sup>. Nei vari dizionari genovesi l'avarò viene definito come un uomo sordido, troppo attaccato al denaro e che, come una *pigna* che non rilascia facilmente i suoi pinoli, si guarda bene dallo spendere i suoi soldi. Anche chi è parsimonioso e dunque è, in sostanza, un risparmiatore accorto, che si ispira alla prudenza e al buon senso, viene stigmatizzato impropriamente come uno *sparagnin*, vale a dire come uno spilorcio.

Naturalmente anche in alcuni modi di dire si rintraccia il senso di questo modo di pensare e di agire. Ad esempio si dice *avéi a péixe a-a stacca* (avere la pece in tasca) e dunque non essere in grado di tirare fuori nulla dalle tasche, neanche una lira, perché la pece ce lo impedisce. È opinione comune che *a prestâ e palanche à un amigo, ti perdi e palanche e ti perdi l'amigo* (se presti dei soldi ad un amico perdi i soldi e perdi l'amico); dunque un adagio che induce a non mescolare mai gli affari con i sentimenti<sup>7</sup>. Il rispetto, diciamo così, per il denaro ed il piacere che deriva dal suo possesso e dal possesso di altri beni e di proprietà che il denaro permette di avere, si associa ad un atteggiamento di diffidenza e di riservatezza verso il prossimo. I genovesi non sono affatto propensi a mostrare pubblicamente le loro fortune; non per caso si afferma che: *o cû e i dinæ no se mostran à nisciun* (il sedere e i soldi non si mostrano a nessuno). Ci sono fatti risaputi da sempre in città. Sono esempi di "avarizia" sui quali non si fa nemmeno troppa ironia e di cui, anzi spesso, si parla come degli esempi modello.

*L'avarizia a Genova non è mai sordida e nascosta ma solare, aperta, letteraria e ride di sé stessa e dei suoi aneddoti.*

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Giovanni Casaccia, *Vocabolario Genovese-Italiano*, Tipografia Fratelli Pagano, Genova, 1851 alle pp. 123, 400 e 423; Franco Bampi, *Nuovo Dizionario Italiano-Genovese*, Nuova Editrice Genovese, Genova, 2008 a p. 49 e soprattutto il *Traduttore Italiano-Genovese TIG* al sito <https://www.zeneize.net>

<sup>6</sup> Va ricordata, per la sua paradigmaticità sul tema, la commedia *Pigna-secca e Pignaverde*, interpretata dalla Compagnia Comica Genovese diretta da Gilberto Govi. La commedia, composta da Emerico Valentini nel 1957, si ispira ad una famosa poesia, *I doi avài* (I due avari) scritta in dialetto dal poeta ligure Martin Piaggio (1774-1843) e riproduce un microcosmo familiare genovese d'epoca rappresentando, e legittimando l'eterno archetipo dell'avarò.

<sup>7</sup> Il termine "palanche", usato dai genovesi per indicare i soldi, nasce nel secolo XVI quando a Genova comincia a circolare il "blanco" o "blanca" cioè una moneta spagnola che, per effetto di una deformazione onomatopeica, diventa "planco", "palanco" ed infine "palanca" ed è tuttora adottato.

*La marchesa De Ferrari alla mattina, di buonora, andava nel pollaio a tastare l'uovo alle galline e usando una matita, con abilità da chirurgo, scriveva un numero progressivo sulle uova ancora in loco e guai se alla sera non c'erano tutte. A Mantova si getta l'olio del tonno in scatola, a Genova ci si condisciono le patate e niente fa andare più in bestia un padre di famiglia genovese della luce lasciata accesa nelle stanze vuote. E in tutto il mondo solo i genovesi, di qualsiasi ceto, quando hanno bisogno di entrare in una toilette, se questa è a pagamento, escono* (Valenziano 1994: 276)

Interessante testimonianza di questo approccio alla quotidianità fatto di una scrupolosa attenzione per evitare il minimo sciupio sono altri episodi molto noti: un importante armatore ordinava al suo autista di spegnere il motore dell'auto in discesa per risparmiare sul consumo di carburante. Un altro imprenditore, ricchissimo, si alzava al mattino molto presto e, facendosi accompagnare dalla domestica, andava ai mercati generali per fare di persona le provviste alimentari della famiglia. In questo modo risparmiava sui prezzi e ritornava tutto soddisfatto a casa senza preoccuparsi di calcolare il tempo sottratto al suo lavoro prezioso e ben più redditizio di gestire di navi e di traffici internazionali: ciò che importava era la soddisfazione di avere trovato un modo per spendere meno per la spesa giornaliera. Ancora: chiunque può sperimentare di persona, andando a Genova in un negozio, come i commessi, il più delle volte, consigliano l'acquisto di un prodotto, sempre di qualità, ma che costa di meno rispetto a quello che il cliente aveva scelto in un primo momento. Si testimonia così, paradossalmente rispetto agli interessi immediati del negoziante, che quel che conta soprattutto è il rispetto di un codice morale latente, ma inviolabile nella cultura genovese, che vieta assolutamente lo spreco di denaro. L'avarizia genovese non è semplicemente uno dei vizi capitali, ha una connotazione piuttosto complessa. Non implica banalmente solo avidità e gusto del possesso, implica anche parsimonia e prudenza nell'uso di una risorsa preziosa, conquistata spesso con fatica.

Si tratta di comprendere allora quali processi abbiano generato una *Weltanschauung* così angusta ma diffusa, tale da rappresentare pubblicamente un'identità collettiva. Si tratta di una visione che produce però anche effetti significativi di chiusura sociale. Le radici di questa concezione della vita ancorate a Genova sono antiche. Un esempio? L'avarizia come bussola della vita dei genovesi d'alto rango è un tema centrale di una novella del *Decamerone* ([1351] 1985)<sup>8</sup>. Si incontrano eventi storici

<sup>8</sup> Si veda la novella VIII della prima giornata, dove un ricchissimo patrio genovese Ermino de'Grimaldi, detto Ermino Avarizia, dopo essere stato svergognato da un gentiluomo fiorentino, Guiglielmo Borsiere, si ravvede e decide di cambiare stile di vita.

ed accadimenti che vengono raccontati a metà, tra storia e leggenda, e che attestano l'antica attitudine genovese al rifiuto di esborsare denaro. Di seguito si considerano quattro avvenimenti, situati tra di loro a molta distanza nel tempo, che dimostrano come la prudenza nel trattare il denaro sia un valore ben presente nelle modalità di azione dei ceti superiori con responsabilità di governo della città. Il primo episodio è relativo all'origine dell'espressione tipicamente genovese *Emmo za dato!* (abbiamo già dato) che è da ritrovarsi nella risposta che Oberto Spinola, convocato con gli altri rappresentanti dei comuni italici alla Dieta di Roncaglia nel 1158 diede, con orgoglio, a fronte delle pretese di Federico I, detto il Barbarossa. L'Imperatore avrebbe rinnovato la concessione di piena autonomia alla città se questa le avesse dato omaggi e tributi. Ma non li ottenne. I genovesi, in cambio dell'esenzione fiscale da loro fermamente rivendicata, confermarono il loro impegno nella difesa del litorale, da Roma a Barcellona, dalle incursioni dei pirati saraceni. Questo servizio di polizia marittima naturalmente, in primo luogo, difendeva gli interessi commerciali di Genova ma anche proteggeva la pace nelle terre dell'Impero.

Il secondo episodio è di circa quattro secoli dopo. Andrea Doria, Ammiraglio Capo dell'Impero e *Pater Patriae*, nel 1528 aveva stipulato un contratto (*asiento*)<sup>9</sup> con Carlo V d'Asburgo, Re di Spagna e poi Imperatore. Si avvia, con questo patto, il *Siglo de los Genoveses*: un secolo che vedrà Genova tra le potenze finanziarie europee più importanti. Grazie a questo accordo le maestranze genovesi beneficeranno di numerose commesse per armare la flotta spagnola. Alcune famiglie come gli Spinola, i Doria e i Centurione finanziano con ingenti somme le attività militari dell'Impero ed in cambio ottengono la possibilità di occuparsi in esclusiva di tutte le attività marittime. In questo stesso periodo comincia a girare per Genova il blanco, la moneta spagnola. Nasce allora la diceria secondo cui "l'oro nasceva in America, arrivava in Spagna e veniva sepolto a Genova". Nel 1533 Carlo V visitò Genova e fu ospitato da Andrea Doria. In suo onore fu organizzato un banchetto fastoso e per impressionare l'Imperatore si usarono dei piatti d'oro che, al termine di ogni portata, venivano gettati in mare e sostituiti con altri piatti sempre d'oro che, una volta usati, subivano la stessa sorte. Questo sfoggio di ricchezza apparentemente sprecata, in realtà, non tradiva certo il sacro principio del risparmio. Infatti gli invitati non

<sup>9</sup> *L'asiento* è un accordo stipulato fra lo Stato e dei privati che si assumono l'onere di svolgere dei servizi pubblici o di adempiere a delle forniture. La Spagna rappresentava un'area ideale per gli investimenti dei genovesi, che finanziano stabilmente la Corona castigliana, specialmente attraverso prestiti di capitali e di navi.

sapevano che sul fondo del mare era stata gettata una rete che avrebbe permesso di recuperare, a tempo debito, tutti i piatti<sup>10</sup>.

Il terzo è un evento spartiacque che si colloca nella seconda metà del secolo XVI. L'evento viene ricordato da molti analisti che si preoccupano di comprendere aspetti e processi che possono concorrere alla formazione di una mentalità sparagnina nei genovesi. Nel 1585 scoppia la guerra fra Filippo II, Re di Spagna, paladino dell'ortodossia cattolica, e l'Inghilterra di Elisabetta I. La guerra è dovuta sia a motivi religiosi sia a motivi commerciali. Le enormi spese necessarie per allestire la Invincibile Armata spagnola furono addossate ai genovesi. Gli armatori genovesi erano perplessi perché si trattava di investire una enorme quantità di denaro in un'impresa molto rischiosa. Tuttavia prevalse l'idea di conservare la propria fedeltà alla corona degli Asburgo e così si diede vita alla flotta spagnola composta da 138 navi che consentivano a circa 30 mila uomini, e a più di 2000 pezzi di artiglieria, di affrontare la Royal Navy inglese nel canale della Manica. La flotta inglese era capitanata da Sir Francis Drake, un corsaro abilissimo, grande navigatore (il primo inglese a circumnavigare il globo), nominato dalla Regina vice ammiraglio. Questi tramite l'uso di navi incendiarie scatenò il panico nei capitani spagnoli. Lo scoppio concomitante di violentissime tempeste disperse la flotta spagnola prima verso il Mare del Nord e poi nell'Atlantico (agosto e settembre 1588). I sogni di conquista degli spagnoli svanirono così, insieme alle aspirazioni di lucro dei finanziatori genovesi.<sup>11</sup> La Superba subì un colpo durissimo. Dopo un secolo glorioso di accumulo di una ricchezza straordinaria, testimoniata dalle sue dimore patrizie – le più sfarzose di Europa – Genova seguirà lo stesso declino della Spagna e non riuscirà più a riscuotere i crediti maturati con la potenza iberica, ormai in crisi. Da questa disfatta si originerebbe una malcelata diffidenza verso i *forèsti*, soprattutto se si tratta di avere con loro relazioni economiche («se non era per gli spagnoli»). Analogamente si spiegherebbe l'estrema prudenza nel gestire gli investimenti di denaro, con annessa avversione per lo spreco che comunque, lo si ribadisce, consiglia di adottare una

<sup>10</sup> Si veda Fabrizio Càlzia (2011) al paragrafo 87.

<sup>11</sup> Filippo II di Spagna (1527-1598), detto il Prudente, figlio di Carlo V d'Asburgo, fu il più importante cliente dei banchieri genovesi del Cinquecento. Oberato da gravi oneri finanziari per la difesa dell'enorme impero creato dal padre, Filippo II con le sue ripetute dichiarazioni di fallimento travolse alcuni tra i più ricchi finanziari genovesi. La sua vittima principale fu Niccolò Grimaldi (1524-1593) che, per i vari titoli nobiliari di cui faceva vanto e soprattutto per le sue enormi ricchezze, era chiamato il Monarca. Grimaldi fu costretto improvvisamente a vendere, mentre era ancora in costruzione il suo ambito palazzo nella Strada Nuova (oggi palazzo Tursi e sede del Municipio in via Garibaldi).

diagnosi di prudenza piuttosto che quella sbrigativa, e stigmatizzante, di tirchieria e di avarizia.

Un'altra vicenda curiosa, che si dissolve nella leggenda<sup>12</sup>, riguarda il vessillo di Genova che è stato il simbolo della più importante potenza navale fra il Duecento ed il Trecento e della capitale della finanza europea fra il Cinquecento ed il Seicento. Questa leggenda viene ripresa e divulgata dalla stampa, a più riprese nel tempo, ed è relativa alla bandiera di San Giorgio, una croce rossa su fondo bianco, che gli inglesi avrebbero adottato nel 1190 per proteggere la loro flotta, essendo la fama dei naviganti genovesi tale da scoraggiare gli attacchi dei pirati semplicemente alla vista della bandiera. In cambio di questo privilegio concesso dai genovesi il monarca inglese avrebbe corrisposto un tributo ogni anno al Doge di Genova (che nel 1190, però, non esisteva ancora perché il doganato come forma di governo a Genova fu istituito solo nel 1339)<sup>13</sup>. Le inesattezze storiche si sprecano ma, ciononostante, nel 2018, Marco Bucci, al tempo sindaco di Genova, si fece pubblicamente promotore di un'iniziativa ispirata da esigenze di marketing, forse un tantino grossolane, che merita di essere citata perché sembra confermare una *forma mentis* presente nella classe dirigente della città, frutto di una visione della vita tipicamente *zenéize*. Il sindaco di Genova infatti scrive – in maniera ufficiale – un lapidario messaggio a Buckingham Palace: «Your Majesty, I regret to inform you that from my books it looks like you didn't pay for the last 247 years». La bizzarra, e si spera consapevolmente ironica, richiesta alla Regina di avere gli arretrati per l'affitto della Croce di San Giorgio naturalmente non avrà alcun riscontro. La Regina ha educatamente ed ufficialmente risposto al sindaco Bucci ringraziandolo per i riferimenti ai trascorsi intensi rapporti tra Genova e la Corona inglese, auspicando un consolidamento delle precitate relazioni e niente di più<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. <https://www.genova24.it/2021/07/la-bufala-della-bandiera-di-san-giorgio-presa-in-affitto-a-genova-dagli-inglesi-268277/>

<sup>13</sup> La prima, e sola, notizia dell'utilizzo della bandiera si ritrova (quasi a sei secoli di distanza) nel *Compendio delle storie di Genova* (1750) di Francesco Maria Accinelli, il quale a sua volta fa un riferimento (ma impropriamente perché, di fatto, nella fonte citata non c'è nessun cenno all'uso della bandiera genovese e tantomeno al diritto di inalberarla dietro pagamento) ai *Castigatissimi annali della Eccelsa ed Illustrissima Repubblica di Genova* di Agostino Giustiniani (pubblicati postumi nel 1537). In realtà gli storici hanno comprovato che c'era un utilizzo del vessillo nell'ambito inglese prima del 1190. Il vessillo infatti viene rappresentato già nell'arazzo di Bayeux, in collegamento con la campagna di Guglielmo il Conquistatore nel 1066. Si veda l'accurata ricostruzione di questa vicenda dovuta ad Antonio Musarra ed Emiliano Beri nel post del sito facebook del Laboratorio di Storia marittima e navale – Genova, *Il Vessillo di Genova e l'Inghilterra* [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1239](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1239) (23 aprile 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Un dettaglio non trascurabile, perché attesta una perseveranza dal tratto non proprio elegante, è relativo al fatto che oltre a scrivere alla

### 3. LA FAMIGLIA-AZIENDA

Atteggiamenti di questa natura non contrastano certo con il notissimo motto *Ianuensis ergo mercator* che risalirebbe addirittura ad un anonimo del 1200, quando per i genovesi essere naviganti, guerrieri e commercianti era un tutt'uno, e si verificava così una fruttuosa commistione di interessi tra gli uomini d'armi e i capitani di mare. Nel tardo Medioevo compaiono a Genova le prime banche. La straordinaria vocazione a gestire il denaro come fulcro dell'economia si rafforza a partire dal Quattrocento. Nel 1407 viene istituita la *Casa delle compere e dei banchi di San Giorgio*<sup>15</sup> che farà di Genova la città regina delle transazioni finanziarie e le attribuirà un primato in questo settore a scapito dei banchieri dei paesi nordeuropei. La Casa di San Giorgio per quattro secoli sarà l'istituzione più importante della Repubblica genovese, come potenza economica e come potenza politica<sup>16</sup>. L'economia del denaro è parte essenziale della storia genovese. Il nucleo fondamentale si forma e si consolida nel precitato *Secolo dei Genovesi*, che in realtà durerà settant'anni (1557-1627).

*Tale esperienza merita di essere studiata in sé stessa; è certamente il più curioso esempio di polarizzazione e di concentrazione che abbia offerto finora la storia dell'economia-mondo europea, in quanto ruota attorno a un punto pressoché inconsistente. Il perno dell'insieme non è infatti Genova, ma un pugno di banchieri-finanzieri (oggi si direbbe una società multinazionale). E questo non è che uno dei paradossi di quella strana città, tanto svantaggiata e tuttavia, prima e dopo il "suo" secolo, tesa a puntare ai vertici della vita internazionale degli affari. Una città che, a mio giudizio, è sempre stata a misura del suo tempo, la città capitalista per eccellenza* (Braudel 1982: 140-167)<sup>17</sup>

La seduzione del denaro che sembra avvolgere le menti genovesi lungo il corso dei secoli ha un suo profondo radicamento sociale ed istituzionale che bene viene illustrato da Gabriella Airaldi (2021: 153)<sup>18</sup>:

Regina Elisabetta, il Comune di Genova ha inviato una copia della lettera anche all'allora Primo Ministro del Regno Unito, Theresa May e all'allora Sindaco di Londra, Sadiq Khan.

<sup>15</sup> La nuova denominazione dal 1797 al 1805 sarà *Banco di San Giorgio*.

<sup>16</sup> Per inciso va ricordato che il 2 aprile 1502 Cristoforo Colombo, in una sua lettera redatta a Siviglia in castigliano, conferma la sua profonda affezione a Genova scrivendo: «Bien que el cuerpo anda acá, el coraçón está alí de continuo» e, nello stesso tempo, promette ai Protettori della Casa di San Giorgio di donare al banco un decimo delle sue rendite.

<sup>17</sup> Illuminanti le pagine *Restituiamo dimensioni e importanza al secolo dei genovesi* che Fernand Braudel dedica al tema in *Civiltà materiale, economia e capitalismo (secoli XV-XVIII)*.

<sup>18</sup> Airaldi descrive in modo molto documentato la capacità dei Genovesi di organizzare, nella lunga durata e su una scala internazionale, un'economia attorno al prestito di denaro: «Parte dagli anni Venti del

*L' homo faber fortunae suae, nato ed educato sul binomio mercato-città, è la prima espressione dell' homo oeconomicus che verrà. Quest' individuo però non è solo, né opera in solitudine. Intorno a lui, infatti, si consolida definitivamente il ruolo della famiglia-azienda. Una formula presente dappertutto, apprezzata in sommo grado dei Genovesi che, fin dal XII secolo, ne fanno l'asse del loro sistema comunale e del loro fortunato modello di espansione, il più esteso a livello mondiale grazie alla formula dell' "albergo". Una formula che nel 1528 raccoglierà sotto ventotto grandi nomi centinaia e centinaia di gruppi familiari, codificando anche a livello politico un sistema secolare.*

Il nodo antropologico che accompagna la mentalità dei Genovesi (scritti con la G maiuscola, vale a dire i titolari della leadership economica e politica della città) si fonda su un familismo eticamente dominato dal principio di utilità, animato da una rete di famiglie-azienda in aspra ed eterna competizione fra di loro. Questi Genovesi si dimostrano abili moltiplicatori di denaro a partire dal Medioevo tramite il controllo mercantile dell'allume, dello zucchero e poi del frumento. Grazie a questo ruolo condizioneranno per secoli il mercato finanziario internazionale. La forza di Genova è radicata in un capitalismo familiare.

*Dalla fine del Mille le grandi famiglie sono anche aziende e la creazione di una potente, elastica rete internazionale che si amplia nel tempo testimonia la validità di questa formula, destinata a rimanere invariata fino all'Età contemporanea. In effetti la necessità di modificare le zone operative lavorando intensamente a spostare le frontiere – tema di fondo della storia genovese – impone il rispetto di regole rigide che garantiscano la maggiore libertà di azione e la maggiore sicurezza di movimento. Per questo i genovesi scelgono di rimanere fedeli all'uso di modelli tradizionali per loro natura stabili e solidali. Decidono cioè di mantenere intatta anche nell'esercizio degli affari la centralità della famiglia patriarcale, ricca di uomini da diramare per il mondo e vertice di una piramide umana che essi portano con sé dappertutto (Airaldi 2012: 67-97)*

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Cinquecento "il secolo dei Genovesi", speculatori abilissimi nel manovrare tutto ciò che è cartaceo. Ma il prestito all'uso di Genova supera il secolo. Vale la pena di ricordarlo per capire come i capitali girino senza sosta. È questa la storia della finanza, una storia che non si vede ma che proseguirà nel tempo fino all'età contemporanea. Sono coinvolti nel prestito all'uso di Genova, tra molti altri, Luigi XV e Luigi XVI di Francia, Maria Teresa d'Austria, Giuseppe II, Leopoldo II, Caterina II, i re di Baviera, Sassonia e Danimarca, e così pure Napoleone e il suo *entourage*. Nel 1785 i prestiti ammontano a 110 milioni di lire, da sommare a circa 230 milioni impiegati in titoli pubblici ad alto rendimento in una ventina di Paesi europei: un volume complessivo pari a dieci volte il valore del commercio marittimo e a venti volte il bilancio della Repubblica» (*Ibidem*: 164).

La famiglia-azienda si muove sia in città sia nel mondo in un modo spregiudicato, sa sfruttare opportunità impensabili grazie alle sue intuizioni geniali e attraverso i secoli grazie alla solidità del legame familiare. Il familismo capitalistico dei genovesi produce una grande ricchezza e un potere altrettanto influente, ma incoraggia anche delle modalità di vita dense di contraddizioni, soprattutto orientate alla tutela di interessi materiali. Il familismo genera naturalmente una sfera pubblica privatizzata. Non per caso si parla di una repubblica aristocratica dei Genovesi. «A Genova, una città così tipicamente capitalistica, secondo una relazione del 1684, la nobiltà che tiene nelle proprie mani la repubblica (in nome dei suoi titoli, non meno che del suo denaro) è costituita al massimo da 700 persone (non contando le famiglie) su forse 80.000 abitanti» (Braudel 1981: 477). L'aggregazione politica ha come scopo primario il guadagno tramite il monopolio commerciale. L'individualismo estremo del sistema della famiglia-azienda genera un carattere essenzialmente individualistico dell'ordinamento politico e sociale ed incoraggia un'alternanza di alleanze e di violenti conflitti tra le stesse famiglie. La struttura oligarchica sostiene la propensione ai veti incrociati tra i vari capifamiglia. Non si è forti abbastanza per assumere interamente il potere ma lo si è abbastanza per impedire agli altri di esercitarlo in piena autonomia (Vitale 1955). Questo atteggiamento diventa un dato antropologico di lunga durata che favorisce la conservazione ed inibisce ogni progetto che abbia degli obiettivi di un cambiamento strutturale della società genovese nella prospettiva del bene comune.

Se questi processi e gli eventi che li hanno accompagnati hanno avuto la loro influenza nella costruzione di una mentalità, sicuramente, poi, hanno alimentato, non poco, lo stereotipo dell'avarizia le affermazioni affatto lusinghiere nei confronti dei genovesi espresse da personaggi illustri e da pensatori autorevoli come ad esempio Montesquieu (1689-1755) che in alcune pagine di *Viaggio in Italia* ([1728] 1990) e nella sua *Lettera su Genova* avanza delle impressioni frettolose e dei giudizi molto severi che, purtroppo, saranno un punto di riferimento per gli altri viaggiatori, francesi e non solo, che verranno a Genova e ne proporranno al mondo un'immagine opaca:

*i Genovesi non sono affatto socievoli; e questo carattere deriva piuttosto dalla loro estrema avarizia che non da un indole forastica: perché non potete credere fino a che punto arriva la parsimonia di quei principi. Non c'è niente di più bugiardo dei loro palazzi: di fuori, una casa superba, e dentro una vecchia serva, che fila. Se nelle case più illustri vedete un paggio, è perché non ci sono domestici. Invitare qualcuno a pranzo è a Genova una cosa inaudita. Quei bei*

*palazzi sono in realtà, fino al terzo piano, magazzini per le merci. Tutti esercitano il commercio, e il primo mercante è il Doge. Tutto questo rende gli animi della gente assai bassi, anche se molto vani. Hanno palazzi non perché spendano, ma perché il luogo fornisce loro il marmo. Come ad Angers dove tutte le case sono coperte di ardesia. Hanno tuttavia dei piccoli casini lungo il mare, abbastanza belli; ma la bellezza è dovuta alla posizione e al mare, che non costano nulla. I Genovesi di oggi sono tardi quanto gli antichi Liguri. Non voglio dire con questo che non intendano i loro affari: l'interesse apre gli occhi a tutti [...] C'è sempre un nobile genovese in viaggio per chiedere perdono a qualche sovrano delle sciocchezze che fa la sua repubblica. C'è ancora una cosa, che i Genovesi non si raffinano in nessun modo: sono pietre massicce che non si lasciano tagliare. Quelli che sono stati inviati nelle corti straniere, ne son tornati Genovesi come prima (Ibidem: 108-109)*

Non si sa come questo illuminato filosofo sia stato in grado di delineare degli aspetti identitari così penetranti sulla base di un soggiorno molto breve. Ciò nonostante, il 26 dicembre del 1728, scrive a Madame de Lambert queste righe velenose «Dimenticavo di dirvi che sono stato otto giorni a Genova e che mi sono annoiato da morire: è la Narbonne d'Italia. Non c'è niente da vedere all'infuori di un bellissimo e pericolosissimo porto, delle case costruite in marmo, perché la pietra costa troppo e degli ebrei che vanno a messa».<sup>19</sup> Viene il sospetto che un livore così accanito sia soprattutto una reazione al fatto di non essere stato riconosciuto ed accolto dai genovesi in una maniera adeguata alla sua fama e al suo rango, così come gli capitava abitualmente quando viaggiava in altre città. Tuttavia molti anni dopo, ne *Lo spirito delle leggi* (1748) si ritrovano alcune frasi che riequilibrano, in un evidente e comunque parziale ripensamento, le sue critiche demolitrici ed irrispettose scritte nel *Viaggio in Italia* e nella sua greve poesia *Adieu à Gènes* (1728).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Il testo della lettera è riportato da Carlo Bo (1966: 12).

<sup>20</sup> «La città di Genova è stata una fonte di grande ricchezza per il mondo, grazie alla sua abilità nel commercio e alla sua posizione strategica sulle rotte commerciali del Mediterraneo [...] La città di Genova ha dato i natali a numerosi uomini illustri, tra cui artisti, scienziati e filosofi, dimostrando di avere anche una grande cultura e un alto livello di pensiero [...] La città di Genova, nonostante le sue debolezze e i suoi problemi, rimane una delle più belle e affascinanti città d'Italia, testimone della grande cultura e della grande tradizione del popolo genovese [...] I Genovesi hanno dimostrato un grande spirito di iniziativa e di adattabilità nel corso dei secoli, affrontando con successo le sfide del commercio e della politica internazionale [...] I Genovesi sono un popolo di grande energia e di grande determinazione, che ha saputo sopravvivere alle difficoltà e alle sfide della storia con coraggio e con successo». Il testo integrale della poesia-invektiva *Adieu à Gènes*, anch'esso redatto nel 1728, si trova in Carlo Bo (1966: 11-12).

#### 4. GENOVESI DI RANGO E GENOVESI COMUNI

La mentalità dei genovesi va indagata, tuttavia, avendo riguardo anche, e soprattutto, agli atteggiamenti che sono propri della gente comune; dunque di chi non dispone di una grande ricchezza da investire e di chi non appartiene alla casta dei potenti ma semplicemente con il suo lavoro e con il suo senso di responsabilità vive la quotidianità e concorre a definire un'immagine pubblica della città. Negli strati sociali popolari si rintraccia, più che una passione del possesso che alimenta l'avarizia, un'attenzione ad evitare lo spreco ed un'antica sapienza nel sapere utilizzare in una maniera estremamente oculata le poche risorse disponibili. Per tentare una spiegazione di questa *forma mentis* così diffusa e così tipica dei genovesi, è forse utile introdurre un approccio che tenga conto di alcuni aspetti morfologici relativi al territorio dove vive questa popolazione. Genova è una città stretta fra monti e mare. Le vallate che la circondano non offrono un terreno adatto all'agricoltura, o meglio, il poco terreno utile va ricavato spianando i pendii più scoscesi con un sistema di terrazzamenti, le famose "fasce", rette da muri a secco. Le vallate coltivate sono dei gradini di terreno che assumono – come scrive Italo Calvino ([1973] 1995: 2382) –

*il caratteristico aspetto di gironi danteschi e sono il più delle volte troppo piccoli per consentire l'impiego di aratri e di macchine agricole. Il pesante piccone a tre becchi, il "magaiu", è stato per secoli l'attrezzo agricolo per eccellenza, capace di dissodare le più dure zolle della montagna. Richiede braccia e schiena fortissime, piedi ben piantati per terra, ostinazione feroce. Nella maggior parte dei casi questo forzato della zappa era lo stesso proprietario del terreno: la proprietà agricola in Liguria era e resta estremamente frazionata e sopperisce a malapena alla sopravvivenza familiare.*

All'avarizia della terra corrisponde, naturalmente, l'"avarizia" di chi la coltiva che non può non tenere in gran conto quel poco che riesce a produrre e quello che consuma nella sua quotidianità. La cura ed il rispetto per ciò che si è conquistato con grande fatica, il culto per il risparmio, in un senso lato, diventa un dato identitario non facile da scalfire e che si trasmette di generazione in generazione anche quando, lasciata la campagna, si va a vivere in città e si respira l'atmosfera della modernità.

L'aspetto morfologico territoriale e la sua inevitabile influenza sulle modalità di stabilire e di vivere le relazioni sociali, suggerisce di considerare la specificità urbanistica di Genova. I genovesi sono da sempre abituati a disporre di poco spazio e a muoversi avendo a disposi-

zione poca terra sotto i loro piedi. Da secoli la città si edifica su un territorio dall'estensione limitata che promuove una dimensione pronunciata di verticalità. La percezione di una "città verticale" è assai comune e viene dichiarata spesso come prima impressione anche da chi visita la città<sup>21</sup>. Giorgio Caproni (1912-1990), poeta *mala-de de Gênes*, riesce a descriverla mirabilmente:

*Con le sue salite, le sue rampe, le sue scalinate, i suoi ascensori pubblici, le sue funicolari e le sue strade disposte una sull'altra, Genova è infatti una città tutta verticale. Verticale e quindi, almeno per me, lirica, se non addirittura onirica. Una città che direi, urbanisticamente, tra le più irrazionali, se non sapessi come invece, tale apparente irrazionalità altro non sia che il frutto d'un ben ponderato calcolo: quello di trarre il maggior profitto possibile, e nel modo migliore, da una tirannica configurazione geografica, che sempre ha imposto ai genovesi d'espandersi soltanto in altezza. (Caproni 1997: 12)*<sup>22</sup>

Genova è una città in salita. Bruno Gabrielli (1932-2015) parla di Genova come di una «città costretta» che declina verso il mare<sup>23</sup>. Si tratta allora di tentare di dare una risposta all'interrogativo quali siano gli effetti della dimensione verticale dell'habitat urbano sui suoi abitanti. La psicologia ambientale può formulare delle ipotesi interessanti, partendo dall'assunto che la configurazione dello spazio ove si vive influenza le emozioni, il funzionamento cognitivo ed in generale gli stati mentali e quindi la socialità. *In primis*, ovviamente, si determina una maggiore densità abitativa, ma è l'uso dello spazio così compresso che va valutato nei suoi effetti sulle rappresentazioni della realtà e sulle modalità individuali di viverla. La densità coatta alimenta nella quotidianità una sorta di verticalità psicologica ed alimenta una soggettività intrisa di un senso di disagio, dal quale ci si protegge conservando uno spazio di forte autonomia e di distanza dagli altri. Spesso questo forte bisogno di privacy e di riservatezza diventa diffidenza e si salda con altri atteggiamenti psicologici che scoraggiano le forme di incontro e di solidarietà e concorrono nel fare del genovese un tipo spigoloso. Anche Guido Piovene (1907-1974) nel suo *Viaggio in Italia* ([1957] 2013: 227-230) scrive di Genova come di «una città fatta a compartimenti stagni» e rintraccia delle somiglianze fra i genovesi e gli inglesi: «inglesi sono a Genova la prudenza, il riserbo, il poco

gusto di apparire» così come lo sono «la concezione del lavoro, il tipico *understatement* ed il carattere schivo». Ma Piovene si accorge anche di altri caratteri come «lo scarso amore del rischio, le decisioni troppo rimuginate, il tradizionalismo, il poco gusto di far circolare il denaro, specie nella propria città»<sup>24</sup>.

In breve. Le determinanti della mentalità di una comunità sono sicuramente molteplici, alcune manifeste altre latenti. Queste determinanti si influenzano reciprocamente con intensità e secondo modalità che variano nel tempo. Dunque esplorarle è un compito arduo che qui si svolge solo parzialmente. Un punto resta fondamentale per il caso genovese: si può sottolineare che molto ruota attorno al denaro. Il denaro è stato la merce più preziosa che i genovesi hanno scambiato con il mondo nel corso dei secoli. Le vicende che riguardano il denaro spiegano la storia economica e sociale della città. Il denaro acquista un valore culturale profondo che trascende il suo significato meramente economico. Ne è prova il fatto che più volte tra le navate della Cattedrale di San Lorenzo, anche nelle celebrazioni natalizie, è risuonato per bocca dell'allora potente Cardinale Giuseppe Siri (1906-1989) il proverbio, cinico ed inquietante, *Homo sine pecunia est imago mortis*. La complessità è l'essenza della realtà genovese e nasconde aspetti imprevedibili che, inevitabilmente, sfuggono all'occhio del sociologo. Sembra allora opportuno concludere questo excursus dedicato alla "frugalità" dei genovesi con due citazioni che propongono due ottiche di lettura differenti ma che, a parere di chi scrive, sono egualmente interessanti, pur nella loro inconciliabilità. La prima è ricavata dal libro, già citato, *Essere avari* (Airaldi 2021) che riflette sull'avarizia nella cultura occidentale in una prospettiva storica di lunghissima durata. Airaldi, massima esperta della storia politica ed economica della città di Genova, mentre suggerisce di oltrepassare le analisi banalmente negative e gli stereotipi relativi, avanza un punto di vista capace di intuire le metamorfosi del capi-

<sup>21</sup> Calvino (1973: 2386) scrive di «una città verticale addossata alle alture che non lasciano spazio tra le loro pareti ed il mare, di modo che le case devono appiattirsi l'una sull'altra, espandersi a ventaglio sopra un porto sempre più ramificato ed affollato».

<sup>22</sup> Superfluo ricordare che Caproni è l'autore di quella straordinaria *Litania* (1954), dedicata alla città di Genova.

<sup>23</sup> Bruno Gabrielli è stato un preclaro docente di urbanistica ed assessore alla qualità urbana nel Comune di Genova tra il 1997 ed il 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Alcuni anni dopo, nel 1968, all'interno della serie televisiva *Questa nostra Italia* (rai play.it/programmi/questanostraitalia-sabelepiovene, episodio 13- Liguria) Piovene riprenderà le sue riflessioni su Genova e sui suoi abitanti: «Vi è stato parlato e si parlerà ancora di alcune caratteristiche ataviche dei genovesi, che naturalmente oggi con i mutamenti dell'economia e del costume possono valere soltanto come inclinazioni. È vero che il vecchio genovese aveva scarsa simpatia per la politica e invece il feticismo per il lavoro, il gusto e il culto del riserbo e della vita privata. A sentire i discorsi di qualche vecchio imprenditore, lavorava sempre, non si capiva quando andasse a mangiare e a dormire. Tra poco un genovese vi dirà che il suo concittadino tipico non ama divertirsi a Genova, dove preferisce passare inosservato e va a letto presto, ma lontano da Genova: onde il vecchio detto che il genovese diventa milanese appena fuori dalle mura. Questa stessa persona sfiorerà anche Portofino che è un concentrato di alta borghesia settentrionale; e qui milanesi e genovesi di un certo ceto superano le loro diversità apparenti e si uniscono in un medesimo stile».

talismo nella mentalità di una popolazione avvezza per secoli all'uso del denaro e al commercio.

*Appetitus pecuniae hoc est avaritia [...] Desiderare denaro è nella natura umana perché il denaro fa stare meglio. Ogni attività verrebbe meno se non ci fosse il desiderio di aumentare la propria ricchezza e il proprio benessere, pur correndo rischi e pericoli. Il principio di utilità è una naturale inclinazione umana, perciò l'acquisizione di beni materiali e di moneta non è contro natura. Ogni città ha bisogno di avari che mobilitino lavoro per aumentare il valore delle merci prodotte - senza denaro niente scambi - e anche l'agricoltura ne trae vantaggio. Se ne può concludere che l'avarizia non è un vizio ma una virtù (Ibidem: 157-158).*

Naturalmente si può considerare che il principio di utilità, se motivato solo dalla passione smodata per il possesso del denaro, non agisce sempre nell'interesse comune, anche se la storia delle vicende umane è segnata profondamente dal principio delle conseguenze inintenzionali dell'agire. La seconda citazione propone, invece, una riflessione di un raffinato critico letterario, nato nella Riviera ligure di Levante, Carlo Bo (1996), che si prefigge «di interrompere una lettura per schemi e per luoghi comuni» della mentalità genovese. Bo introduce una variabile psicologica inaspettata: «la preoccupazione di rendere eterne le cose», figlia di una religiosità e di un senso del sacro vissuti dai genovesi nella consapevolezza della propria finitudine ma che, nonostante ciò, alimentano l'ansia del domani, il desiderio di non stare in ozio, la certezza a non sciupare e a non offendere la quotidianità con un profondo rispetto ed amore per la vita.

*Si vuole notare soprattutto una cosa: non è vero che i genovesi siano degli spiriti insensibili, e quindi bisogna stare attenti a non prendere per insensibilità ciò che invece è chiusura, prudenza, capacità di vedere le cose come sono, insomma misura religiosa della vita [...] All'idolatria del lavoro corrisponde un altrettanto robusto senso del mistero, del sacro, del religioso [...] Farsi la casa, fare la casa di Dio: tutto viene fatto perché non passi, perché resti, perché sia testimonianza della continuità. In questo senso va innestata l'interpretazione della prudenza, delle ragioni economiche, magari dell'avarizia dei genovesi che in fondo è più travestita che reale. Si vuole conservare ma per gli altri, si vuole tesaurizzare ma per potere affrontare il futuro. Che sono poi pensieri che nascono fatalmente in gente che ha avuto per sorte una terra arida fino alla più disperata miseria e per salvezza il mare, vale a dire un elemento che non dà pace, che tradisce, che sembra addirittura la contraddizione dell'idea di stabilità, di eternità. Il genovese costruisce, convinto della vanità e dell'insicurezza della nostra vita e, nonostante questo, vuole che le sue costruzioni siano eterne, durino nel nome della famiglia, restino ai figli [...] Bisogna andar sotto le cose, bisogna spogliare gli attori di questo teatro delle loro vesti apparenti e allora si*

*ritroverà un discorso solo, continuo, fondato su questa doppia aspirazione al concreto e all'eterno (Ibidem: 9-10)*

## 5. LO IUS MUGUGNANDI

Un altro dei simboli identitari più noti dei genovesi è il mugugno. Mugugno (o *mogògno*) è una voce dialettale che sottintende un atteggiamento insoddisfatto o di rifiuto. Per meglio dire, è una forma di protesta che si manifesta a mezza voce, con un brontolio continuo. Si mugugna a denti stretti, con le labbra semichiusate adottando un'espressione accigliata, quasi cupa, malmostosa, che si concentra tutta in una rappresentazione fonetica. Il mugugno svela un'attitudine al lamento. È l'espressione di un sentimento di profondo malumore con cui, tuttavia, si convive in un modo naturale, accompagnato da un bisogno irrefrenabile di protestare contro qualcuno, o contro qualcosa, ma senza che si sia mai in preda ad un'ira violenta. Ci si lagna ma, in definitiva, in una maniera inconcludente perché le cause della sofferenza restano intatte. Il mugugno è una rimostranza con toni pacati, continua ed incessante. Se usato bene e al massimo delle sue potenzialità, può essere assai peggio di una vera arrabbiatura e può portare, a volte, anche allo sfinimento dell'interlocutore che lo subisce. Questa forma di comunicazione repressa è però funzionale, soprattutto, in quanto agisce da valvola di sfogo che permette a chi patisce un'ingiustizia di continuare a svolgere un'azione non gradita ma necessaria. Il mugugno, se si analizza meglio e se ne cercano i contenuti, si riduce ad una disapprovazione cauta, ad un mugolio indistinto che non si trasforma mai in aperta aggressività. Il mugugnare si riduce al «manifestare sterilmente il proprio dissenso con discorsi allusivi, disapprovazioni caute, critiche velate, senza assumere mai posizioni di aperto contrasto o di efficace opposizione» (Battaglia 1981: 55). La pratica quotidiana del mugugno forse è l'effetto di una sorta di complesso di inferiorità nei confronti dell'altro, bilanciato però da un senso di superiorità di ordine morale che si traduce, appunto, in un lamento-protesta. Mugugnare significa, di fatto, pronunciare parole incomprensibili, dei suoni poco articolati che sono sufficienti però a rappresentare un utile allentamento della tensione ed aiutano a continuare a svolgere i propri compiti, per pesanti che siano.

Mugugno è un termine che ha una sua storia semantica, non agevole da ricostruire. In questo caso la storia delle origini è radicata nell'ambiente marinaro. *Ou mugugnu*, a dire degli studiosi, è una voce onomatopeica<sup>25</sup> che riproduce un suono particolare e che si lega

<sup>25</sup> Il *Grande Dizionario della lingua italiana* collega le origini onomatopeiche della parola strettamente «agli sfoghi e ai malumori puramente

allo sfogo di chi patisce la durezza della vita del navigante, fatta di ordini secchi e di dura disciplina. Pare che il diritto a mugugnare sia stato accordato per la prima volta ai marittimi camogli reputati, per abilità, i migliori del mondo. I marinai di Camogli potevano scegliere fra due tipi di ingaggio: il primo senza mugugno con una paga più elevata, il secondo con diritto di mugugno per ciò che li faceva irritare, ma con una paga più bassa. Tutti, o quasi tutti, sceglievano, paradossalmente, la seconda possibilità.<sup>26</sup> Alle origini del mugugno ci sarebbe il bisogno di mettere in discussione, in astratto, gli equilibri delle gerarchie marinaresche. Da qui l'adagio: «Senza vino si naviga, senza mugugni, no» (Celesia 1884: 68). Il mugugno, in tale circostanza, sembra da intendere non solo come una sterile lamentela, ma come una messa in discussione degli ordini impartiti senza ritegno e dunque come una sorta di difesa della libertà di espressione dei sottoposti, anche se le cose per loro non cambiavano. Dunque nel profilo originario del mugugnare si rintraccia, forse, un embrione di democrazia. Tuttavia va sottolineato che il mugugno non si traduce mai in una protesta aperta, ostruzionista o anarchica, ma rimane un borbottio risentito che preme in una direzione precisa, senza mai prevaricare. Gli ordini, di fatto, venivano sempre eseguiti. La leggenda narra che la Magistratura dei Conservatori del mare di Genova, l'organo che regolamentava le attività e le controversie riguardanti il porto e la marina, avrebbe codificato e sancito il diritto al mugugno fin dal 1300<sup>27</sup>. Questo diritto, o forse meglio, questa prassi consolidata fu sospesa e riformata dal Principe-Ammiraglio dell'Antica Repubblica di Genova, Andrea Doria (1466-1560). Andrea Doria, forse temendo che la disciplina di bordo si incrinasse, stabilì per i suoi equipaggi delle migliori condizioni di lavoro, con una riduzione dei turni di voga e con un'alimentazione più decente (carne essiccata a bordo al posto delle solite brodaglie) ma, soprattutto, alzando le paghe; in cambio però pretese ed ottenne la rinuncia integrale al mugugno. Tuttavia, terminata l'epoca dell'Ammiraglio Doria i marinai della Superba ripresero la loro antica abitudine: continuarono a rinunciare a parte dell'ingaggio pur di mantenere il loro secolare diritto al mugugno. In segui-

to, questa prassi si diffuse in altri settori portuali e la disciplina contrattuale fu accordata anche ai *camalli*,<sup>28</sup> cioè agli scaricatori che lavorano nel porto. Con il tempo, poi, la parola, ha trasformato il primo significato legato ad un contesto marinaro e ha assunto il senso di una sterile lamentela che si prolunga nel tempo e che si manifesta nelle situazioni le più diverse.

Il mugugno riflette comunque, sia alle origini sia nella contemporaneità, una *forma mentis* ed uno stile di vita proprio di chi protesta sempre e volentieri, ma poi fa poco o nulla per cambiare le cose di cui si lamenta. Il mugugno è, a tutt'oggi, quel qualcosa di cui i genovesi ed i liguri sembra non possano più fare a meno. Il mugugno risponde ad un bisogno incontenibile di criticare l'autorità o, più in generale, lo stato delle cose che fa parte della quotidianità. Si protesta, si brontola perfino a prescindere da un assillo effettivo. Il mugugno è un comportamento verbale che riflette una stanchezza interiore, un pessimismo endemico ed irrimediabile. Il mugugno svela una situazione emotiva, fatta di una scontentezza senza alternative, che rifiuta la caciara rumorosa e che predilige la riservatezza, anche nella protesta. Il mugugno è catartico, basta a sé stesso, non chiede, non pretende proprio nulla in cambio, così come è nell'indole orgogliosa *zenéize*. Questo stato d'animo si associa al *maniman*, un atteggiamento che contrasta con il coraggio di chi rischia la vita in mare per professione e che ci parla di un soggetto che adotta il riserbo e che non comunica volentieri ed apertamente con l'esterno perché, in fondo, ha la preoccupazione di sbagliare. Se si trasferisce sul piano collettivo l'effetto di questa visione della vita, si può comprendere, almeno in parte, il perché della persistente staticità di una grande città come Genova che, per troppo tempo, non ha saputo partecipare alle grandi trasformazioni sociali ed economiche e, spesso, non è stata capace di attivare quelle energie in grado di produrre mutamenti in sintonia con i tempi. L'abitudine a lagnarsi è trasversale è presente in tutte le classi sociali. Il mugugno non risponde ad un'agenda precisa. Un intervistato genovese documenta spontaneamente il senso del mugugno quando ci avverte che: «i discòrsci che gian insciú mogògno soun cæi e scetti “mogògno libberou” o “levæme tûtto ma lasciæme ou mogògno”, o ascì “pe’ fâ andâ e cose drite ghé veu ‘na bella lite, niatri inte ‘na manea o natra douvemou mogògnâ”»<sup>29</sup>. Nella pra-

platonici di chi è soggetto agli inevitabili disagi della vita e della disciplina di bordo», (*Ibidem*).

<sup>26</sup> «Venti lire di paga invece di trenta ma col ‘ius mugugnandi’» (Moretti 1961: 334).

<sup>27</sup> In realtà si tratta di una data discutibile, o peggio evidentemente errata, perché come ha notato lo storico, Giovanni Assereto: «Il Magistrato dei Conservatori del mare nasce solo a metà del Cinquecento; e i documenti più antichi relativi a tale magistratura conservati nell'Archivio di Stato di Genova risalgono al 1575 (cfr. la *Guida generale degli Archivi di Stato*, a p. 322)»; si veda [www.amezena.net/storia-di/storia-di-marinaidi-magistrati/#comment-119074](http://www.amezena.net/storia-di/storia-di-marinaidi-magistrati/#comment-119074)

<sup>28</sup> Il termine genovese *camallo* è mutuato dall'arabo *hammāl* che significa facchino, portatore di merce a spalla. Merita ricordare che il termine viene rintracciato, forse, per la prima volta nel latino medioevale ligure del 1387 (Pettracco Siccardi 2002)

<sup>29</sup> Il testo in lingua italiana diventa: «i discorsi che si fanno sul mugugno sono chiari e schietti: “mugugno libero per tutti” oppure “toglietemi tutto ma lasciatemi il mugugno”, o anche “per fare andare bene le cose ci vuole una bella lite, noialtri in un modo o nell'altro dobbiamo mugugnare”».

tica quotidiana ci si imbatte in mugugni che fanno parte di un modo di esprimersi abituale di soggetti che manifestano così la loro natura *stondäia* (brontolona), restia alle aperture verso l'esterno e timorosa del nuovo e del non previsto<sup>30</sup>.

Il mugugno è un rituale che si associa ad un tono di voce cantilenante, monotono nella cadenza (*còcina*) e che si accompagna ad una contenuta gestualità: alzata di spalle, sopracciglio inarcato, mani che roteano a mimare l'ineluttabile. Naturalmente il mugugno è anche una propensione fatta di ironia consapevole e non arriva certo ad inibire, specialmente nelle generazioni più giovani, alcuni aspetti fondamentali del popolo genovese come la creatività, la tenacia, il sapere guardare oltre l'orizzonte e l'ambire ad occasioni di crescita e di sviluppo economico e sociale.

Ancora una volta, non va taciuta la riflessione sulla genovesità di Carlo Bo ed in particolare il significato che attribuisce, nobilitandolo, al mugugno. Bo, lo si ricorderà, rintraccia nei genovesi due concezioni della vita, *ictu oculi*, inconciliabili. Da un lato «l'idolatria del lavoro», dall'altro «un altrettanto robusto senso del mistero, del sacro, del religioso». Il contrasto tra queste due visioni della vita, a suo dire, è solo apparente:

*Il punto di unione è rintracciabile facilmente in quelli che sono gli atteggiamenti ufficiali, illustrati da un larghissimo teatro popolare, dei genovesi; il famoso 'mugugno' non è che il controcanto, l'avvertimento che ogni vero genovese sa di dover dare a se stesso, mentre finge di rivolgersi agli altri, nell'ambito di una ben segnata e calcata insofferenza. È un modo di fare la tara sui grandi propositi umani, sulle grandi ambizioni, sull'inevitabile retorica della vita. Nel 'mugugno' c'è la mano dell'esperienza e del pericolo conosciuto e valutato per quello che è, e ancora c'è la strada più rapida per arrivare alla preghiera. I genovesi, i liguri pregano di nascosto, pregano mugugnando e spesso si ha la sensazione che ci sia un dialogo estremamente ambizioso fra l'uomo che conosce la sua infinita miseria e il Dio ignoto, il Dio che non rende il mondo perfetto. Ma in questo stesso momento in cui sembrano prevalere gli errori del carattere, ecco che si ha uno straordinario capovolgimento (Bo 1996: 9)*

Sembra bene integrare la riflessione di Bo un cenno che Eugenio Montale (1896-1981) dedica al mugugno all'interno della sua definizione di un tipo umano genovese etichettato con il termine *stundaio*: «atteggiamento tipico di orgoglio misto a timidezza e diffidenza,

<sup>30</sup> Ecco un *loop* che accompagna, di solito, il mugugno lungo il corso delle stagioni. In primavera: «*Belin non fasso àlto che stranuà l'ea mègio quànde l'ea freido*»; in estate: «*Belin se scciupà da o càdo*»; in autunno: «*Oh belin come ciève...l'è colpa do scindaco*»; in inverno: «*Se stava mègio quànde l'ea càdo*».

la pratica quotidiana del mugugno, una diffidenza nei confronti di altri bilanciato dal senso di una superiorità di ordine morale».<sup>31</sup>

Una breve nota linguistica sembra opportuna *ad adiuvandum* l'analisi sociologica. Il linguaggio è un fatto sociale e come tale va studiato per analizzare i comportamenti degli attori che lo adottano per comunicare e per influire sulle dinamiche sociali. Il linguaggio ha una sua naturale valenza diffusiva che corrisponde ai processi di cambiamento dovuti, anche, alla contaminazione culturale. Il verbo *Mogògnà* (brontolare, lamentarsi) è rintracciabile compattamente a Genova ed in buona parte del territorio ligure «dove *mogògno* è una vera e propria parola-bandiera, di qui passata in còrso, nonché nel dialetto della Versilia e alla Capraia» (Toso 2015: 182-183). Il dialetto genovese ha raccolto via mare le ricchezze delle lingue del Mediterraneo ma, sempre attraverso il gergo marinaro, le ha restituite all'italiano e da tempo il termine mugugno è entrato nel nostro vocabolario. Si dice che a sanzionarne l'uso in italiano, così almeno sostiene Hugo Plomteux (1939-1981), massimo esperto di dialettologia ligure, sia stato addirittura Benito Mussolini che, peraltro attraverso l'Opera Vigilanza Repressione Antifascista (OVRA), temendolo, reprimeva sistematicamente lo *ius murmurandi*<sup>32</sup>.

## 6. MANIMAN - LA PAURA DEL NUOVO

A *poia do nêuvo*. Il terzo ed ultimo elemento su cui ci si sofferma nel tentativo di comprendere la mentalità dei genovesi, nei suoi aspetti di lunga durata, è un'espressione idiomatica, un modo di dire che ci rimanda ad uno stato psicologico radicato in una società ripiegata su sé stessa, incline all'autoreferenzialità e ad una cautela paralizzante. *Maniman* è un intercalare dialettale che, con la riservatezza consueta, viene espresso sommessamente, a mezza voce, e che sembra alludere all'impossibilità di fuggire dalla potenza temibile del fato. Questo intercalare viene adottato, mescolato nella stessa frase a parole italiane, un po' ovunque in Liguria ma soprattutto dai genovesi, indipendentemente dallo status sociale

<sup>31</sup> Si veda: [ilmugugno.genovese.it/lezione-serale-16-stundaio/](http://ilmugugno.genovese.it/lezione-serale-16-stundaio/) Montale propone, dunque, una sua definizione raffinata ed articolata secondo la quale *stundaio* è un uomo schivo, dal carattere tra il timido e l'aspro che adotta il mugugno come espediente di una vita vissuta all'insegna di una rassegnazione dignitosa. Frisoni (1919: 267), invece, sottolinea solo i caratteri negativi di questo tipo umano e definisce *stundaio* un essere bisbetico e dal cervello balzano.

<sup>32</sup> Si veda il discorso di Mussolini al terzo Congresso dei Sindacati Fascisti, tenutosi a Roma il 7 maggio 1928: «Ebbene, oggi che la battaglia della lira può dirsi felicemente conclusa, debbo dichiarare che le difficoltà, le mormorazioni, i *mugugni*, le sobillazioni sono venuti a me da tutte le categorie, esclusa la massa del popolo italiano».

di appartenenza. *Maniman* è una forma contratta rispetto alla espressione originaria, di base, che è *amanamàn*. Nel 1876 Giovanni Casaccia, nel suo dizionario, chiarisce che l'espressione è polisemica: allude ad un "senso di timore", oppure ad un atteggiamento "d'ironia o di scherno", oppure è una messa in guardia nei confronti di "un pericolo che potrebbe incontrarsi"<sup>33</sup>. Il *maniman* esprime un'aspettativa assai poco speranzosa nei confronti del nostro prossimo che ci dà poco affidamento ed allude ad un sentire di poca fiducia per gli eventi che ci accompagnano nella quotidianità del presente e nel futuro<sup>34</sup>. In sostanza *maniman* può stare al posto di "non si sa mai" o "non sia mai". In altre parole tradisce il classico atteggiamento di estrema prudenza dei genovesi ed una "legittima", ma inspiegabile, preoccupazione per qualcosa che potrebbe effettivamente verificarsi, causando fastidio o cose peggiori.

Si può approfondire il senso di questa parola con l'aiuto di Giuseppe Marcenaro (1943-2024), un intellettuale genovese che soffriva la sua genovesità perché non vede fiorire Genova come avrebbe meritato, mentre ne svela i valori insieme ai limiti più profondi<sup>35</sup>. A tratti, la sua analisi si rivela impietosa, ma è un documento interessante perché è una testimonianza frutto di quella che i sociologi definiscono un'osservazione diretta e partecipante.

*Maniman è una parola di tono arcano, chiude più porte di quante sia riuscito ad aprirne abracadabra. Maniman più che parola è concetto. È intraducibile come Stimmung e Weltschmerz. Per approssimazione, dovendola rendere in italiano, si potrebbe dire non si sa mai. In dialetto è tuttavia più forte, più precisa. Arriva subito al centro. Non mi*

<sup>33</sup> Così in Fiorenzo Toso (2015: 174-175). Toso respinge energicamente l'interpretazione di chi legge il *maniman* come «una sorta di parola-bandiera dell'atteggiamento collettivo di certi ambienti genovesi, la cui paura per il futuro, il cui timore di esporsi, la cui esitazione di fronte ai rischi rappresenterebbero una sorte di blasone (in negativo) della 'genovesità' attuale». A testimonianza della univocità di questa derivazione ci viene ricordato che nella *Gerusalemme deliverà* (1755) si usa il termine nel significato principale di "progressivamente, poco a poco" da cui discenderebbero, eventualmente, gli altri. Analogamente accade nell'opera coeva *Libeaçion de Zena*. Anche in ambito marinaro il termine esprime una attività che si svolge progressivamente, in continua gradualità: «*arriæ sta çimma de man in man*» («cala questa cima a poco a poco»); ciò ha incoraggiato l'ingresso dell'espressione genovese in turco e in greco (*manimani*).

<sup>34</sup> Alcuni modi di dire frequenti, tra i mille usati: "Stanni attentu che maniman ti scuggi" (stai attento che puoi cadere!); "Mescite, maniman nu tarrivi" (spicciati, rischi di non arrivare); "Nu vegnu, maniman..." (non vengo, non si sa mai); "Maniman ti saie stancu" (non sia mai che tu ti stanchi).

<sup>35</sup> Si veda *Intervista con Giuseppe Marcenaro: Genova e le sue storie in «eraSUPERBA»* del 10.XI.2011 ([genova.erasuperba.it/giuseppe-marcenaro](http://genova.erasuperba.it/giuseppe-marcenaro)) per alcune acute riflessioni sull'identità genovese e l'inclinazione all'immobilismo.

*sto dilettando di filologia e mi convinco, ogni giorno di più, che quella parola è la vera tragedia di Genova. È applicata a tutte le situazioni. "Se devi uscire prendi l'ombrello, maniman piove"; "Io non lo farei, maniman..."; "Lascia stare maniman...". Maniman, che ha questa sinuosità orientale, attraversa la filosofia del genovese. È un avvertimento prudente, un invito all'immobilità, alla non scelta. Maniman è un'implosione lessicale. Assomiglia a un serpente che, per rendersi essenziale, comincia a divorarsi la coda. [...] Quando si pensa, a Genova, di porsi in antagonismo al maniman, occorre farlo con cautela, non apparire. Come un'idra il maniman si autoriproduce. È l'ermafrodita della parlata: non ha bisogno di essere fecondato. Porta in sé gli elementi necessari a perpetuarsi nel tempo e nello spazio. L'umore paralizzante che riesce a produrre il maniman, messo a contatto con ogni idea positiva, è deleterio: ossida ogni guizzo dell'immaginazione, blocca la fantasia. Infatti maniman è l'esatto contrario dell'inventiva, del capriccio, della bizzarria. Il genovese, almeno in rapporto con la cultura, trova la sua pietra di paragone nel maniman, infatti crede che il dialettismo e la reminiscenza municipalistica siano cultura, al pari di Govi, del pesto e della collezione di cartoline coi tramvaietti [...]. Alla lontana l'atteggiamento potrebbe richiamare la furba intelligenza di Bertoldo: "Chi gratta la rogn altrui rinfresca la propria". Tuttavia Bertoldo è l'esatto opposto del genovese ingrignito, maldisposto a nuove amicizie: usura già quelle che ha, e usurare costa. Genova è una città dove anche il sentimento ha un suo prezzo. Lo si può riscontare esaminando il lessico. Amare deve costare moltissimo. Infatti, in dialetto non esiste. Si trova invece ti voglio bene che, come ognuno sa, è tutto un'altra cosa. Ti voglio bene è meno impegnativo, maniman... Maniman può anche diventare un concetto cosmico positivo: è la rarità della perla nera (Marcenaro 1984: 100-1005)<sup>36</sup>*

Sempre secondo Marcenaro «l'autoflagellazione genovese ha origini ancestrali, connesse al carattere» (*Ibidem*). Per i genovesi, poi, forse «l'unica costante espressiva, connessa alla cultura, è il commercio» (*Ibidem*). Un dato questo naturale, in sintonia con la storia economica della città e certamente non condannabile; anche se è proverbiale l'avversione per chi si dedica all'arte o alla letteratura, visto come un "diverso" che impegna il suo tempo in un'attività del tutto inutile.

A questo punto merita riportare un'altra citazione, però di segno differente, che condensa sul *maniman* il pensiero di Maurizio Maggiani, scrittore ligure contemporaneo, genovese di adozione, che ha saputo e che ha voluto guardare a Genova, come lui stesso dichiara, da

<sup>36</sup> Per quanto riguarda l'estremo pudore o, forse meglio, l'aridità sentimentale dei genovesi, se si consulta il TIG (Traduttore Italiano-Genovese) si verifica quello che osservava Marcenaro poco sopra nel testo: alla parola "amare" ci si imbatte, in effetti, in un solo lemma con un'inquietante precisazione: «amare» si traduce «*voéi ben*»; «ti amo diventa *véuggio bén*; dire *te àmmo* suona estraneo alle orecchie di un genovese».

una prospettiva «sghemba», quasi onirica e sicuramente piena di sensibilità, frutto di un autentico invaghimento per la città e per i suoi abitanti. La citazione è significativa anche sotto il profilo metodologico perché intreccia orientamenti differenti, ma complementari, come sono *maniman* e parsimonia. Genova manifesta insieme alla sua proverbiale parsimonia una straordinaria capacità inclusiva<sup>37</sup>. La complessità, che vede stratificarsi nel tempo caratteri eterogenei e non facilmente apparentabili, rappresenta la specificità più autentica di questa città. Maggiani ci suggerisce un percorso analitico per ricostruire in un modo efficace la mentalità genovese e dunque per individuarne le determinanti e gli effetti anche sul piano sociale, economico e politico.

*L'arte di Genova di contenere tutto e ogni cosa. La costante virtù degli abitatori della città che nel corso di molti secoli hanno imparato l'arte di non buttare via niente e usare tutto. In un millennio hanno infranto pochissime volte la regola che si sono dati, e chi lo ha fatto è ricordato con obbrobrio e vergogna. Perché buttare via è cosa insensata e lo spreco è peccato. La parsimonia è attività dello spirito creativa e feconda. Maniman è la parola della parsimonia. La sua infrangibile radice araba è volgarmente tradotta in "non si sa mai", ma afferma invece che Iddio lo sa. Genova non conserva per avarizia, ma per adesione al destino delle cose, che risiede nella coscienza di Dio, non in quella degli uomini. Maniman non è la prudenza del serpente, ma della colomba. Genova parsimoniosa non è mai stata avara. Infatti è colma di bellezza, e la bellezza non abita nell'avarizia. La natura della sua bellezza consiste nella complessità, e la complessità in Genova si forma nell'accumulo, nella sovrapposizione, nell'accatastamento, nella coabitazione. Nel perfetto equilibrio della catastrofe, nel naturale risolversi dei conflitti nella coabitazione. Può darsi che la parsimonia venga dal mare, di sicuro nel porto non si butta via mai niente e niente è mai passato (Maggiani 2018: 80-81)<sup>38</sup>*

In sintesi: il *maniman* è uno gnommero psicologico/culturale. Nel *maniman* si ritrova l'essenza dello stato d'animo dei genovesi. Di fronte ad una situazione che esige una decisione che comporta uno stacco da ciò che

è sempre stato ci si esprime con un suono allusivo che implica una sfumatura di pessimismo e, al tempo stesso, si ricorre al modo più semplice per trovare una via di fuga o per lo meno si sceglie un rinviare che consola e che dà una qualche sicurezza, pur provvisoria. Renzo Piano sostiene che il *maniman* è, nella sostanza, cautela e lo legittima rintracciandone le radici: «Non si sa mai cosa riserva il domani. È prudenza che nasce dal rispetto del mare» (Piano e Piano 2021: 24).

Di fatto il *maniman* è certamente un invito alla prudenza ed è una sorta di auspicio di resilienza verso eventi avversi (il più delle volte poco probabili). *Maniman* manifesta una certa paura del cambiamento la cui imminenza, ambivalente ed incontrollabile, viene esorcizzata ma, per l'appunto, con circospezione. Naturalmente il modo di pronunciare questa parola-formula varia in relazione alla funzione che deve assolvere nella situazione contingente nella quale è adottata. Se viene espressa con un tono stanco ma forte, annoiato ma comunque incisivo, il più delle volte sta al posto di un «non ti sprecare eh! *maniman te caze l'ernia*». Così questo qualcuno, in preda alla pigritia, subisce i risolini di chi lo vuole provocare, anche se lo fa con una comprensione ed una complicità latente. Concludendo si può ritenere che il *maniman* esprima un'incerta aspettativa sia rispetto a ciò che può accadere, e che non ci aggrada, sia rispetto al nostro prossimo perché gli altri, il più delle volte, ci creano dei problemi e non sono sempre facili da amare, come invece ci suggerirebbe il precetto evangelico. Nella sostanza, il *maniman* si traduce in un elogio muto dell'immobilità, nel sospetto per ciò che è nuovo o che è incerto<sup>39</sup>. L'*homo-maniman* è uno spettatore il più delle volte impartece, che osserva il mondo autorecludendosi nel suo cantuccio da dove non si vuole schiodare e dove sperimenta una ben misera felicità. Insomma il *maniman* ci ricorda una specie d'uomo ritratta in un Don Abbondio laico, che anche quando si lamenta è timoroso e dunque sussurra, farfuglia e mugugna intimorito da catastrofi che percepisce incombenti sulla sua tranquilla quotidianità, da preservare ad ogni costo.

<sup>37</sup> Genova, non lo si sottolinea mai abbastanza, è una città complessa e contraddittoria sotto molti, troppi, profili. La sua capacità di accogliere, di contaminare e di integrare, ne accompagna da sempre la storia. Bene ha scritto Sanguineti: «Guardala qui, questa città, la mia... Vedilo, il mondo: in Genova è raccolto. A replicarne un po' la psiche e il volto» (Sanguineti 2004: 73).

<sup>38</sup> L'ipotesi che radica la parsimonia ligure nella cultura marinara e portuale viene posta da Maggiani accanto alla ipotesi, invece, a suo dire di scarsa rilevanza relativa all'apporto del mondo contadino ad una mentalità sparagnina. Merita sottolineare l'assonanza del punto di vista di Maggiani, quando tira in ballo «la coscienza di Dio», con la tesi che Carlo Bo aveva espresso quasi mezzo secolo prima e che è stata citata *supra*.

<sup>39</sup> È significativo che Marco Tasca, arcivescovo metropolita di Genova, ma di origine veneta, in occasione del Te Deum di fine d'anno (dicembre 2021) abbia invitato i genovesi a vincere il *maniman*, come predisposizione ancestrale a vedere nelle novità solo degli aspetti pericolosi anziché delle opportunità. Altrettanto significativa, a distanza di un anno (si veda «la Repubblica» del 2 dicembre 2022) appare l'energica presa di posizione dell'allora sindaco Marco Bucci che intendeva, come è noto, riportare alle antiche glorie Genova, allorché ha dichiarato di opporsi a chi «pensa di potere applicare ancora oggi le vecchie teorie del *maniman*».

## 7. RICAPITOLANDO

*Pe finì.* Non è facile e non ha un senso, né scientifico né d'altra natura, cercare una conclusione convincente per queste note che si son soffermate su atteggiamenti intrecciati che confluiscono soprattutto in un aspetto, che sembrerebbe essere tuttora tipico della mentalità genovese dominata dalla paura dello spreco e dalla paura del nuovo. I genovesi non sono facili da capire né tantomeno è possibile catalogarli. Chi, per passione e per professione, ha esplorato a lungo la storia di Genova avanza delle considerazioni che non sembrano rendere del tutto giustizia alla complessità ed al persistere di una mentalità speciale. Su queste considerazioni conviene, tuttavia, riflettere:

*Il Genovese per eccellenza non è mai organico a nulla, esula anche antipaticamente, dagli schemi classici delle costruzioni culturali: non è un chierico e nulla lo alimenta se non quello che vede. La testimonianza passa per l'iride, che è più vicina alla testa che al cuore. Saremmo così di fronte alla curva perfetta del razionale. Peccato che in questo mirabile Dna ci sia il germe del cupio dissolvi, del gioco al massacro che molte volte, come notò fulmineamente Machiavelli, ha portato i protagonisti delle eterne risse, vinti e vincitori accomunati nel medesimo abbraccio mortale, sull'orlo della distruzione. Ma forse è solo l'eterna maledizione del Denaro, ohimè, unica divinità autenticamente venerata su questa proda incantevole del Mediterraneo (Lingua 2001: IX)*

Si è già detto che osservazioni di questo tipo meglio si attagliano alla mentalità del ceto dirigente genovese o, per dire meglio, alla mentalità delle grandi famiglie-azienda che hanno generato la ricchezza della città e che, in virtù del potere economico, l'hanno anche governata. L'avarizia, intesa come ossessione per il possesso del denaro, dunque ha i suoi confini socialmente ben definiti mentre la parsimonia, il rifiuto dello spreco (espressa dal detto «*chi nu se straggia ninte*»<sup>40</sup>) è diffusa in tutti gli strati sociali e sembra rappresentare un valore identitario popolare, con un fondamento etico particolare. Altrettanto sembra potersi dire per il mugugno e per il *maniman*, due forme di espressione lessicale, che riflettono degli atteggiamenti mentali molto diffusi. Mugugno e *maniman* ci parlano di una frugalità emozionale

<sup>40</sup> In italiano: «Qui non si butta via niente». Questo motto, tipico, era spesso adottato da Fulvio Cerofolini (1928-2011) sindaco di Genova dal 1975 al 1985, e piace molto a Renzo Piano che gli attribuisce una valenza etica importante perché ritiene esprima l'essenza autentica dell'*animus* genovese. Tale convinzione, in occasione dello svolgimento della America's Cup del 2007, lo ha indotto a scrivere a mano lo stesso motto su una delle vecchie vele di Luna Rossa, riusata come rivestimento dei pannelli esterni della base operativa da lui progettata a Valencia.

che travalica nelle relazioni sociali e che assume l'aspetto della diffidenza per i *foresti* e della scontrosità come primo stile di presentazione in pubblico. Allora sembra di poter concludere ribadendo che la mentalità è una risorsa rilevante dal punto di vista culturale per i suoi riflessi sui comportamenti concreti. Ma va sottolineato che la mentalità include vari aspetti, alcuni anche contraddittori fra loro, che spesso si mantengono ad un livello latente per poi emergere con forza a fronte di certi accadimenti. Braudel aveva intuito che

*a Genova tutto è acrobazia. Fabbrica, ma per gli altri; naviga, ma per gli altri; investe, ma presso gli altri [...] Una geografia costrittiva la condanna ad andare alla ventura. È l'eterno problema di Genova, che vive e deve vivere in agguato, condannata a rischiare e al tempo stesso ad essere particolarmente prudente. Ne derivano successi favolosi e fallimenti catastrofici. Ne è un esempio, e non solo, il crollo degli investimenti genovesi dopo il 1789, e non soltanto in Francia. Le crisi del 1557, 1575, 1596, 1607, 1627 e 1647, determinate questa volta dalla Spagna, sono state formidabili intimidazioni di arresto, quasi terremoti. Nel cuore di un capitalismo drammatico, la contropartita di questi pericoli è l'elasticità, l'agilità, la disponibilità, la "mano leggera" dell'uomo d'affari genovese. Genova ha cambiato rotta più volte, sempre accettando la necessaria metamorfosi. Ha organizzato, per riservarsi, un universo esterno, e l'ha abbandonato quando è diventato inabitabile o inutilizzabile; ne ha immaginato e costruito un altro - alla fine del secolo X, per esempio, ha lasciato l'Oriente per l'Occidente, il Mar Nero per l'Atlantico; nel secolo XIX ha contribuito a proprio vantaggio all'unità d'Italia: è il destino di Genova, corpo fragile, sismografo ultrasensibile, che registra ogni vibrazione del vasto mondo. Mostro di intelligenza, e talvolta di durezza, Genova è condannata a impadronirsi del mondo, o a non esistere (Braudel 1982: 144-145)*

In breve, Genova nella sua lunga storia ha manifestato spesso aspirazioni di ampio respiro. Oggi però espresse con cautela talché appare una città prigioniera di un'immagine di chiusura e di provincialismo che non riesce a scuotersi di dosso. Evidentemente ci sono altri caratteri che meriterebbero di essere analizzati per approfondire la conoscenza di questa città così speciale e per esplorare adeguatamente la mentalità dei suoi abitanti, siano Genovesi con la G maiuscola o genovesi comuni<sup>41</sup>. La descrizione delineata in queste pagine ha un valore del tutto preliminare ed un carattere, diciamo pure, tra il parziale ed il pindarico. È auspicabile allo-

<sup>41</sup> Ad esempio, un carattere ricorrente è quello della resilienza cioè della capacità di risposta di Genova alla miriadi di crisi che l'hanno, suo malgrado, trasformata radicalmente nel suo confronto faticoso con la modernità, pur lasciandola identica a se stessa; si veda Gazzola e Terenzi (2021).

ra una ulteriore riflessione più approfondita, che esplori la mentalità dei genovesi, ad esempio collegandola al loro comportamento politico come cittadini. Genova è una città che, a tutt'oggi, stratifica socialmente in un modo articolato e netto, anche sul piano territoriale, i suoi abitanti e palesa così le profonde distinzioni di classe e le diseguaglianze che la caratterizzano nei differenti quartieri che la costituiscono<sup>42</sup>. La cultura politica dei genovesi svela un'inclinazione al radicalismo e ad uno spirito orgogliosamente ribelle che si manifesta per reazione ad eventi che provocano periodicamente l'indignazione popolare a difesa di valori fondamentali per la convivenza civile. I genovesi, *ex abrupto*, sanno trasformarsi in una comunità attiva dove scompaiono l'inclinazione al conservatorismo, all'individualismo autoreferenziale e al quieto vivere mentre esplose una loro partecipazione solidale. Questi aspetti hanno una configurazione peculiare che, lo si ribadisce, si radica nella profonda differenza socio-territoriale della città, da sempre divisa in zone socialmente molto eterogenee dove si confrontano interessi e modi di vita contrapposti<sup>43</sup>. Si avverte, allora, la necessità di una ricerca empirica più attenta alle basi sociali della mentalità e alle sue possibili evoluzioni; una ricerca che sappia adottare anche una metodologia interdisciplinare innovativa. Ad esempio si dovrebbero considerare ulteriori dimensioni, che colorano in maniera speciale la genovesità, come un forte sentimento di appartenenza alla città (Bizzarri 2024) che si manifesta in una forma di pronunciata nostalgia, in un rimpianto di natura inspiegabile, una *saudade* struggente, tutta *zenéize*, che trova largo spazio, da sempre, nella cultura musicale locale<sup>44</sup>. *Sed de hoc satis dictum est*.

<sup>42</sup> La separazione tra le periferie operaie del Ponente e della Val Polcevera dai quartieri residenziali della vecchia e della nuova borghesia e il centro storico sono la prova evidente della complessità politico culturale di Genova. Una complessità dagli effetti socialmente molto problematici che da troppo tempo propone delle sfide che non vengono affrontate adeguatamente dalla classe dirigente locale. Cfr. Il libro-ricerca, ormai classico, di Luciano Cavalli ([1964] 1978); Mauro Palumbo (2019: 13-22).

<sup>43</sup> I testi di riferimento sul tema sono molteplici, tra questi: Giovanni Assereto (2010: 151-176); Philip Coke (2000); Donatella Alfonso e Luca Borzani (2008); Agostino Petrillo (2004); Leonardo Lippolis (2022).

<sup>44</sup> Tra le numerose canzoni da citare: le storiche *Ma se ghe penso*, scritta nel 1925 da Mario Cappello con Attilio Margutti, ove si canta, in maniera struggente, l'attaccamento a Genova di un anziano emigrante e *Piccon dagghe cianin* di Ottavio De Santis e Gino Pesce (1957) che racconta la nostalgia per la casa natale demolita per fare posto al moderno ed asettico quartiere di Piccapietra; e le più recenti *Io e il mare* di Umberto Bindi (1976) (con Bruno Lauzi); *Créuza de mã* scritta nel 1984 da Fabrizio De André con Maurizio Pagani; *Quelle navi* di Vittorio De Scalzi (2021).

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## Studying Abroad Narrative Imaginaries: North and South Europe

PIERLUCA BIRINDELLI

**Abstract.** Through analysis of 50 autoethnographies I interpret international students' imaginaries of Italy-Florence (South Europe), Finland-Helsinki (North Europe) and what can be called "the cosmopolitan elsewhere". International students' imaginary of Finland-Helsinki is very slight; that of Italy-Florence is richer and variously articulated: media images and narratives shape students' expectations before their arrival in the host country. The Finland-Helsinki country profile is instead associated with a vague idea of Northern Europe and often confused with Scandinavia. The respective autoethnographic passages can be synthetically interpreted as past (Italy) vs. present (Finland). On one side Italy-Florence's image is almost embedded in a cultural past, on the other Finland-Helsinki's image is almost severed from its history and is seen more as a geographical entity: the deep and mysterious north. Analysis of secondary sources connected with studying abroad reveals the absence of a clear-cut narrative of what it means to be an international student. Nevertheless, there is a glimpse of a vague cosmopolitan narrative. This story, constructed on a global scale by different actors and institutions upholds the generic validity of studying abroad for both instrumental and expressive reasons, and sees it as an institutionalized rite of passage towards global citizenship.

**Keywords:** international students mobility, media images and narratives, autoethnography, Italy and Finland, cosmopolitan imaginaries.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' NARRATIVE AND BIOGRAPHICAL IMAGINARIES OF THE HOST COUNTRY

Studying abroad has increased to the point of becoming an institutionalized practice at global level, but due to the Coronavirus pandemic 2020-2022 will probably represent a watershed. What does the post-pandemic future hold? Possible answers can be found by questioning the taken for granted and quasi-axiomatic pre-pandemic meanings attributed to this phenomenon, a sort of *mobility dogma* (Birindelli 2023). The results of this study suggest that international students are not going to Finland or to Italy, or to study this or that, they are simply "going": mobility wins over stasis, it is a "per se mobility" stemming from an imagined "elsewhere" (Salazar 2012). And studying abroad is "the right thing to do" for both instrumental and expressive reasons.

In this study the key question is not a quantitative one. It is not about the “how much” of the trend. The crucial question here is “what” and “who”. What meanings do international students give to their study abroad experience? And what is the image of the host country and city before the academic sojourn? The latter is the hermeneutic focus of this article: to interpret international students’ imaginaries of the host countries (in this case Italy and Finland) and of what can be called the “cosmopolitan elsewhere”.

The qualitative and comparative research project *The Cultural Experience of International Students* analyses 50 biographical narratives written by international master students. Prompted by in-depth interviews, I collected partial autobiographies-autoethnographies (autoethnography being the description of self as seen within another culture, Ellis and Bochner 2000). Participants in the research were a group of 25 international master students at the University of Helsinki (Finland, representing Northern Europe) and 25 at the University of Florence (Italy, representing Southern Europe). Overall, I managed to achieve a balance in terms of age (average age 26 at the time of the final draft of the autoethnography), gender, and geographical provenance (all inhabited continents).

The phases of fieldwork were as follows. I began with in-depth interviews (approximately one hour and a half). The full transcription of the interview was given to the participant, who revised, integrated, changed and deleted at will; this transcription then prompted the autobiographic-autoethnographic reflection. All biographical accounts followed a three-section *narrative template* (Birindelli 2023) with sections addressing the three basic phases of travel: departure–transition–arrival. This produces a heuristic overlay with the “three phase architecture” underpinning the study: narrative structure (incipit–ruit–exit); existential time (past–present–future); rites of passage (preliminal–liminal–postliminal); human development (young–young-adult–adult); sense of belonging to a collectivity (national–European–cosmopolitan). The *departure-preliminal* section of the template reconstructs the social and cultural context of the decision to study and live abroad. The *transition-liminal* section addresses actual academic and overall life experience abroad, while the *arrival-postliminal* section explores any human bond with the host culture and/or with a place that became familiar during the stay. Within the *departure-preliminal* section I asked the participants what kind of images they had of the host city/country – asking them to identify the media sources, which could be anything: narratives (fiction and non-fiction), textbooks, movies, documentaries, videos, TV

**Table 1.** Media sources of the host city-country.

<i>Finland-Helsinki</i>	<i>Italy-Florence</i>
Music	Music
Books	Books
Textbooks (Social Sciences)	Textbooks (Art, History)
Social Media	Social Media
University website and blogs	/
Quality of life Rankings	/
/	Movies

Source: Author’s elaboration.

shows, newspaper and magazine articles, advertising, institutional websites, blogs, social media, music, photographs, guidebooks, etc.

Here I was essentially trying to reconstruct international students’ imaginary of the host city-country, searching for “cultural objects” (Griswold 1994) that might have shaped their expectations of the host society and culture they later experienced first-hand.

The students’ collective imaginary of the host country-city is divided into (Table. 2) *general images* (or general cultural objects) and (Table. 3) more *specific images* (or more specific cultural objects). In both tables erroneous images/cultural objects (that belong/take place in another country) are in bold.

## 2. HELSINKI-FINLAND: THE PROGRESSIVE AND MYSTERIOUS NATURE OF THE ‘NORTH’

The first noteworthy result stemming from analysis of the autoethnographies is the absence of any kind of

**Table 2.** General Images / General Cultural Objects representing the host city/country.

<i>Finland-Helsinki</i>	<i>Italy-Florence</i>
Mystery	Exotic
Nature, North, Cold	Culture, Art, Architecture,
<b>Scandinavia</b>	History
Welfare System, Education,	Renaissance
Gender Equality, Freedom	Made in Italy, Fashion
Quality of life rankings	Holiday Destination
(Happiness etc.)	Celebrities
Design	Restaurants, Food, Pizza, Olive
Music (heavy metal/hard rock)	Oil
	Opera
	Catholic Church
	Mafia
	Football
	Italian Latin Lover Womanizer

Source: Author’s elaboration.

**Table 3.** Specific Images / Specific Cultural Objects representing the host city/country.

	<i>Finland-Helsinki</i>	<i>Italy-Florence</i>
<i>Anime TV</i>	Heidi, Girl of the Alps	/
<i>Brands &amp; Lifestyle</i>	Nokia, Volvo, Sauna	FIAT 500, Vespa, Dolce and Gabbana, Prada
<i>Music</i>	Nightwish, Children of Bodom, Apocalyptica, HIM, Abba, International Noise Conspiracy	'O Sole Mio, Azzurro (Celentano), Mina, De Andrè, Laura Pausini, Nek, Tiziano Ferro, Ramazzotti, De Gregori
<i>Geography</i>	Aurora Boreal, Lapland	/
<i>Surveys</i>	PISA, Quality of Life Rankings	/
<i>Myths</i>	Santa Claus	/
<i>Famous People</i>	Kimi Raikkonen, Gary Litmanen	Marco Polo, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Macchiavelli, Mussolini, Batistuta, Monica Bellucci
<i>Books</i>	Moomin, Gebrauchsanweisung für Finland	Cuore, Va dove ti porta il cuore, Carolina se enamora
<i>Cities</i>	/	Milan, Rome, Florence, Vatican
<i>Writers</i>	/	Federico Moccia
<i>Opera</i>	/	Tosca, La Traviata
<i>Monuments</i>	/	Colosseum
<i>Influencers</i>	/	Chiara Ferragni, Mariano di Vaio
<i>Movies</i>	/	Under the Tuscan Sun (mentioned 3 times), Eat Pray Love (2), LAuberge Espagnol (2), Roman Holiday (2), Letters to Juliet (2), When in Rome, Midnight in Paris, Italian Job, Inferno, Hannibal, Si accettano miracoli, Benvenuti al sud, Perfetti Sconosciuti, L'ultimo bacio, Life is Beautiful, The Best of Youth, Novecento

Source: Author's elaboration.

image or even information about Finland-Helsinki. Several international students knew literally nothing about the future host country-city. «I knew nothing about Finland. I did not even know there is a country called Finland. I had a globe and Russia was there, China... But where is Finland? I never heard about Finland in the news» (BN, female, Helsinki, East Asia).

ZN (f, Central Europe), although European, writes:

*I really did not have an idea of the place. I did not read any book, saw movie or being exposed to any other media representations. I had no images about Finland. My imagination of Finland was zero. I've never seen Finland represented in any media narrative. Never. (ZN, f, Central Europe)*

In the comparative section of this article we will see that this is one of the most relevant differences between international students' imaginaries of Finland-Helsinki and Italy-Florence. Copious images and media narratives relating to Italy-Florence shape students' expectations before their arrival in the host country. And 'imaginaries' can be conceptualized as "meaning-making devices mediating how people act, cognize and value the world", namely "culturally shared and socially transmitted rep-

resentational assemblages that interact with the personal imagination" (Salazar 2020: 770). But there's more to it than that. We can observe that students applied to the University of Florence because they wanted to experience the Italian lifestyle. For most of these international students academe seems a means toward this end.

Students in the Helsinki group who did not have any image of the host city-country started to search for information once their application was accepted. The void in their biographical imaginary was compensated mainly by short videos found on the University of Helsinki website, other travel vlogs, blogs and social media in general.

*I found some videos on YouTube to check how the city looks like. Videos were about Helsinki, Finland, nature, lakes and how is student life in the University of Helsinki. They were all promotional videos. The elements I got out from these videos are snow, cold, nature, richness of resource and darkness» (ZH, m, South Asia).*

I believe this is an important semantic dynamic. Over and above the key themes communicated by such videos, it is fundamental to note that the media void of the host city-country was filled essentially by institu-

tional marketing. It is probable that the University of Helsinki commissioned promotional videos from media enterprises and plausibly decided that these were the themes best targeted to boost international students' enrollment. In a certain sense, the imaginary seeds for the Helsinki-Finland experience were rationally selected, sown and brought to fruit in the international students' virgin media-narrative soil, and the increased communicative power of such a media campaign is easy to grasp. As we will see in the next section, the University of Florence does not have promotional videos or the like, and basically simply leverages the centuries-old narrative assets that are essentially part of the "tourism imaginaries" (Salazar 2012) for Italy (Florence-Tuscany).

Apparently, the videos found on Finnish institutional websites did not distort the reality later experienced firsthand: "It was easy to get information from the internet. I was not expecting something different from what I found. I was not surprised" (HH, m, South Asia). Before this search HH's media images were not totally absent but limited to one specific cultural object and another general image: *Nokia* and *Aurora Borealis*. These synthesize two recurrent core symbolic meanings representing Finland in the eyes of international students: technology – expanding on the symbolism: advancement, progressive, etc. – and nature.

Digging deeper into the concept of *nature*, Finland is imagined as "a green country full of forests and lakes" (NS, m, West Asia). NS also "imagined that it was cold. I also had the idea that in the winter it would be totally dark, may be for six months." The absence of a clear collective imaginary and the scattered images of nature, cold, snow, darkness etc. constructs an interesting and appealing Finnish aura in the minds of international students that can be summed up in a single word: *mystery*.

*Finland is a big question mark. It's neither west nor east. I did not know anything about the country except for it's fucking cold and people like heavy music. Finland it's a challenge that you want to face because it's unknown* (ND, m, Oceania).

In ND's autoethnography we can find a sort of corollary for mysterious Finland: "I knew I would not be with any other \*\*\* from my university because it was an unpopular choice. It was just so unknown". Thus, going to Finland represents an element of *distinction* from other common study abroad destinations – a sort of reverse (south-north) exoticism.

Even for HD (f, Central Europe) Finland was a mysterious – melancholic and creative – place. HD's autoethnography reveals that this image was shaped by

a specific cultural object of considerable biographical weight, the Finnish band HIM.

*HIM band, they were dressed black, black makeup. The image of Finland was a lot of forests and lakes; people are mysterious and melancholic (HIM music was very melancholic). And when you see images of forests and lakes, along with the other image of Finnish people. So melancholic ... It's like they have more space to think, more creative space... More space. It's not necessarily more happiness.* (HD, f, Central Europe)

HD's autoethnography points us in a valuable heuristic direction by mentioning a *rock band* and the word *happiness*. In the autoethnographies the cultural silence about Finland is interrupted by the sound of music. This is probably the most articulated symbolic representation:

*I did not really know anything about Finland. I had some familiarity with some of the bands from Finland. I knew that there was a lot of rock and heavy metal. Bands like Nightwish, Children of Bodom, Apocalyptica. These kind of big Finnish export bands, big names.* (ND, m, Oceania)

'*Happiness*' is another key word for reconstructing the weak imaginary of Finland. The idea of a happy place does not stem from the narrative of a book, a movie or documentary; this image is the result of indexes found in world rankings.

*I wanted to go to the countries that were ranked the happiest in the world according to surveys. All the Nordic countries are pretty high in the happiness ranking. I think because the Nordic countries are so egalitarian, that's why they are the happiest.* (NY, f, North America)

We shall shortly see how the thin image stemming from rankings is connected to a thicker idea of the social-democratic, egalitarian Nordic welfare state: namely, a political image. Again apropos the 'ranking' media source, we observe how in some cases the choice of Finland as a studying-abroad destination stems from a specific comparison.

*I applied to several places: Britain, Estonia and Amsterdam. I was selected in all the programs, but I decided to come here. I compared rankings, lifestyles, and also the experiences of people I knew had of those countries. And my final choice was Finland. I think people might have the idea that Finland is a rich country, the Scandinavian model. You have high taxes but you get services. But that was just a vague idea.* (ZY, m, South America)

Although other international students did not reflect in a similarly thorough manner, their idea of Finland

was still shaped by ranking and statistics: “I read somewhere in a book about the *welfare in Scandinavia*... I also saw statistics, countries from North Europe were always ranked at the top of the quality of life: GDP per person, happiness, safety” (ST, f, East Asia). Interestingly, it’s not the image of Finland but of *North Europe* in general. In the international students’ imaginary Finland is frequently located in *Scandinavia* and when we get down to more precise cultural objects, several of them are wrong. They are either Swedish or arise from a vague idea of Nordic countries.

‘Education’ is another image of Finland found in rankings: “I heard good things from the PISA survey. Although I do not find it as good as it is presented in the media and recounted by teachers (ZN, f, Central Europe)”; “I have seen a video made about Finnish educational system which shows that in Finland students don’t have to study too much but this system is still one of the best in the world” (BN, f, East Asia). Education is definitely a connotation of Finland in the eyes of international students and is not just the result of a quick look at rankings in online articles or similar. Students read about the Finnish educational system in *social science textbooks*.

*I remember a small clip about education in Finland. A long time ago. It was on YouTube. It was linked to an article I read about the quality of public elementary schools in Finland. And I read two-three articles about elementary school education in Finland. (SZ, f, Africa)*

It’s not just Finnish education that features in social science textbooks but *progressive social policies* in general. Consequently, some students start to imagine the host country as a sort of *ideal, utopic country*.

*Finland in study books was always represented as the ideal country for a lot of different policies, in relation to maternity leave, childcare, gender, rights for homosexuals and lot of things like that. So I started to become very curious because Finland was represented as the ideal place for so many things. (PH, f, South Asia)*

However, in this case too, the analysis of the collected autoethnographies clearly reveals that most of the international students were not exposed to media images or other narratives focusing precisely on Finland. This interpretation is reinforced even in the case of progressive social policies. Students’ imaginary in this sense is in fact connected to the group of North European countries or Scandinavia rather than Finland. «The picture I had of Finland and North European countries, was that they are super-developed. Socialist states, with very good

social benefits, welfare states, equality. All \*\*\* media translate this image» (EP, f, Eurasia).

*I had a very limited knowledge about Nordic countries, about Scandinavia. During high school I only learned that they have very high taxes and very happy individual life. But nothing more than that. I wanted to come here and experience North Europe by myself. (ST, f, East Asia)*

As we can detect from the above passages and those that follow, even beyond the field of social policies and politics, the imaginary is connected to the generic geographic entity “North Europe”. Furthermore, for several students the idea of Finland is a mere reflection of Sweden, which is considered as a sort of “mother tree” of the North European imaginary. The images of Sweden are fairly banal stereotypes: tall, blonde, sex etc.

*In \*\*\* the “Nordic brand” is very successful. When you think of the Nordic countries people think of Norway and Sweden. Especially Sweden ... they are known for things. Norway is rich and Sweden is blonde and they like sex, and there is ABBA. You know, there are these stereotypes. (ND, m, Oceania)*

*I did not spend much thinking about how’s Finland. Thinking of northern Europe, we’ve got the Swedish image as the mother tree. Now I know there is a difference between Sweden and Finland. (QS, m, North America)*

The identification of Finland with Sweden is also influenced by Swedish cultural objects wrongly attributed to Finland, such as the music band «International Noise Conspiracy ... They looked really Nordic. Tight pants, fashionable but left» (ZW, m, Central Europe). In several other students’ narratives the media mismatch is even more evident. Most of the time they force a vague association of images such as cold-snow onto Finland. For instance when a student mentions an association of ideas between Finland and the Japanese anime television series “Heidi, Girl of the Alps” that she believes takes place in Austria – the setting is the Swiss Alps: a multiple mismatch.

*I remember Heidi connected somehow to North Europe, but I do not know if we can consider Austria as North Europe. And the musical The Sound of Music, set in Austria. But nothing connected clearly to Northern Europe (NY, f, North America).*

Finland is identified with an imaginary landscape that we can call “The Deep North”, and several students only started to have a better geographic idea of the host country when they did some internet searches

after being accepted on the Master program: «I discovered more researching the internet. I've learned that Finland is Nordic but not Scandinavian. It's closer to Russia, between east and west» (ZY, m, South America). If we search for more precise cultural objects, besides those already mentioned connected with music, social policies and quality-of-life rankings, we find very little: Santa Claus, Jari Litmanen (football player), sauna. QK (m, South Europe) mentions the cartoon *Moomin*, but this is because one of his parents is Finnish.

Frequently the few cultural objects found in the autoethnographies were connected to Finland only after an internet search. Therefore, they were not part of the student's overall biographical imaginary. And this is the case even for students coming from North Europe.

*I did a little bit of googling about Finland. I used to be into heavy metal when I was a teenager. But I did not know any of these bands are from Finland. I did not know Nokia was from Finland either. And I did not know sauna was Finnish. (HN, f, North Europe)*

EP (f, Eurasia) at first writes that she did not have any specific picture of Finland. However, in another part of the autoethnography she tells us «The first thing I was thinking was ... it's boring, there's nothing. And if I was thinking more, there are lakes, and forest and Lapland». Another passage of EP's narrative allows us to construct an empirical and hermeneutic bridge with the group of students in Italy-Florence and the global imaginary of Italy. EP visited Helsinki before. As we will see in the next section, besides the richer imaginary as compared to Finland-Helsinki, the majority of the international students visited Italy during the holidays, and some of them even several times.

*A couple of years before I moved to \*\*\* I came to Helsinki for a short two days visit. A very quiet city, not very tall buildings, greyish. Before that date I knew something about this country, but nothing specific. I would not think that something is booming here, something is happening. Just very plain and boring. I knew about Santa Claus bla bla bla.... If I think about Italy, for instance, I can picture it more vividly: beautiful landscapes, cities like Rome or Milan, cuisine, etc. (EP, f, Eurasia)*

### 3. FLORENCE-ITALY: THE FASCINATING AND STYLISH CULTURAL PAST

As anticipated in the previous section, compared to the Finland-Helsinki group, analysis of the autoethnographies of international students in Italy-Florence reveals an abundance and diversity of media representations.

We find an image of the host country-city extensively delineated by a range of cultural objects in different thematic fields and in various media sources: textbooks, books, movies, music, advertising, social media etc. The narrative combination of these sources – for several students integrated with direct experience as a holiday destination – constitutes a sort of *Italian and Florentine Dream*: «My dream was to come to Italy» (PW, f, South Europe); «In my opinion Florence is *la più bella città nel mondo* [the most beautiful city on earth]. I love Italy and the Italian language» (ZY, f, South Europe). As one student writes, Italy is 'subconscious': «I always wanted to come here. Maybe because of the movies I was watching and the books I was reading. My subconscious made me want to come here» (WW, f, Eurasia).

An important element stemming from the students' narratives is their strong socialization to the *Made in Italy* brand, mainly linked to *fashion*: «I saw Italy as a brand and Italy to me was fashion. I remember commercials on TV about glasses and fashion, or magazines» (KS, m, East Asia). Lived everyday life in Italy sometimes confirms the idea of the stylish Italian – «Here you always have to be on point, I confirm this idea now» (MU, m, South America) – sometimes it doesn't, albeit validating "Made in Italy & Italian lifestyle" as a crucial element of international students' imaginary.

*I always thought about Italian people as very stylish, but in the reality I see that in my university they are not that stylish. I got this idea of stylish Italians from magazines, from the marketing of brands such as Dolce and Gabbana, Prada. All big brands are from Italy. Some say that Italian people 'feel' fashion. But in reality, when you walk in the street is not so much like that. (FP, m, Eurasia)*

FP (m, Eurasia) endorses the importance of the Italian lifestyle as a key motivation for studying abroad – «I am here because of the Italian life» – and the familiarity of some students with Italian social media influencers displays the pervasiveness and solidity of fashion and style as central to their imaginary of the host country: «I follow on Instagram a blogger, her name is Chiara Ferragni and a model, Mariano di Vaio» (KS, f, South Europe).

MH (f, Africa) reinforces the Italian image connected with fashion rather than study – which, as we will see, is of secondary importance – and the fact that students were previously exposed to a variety of media in this sense. She also cites the key theme of Italy as a *historic* country, and another fundamental and more recent topic: Italy as *food*.

*I thought I am going to a country with a lot of history and fashion. I get these ideas of Italy in TV, movies, social media. Italy was equal to fashion to me. I always thought about fashion or exotic dishes. Italy was never in my mind connected to academy or work. For instance, Italy made me think about shoes. I picked those images in movies.* (MH, f, Africa)

KS (m, East Asia) writes «In \*\*\* if you want to become a chef you need to know how to cook Italian food». The socialization to the image of food (& wine) does not take place only in the media but also through the worldwide diffusion of Italian restaurants: «We have a couple of Italian restaurants back home, so I had a very good idea of the wine, the food» (VU, m, South America).

Another key theme emerging from students' imaginary is obviously *art*, mostly in the field of *architecture*: «My image of Italy comes from study textbooks: mainly history of art and architecture» (CL, m, South Asia). Here it is important to note that, compared to Helsinki, Florence has a specific and unique place in the international students' imagination. The anticipated "atmosphere of place", which is an essential part of any imaginative travel (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006: 14), and the expectations for the host city seem to be fully met during the sojourn: «I like this city because of the art, architecture of Renaissance» (JL, f, East Asia). The main media sources are study textbooks: «History of architecture. We had so many images of Florence and Italy in our textbooks» (EE, f, Eurasia). Artistic cultural objects and images stem from the Renaissance grand narrative. «I had the image of Florence as Renaissance, because I studied it in secondary school: Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, etc. It was included in the course 'Universal History'. Florence to me was Renaissance» (MH, f, Africa).

The picture of Florence absorbed through textbooks was very clear before the departure: «I had this architecture in mind: narrow streets, big churches. I could imagine myself walking in these streets» (VU, m, South America). In both the specific section and in other parts of the autoethnographies it emerges that several students had already visited Italy, confirming and reinforcing the place of Italy-Florence in the global (especially tourist) imaginary. For several international students in the Florence group, media representations and vacations in Italy are biographically alternated and mixed: «I came here when I was 15 years old. I did a cruise in the Mediterranean. I visited Verona, Venice, Rome. Many of my images of Italy come from that cruise» (MU, m, South America); «I go to Italy every year. I've been in Tuscany when I was 15, to Sicily when I was 19. So I am familiar with Italy» (IT, f, Central Europe).

The interpretation of these narrative passages is quite simple. The students had one or more vacations in Italy and were fascinated by the *Belpaese*. Back home they started to cultivate the idea of going back for a longer period for an in-depth experience of Italy and Italian life: «Last year I was in Italy, in Sicily. After that vacation, I told my mom I need to go back to Italy and study there. I know it's my place» (KH, f, East Europe); «I fell in love with the city. It's amazing; It's beautiful. It's incredible to be here, to walk here. I thought that I should try. Florence was my only option» (NP, f, Eurasia).

A master, especially an international one, is a specialist, career-targeted academic degree. Yet some participants assert that study is not the real motivation for being abroad. EE (f, Eurasia) in her autoethnography bluntly writes: «I am in Florence because I want to enjoy life. I do not want to spend my life eight hours per day in front of a computer». In this case, and for most of the international students in the Florence group, the decision to study abroad is not a means toward the end of finding a specialized job or embarking on an academic career via a PhD. It is instead a combination of studying and traveling, where the former seems an excuse for the latter.

*I like travelling and I was in Italy three years ago. A friend of mine was living here and I knew it was not hard coming to Florence and study in a Master degree. I thought I would study to have more opportunities to travel around Italy.* (EE, f, Eurasia)

In some cases, the choice of a master program in tourism supports this interpretation of academe as a mere means toward a different end from that institutionally proclaimed: higher education. In sum: they are abroad for an exceptionally long vacation. For RH (f, Eurasia) all of the above is accompanied by the intention to make a break with her previous life at home.

*The idea was to combine studying and travelling. I've been a tourist in Italy and I liked the country. I made applications to seven Italian universities who had master programs more or less relevant with my previous studies. I had two positive answers: University of Florence and University of Siena. The master in Siena was about economics. But I thought that if I change my life I have to change it completely. So I picked the master in Florence which is on tourism.* (RH, f, Eurasia)

Other students had visited Italy repeatedly over the years before their master sojourn: «I was a tourist in Italy for more than 10 times, than I lost the count. May be is 12, 15, 20» (ON, f, East Europe). For ON Italy became her *elective country*, the place on earth most attuned to her personality, where she was meant to be.

*It was my idea to come here, to live here and to die here; because I feel really good in Italy, even better than in my native country. I do not know why. Even if I do not speak well the language, or even if everybody considers me as a stranger. I thought that this country was created for me or that I was created for this country, and I was born in \*\*\* by accident. (ON, f, East Europe).*

We can also reconstruct another hermeneutic itinerary that, especially for students enrolled in the Architectural Design Master, starts with the study of art-architecture at home, the first-hand Italian experience during holidays, and the consequent decision to *live* in Florence. I deliberately wrote ‘live’ rather than ‘study’ in Florence. Besides the already mentioned fascination with the Italian lifestyle, or the intention to study and travel abroad, for several students the main drive for being abroad is their passion for art and the wish to experience the beauty of Florence. Even in this case, the desire to nourish oneself by being exposed to art on a daily basis greatly supersedes any other academic motivation.

*I am here because I like art, I am very passionate about art. I find more of myself here in Florence. I am here more for myself than for studying, for my personality. I need to have satisfaction and passion besides academic fulfilment. I found this in Florence. (GL, f, Eurasia)*

We might say that these students are abroad for a sort of *cultural and aesthetic self-growth*, or more simply for a life experience rather than to study with a view to a highly specialized job.

*The first thing was going to Italy. The second was to choose a city that I like, and I picked Florence. Only at that point I searched for a Master program in the university of Florence. I checked the majors I could apply and found this master. (QO, f, East Asia)*

Digging deeper into media representation of Italy-Florence we realize that the international students’ imaginary of Italy has the contours of a *holiday destination*. The sources of Finland’s representations are mainly social media, short videos, university textbooks in social sciences and similar sources where students find rankings of quality of life, education, etc. The sources of Italy’s images are richer and more varied, including several movies that have a potent narrative influence in molding the idea of a country-city. Focusing on movies is crucial. Firstly, because of their power to shape a narrative and evocative representation of the host city-country. Secondly, because while the imaginary of the South Europe group features several movies, the group of students in North Europe never saw a movie representing Finland-

Helsinki. I was expecting at least one movie directed by Aki Kaurismäki, but I found zero filmic representations.

The following autoethnographic passage is emblematic and introduces a key cultural object retrieved from a movie, allowing us to see Italy as a sort of vacation from real life.

*I had the image of coming here and riding a Vespa and riding with the Vespa around Florence, to the seaside, to the market to buy fresh fruit. I think I had this image from Italian restaurants in \*\*\*. They decor with images of Vespas. And I remember watching the movie *Under the Tuscan Sun*. (EE, f, Eurasia, Flo).*

EE makes a direct reference to the movie *Under the Tuscan Sun*, which can be seen as the archetypical romantic narrative of Florence and Tuscany (Birindelli 2020a). She also mentions the *Vespa* scooter. This is a recurrent cultural object in foreign movies portraying Italian life, easily linked with visions of a vacation in a fun and, at the same time, sentimental past. In this case the movie-matrix is clearly the famed *Roman Holiday* starring Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn. The movie is explicitly mentioned by several international students in Florence as a narrative that shaped their imaginary about Italy, for instance: «I remember *Roman Holiday*, a story about a princess in Roma» (QO, f, East Asia); «That movie where she rides the Vespa close to the Colosseum» (VU, m, South America). MH (f, Africa) reinforces these meanings and makes it clear how her image of Italy was totally disconnected from academe and profoundly tied up with an idea of the host country as a fashionable holiday destination for celebrities.

*Italy is always represented as the destinations of celebrities, a holiday destination. So Italy in my head had to be a very exotic place. Most of the movies are American.... Also in reality shows .... They always mention Italy connected to fashion, models, design. So Italy to me was a place connected with fashion and a fashionable lifestyle. Italy was never connected with academy. (MH, f, Africa)*

MH had also an image of Italy connected with the *Catholic Church*. However, even the religious image is imbued with the fantasy of luxury, exclusiveness etc. “Italy was also connected to the catholic church, the Vatican. In my country people think the streets in the Vatican are covered in gold.”

Continuing the focus on the movies mentioned in students’ autoethnographies, because of their power to shape the collective imaginary, we can observe that the most mentioned movies belong to the “rom-com” (romantic-comedy) genre: *Roman Holiday*, *Eat Pray Love*, *Under the Tuscan Sun*, *When in Rome*, *Letters to*

*Juliet*. The two movies that can be considered more intellectually committed and apt to open a thoughtful cultural door on Italian society and culture, are *Novecento* and *The Best of Youth*. *Novecento* (Twentieth Century) is an epic-historical drama about the lives and friendship of two men set against the background of the fascist-communist political conflicts in Italy in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *The Best of Youth* is a historical drama set in Italy between 1966 and 2003. The saga traces the life of a middle-class family through the major political and social events in post-WWII Italy: the protests of 1968, mafia wars, corruption and terrorism.

These are important narratives because in the international students autoethnographies – and in the general study-abroad discourse – Italian modernity tends to remain in the shadows (Birindelli 2020b). The features that usually make up the Italian *anima locus* are art, wine, olive oil, fashion, dolce vita, passion, etc. All these aspects are certainly part of the Italian identity, but they are by no means all of it: there is more to say. In *Mythologies* (1957/1972), Roland Barthes identifies the “deprivation of history” as a key figure of the rhetoric of myth regarding other people and cultures. Italians are thus ‘deprived’ of (at least) 150 years of their history. As a result, the interpretation of “the Other”, the locals, seems to be trapped in a distant and romanticized past.

Nevertheless, PW (m, Middle East, Flo) at the end writes:

*One year before I moved to Florence I saw an Italian movie The Best of Youth, a very long movie about an Italian family saga from the 60s to 2000. In this movie, I got this idea of the Vespa, the small Fiat 500 car. This kind of stuff. This simple Italian life. This movie gave this image of Italy.*

It is as if, no matter what they see or experience, a narrative center of gravity (Birindelli 2022) attracts students toward an easy-going, recreational and romantic idea of Italy. In this case studying abroad, rather than fostering openness through real opportunities to meet the Other in the flesh, seems to support an aesthetic “touristic gaze” (Urry and Larsen 2011).

#### 4. ROMANTIC PAST VS. PRAGMATIC FUTURE

We can synthetically interpret the dedicated autoethnographic passages in a comparative way as past (Italy) vs. present (Finland). On one side Italy-Florence’s image is embedded in a cultural past; on the other Finland-Helsinki’s image is severed from its history and is seen more as a geographical entity: the deep north. This is a vague geographical idea; before their arrival sev-

eral students were confusing Finland with Sweden and Norway and believed Finland was part of Scandinavia. Only a few had a clear idea of Finland’s geography, for instance as the western country with the longest border with Russia. Finland is conceived as a mysterious and remote place up north, and this mystery makes the country fascinating.

While Finland is “north”, “cold” and “nature”, Italy is “south”, “warmth” and “culture”. Italy represents a culture of the past while Finland is recognized as a culture of the present and a sort of enlightened and progressive land for the future. Several international students derived this image of Finland as a sort of “educational promised land” from the PISA survey and other international higher education rankings. The idea of Finland is absent in the movies seen by international students, but it is present in music – albeit identified only as hard-rock, metallic music. Other key images of Finland are “quality of life”, “welfare system” and “gender equality”.

By analyzing narrative passages where students recount their actual experience abroad we can dig deeper into the link between expectations fostered by the media and reality experienced firsthand. Part of the *arrival-postliminal* section of the autoethnographic template consists in portraying a bond with the city and with a place that became familiar during the stay.

Helsinki is seen as a functional and livable city, an aspect that is greatly appreciated by most of the international students. IN (m, South America) feels a connection with the city of Helsinki because «It’s a peaceful and safe city. I can walk in the streets without worrying that I can be robbed or mugged or something». ND (m, Oceania) clearly points out the benefits of living in a small capital city.

*Helsinki is a capital so you have the benefits of that. But it’s not busy. It’s a small capital, 560000 people. Public transport is good. Parks are good. Quality of life is high. It’s an easy city to live in. That makes Helsinki attractive. If I want to go to the forest, 20 minutes and you can be in nature. You can’t get that with a capital in many countries.*

In my interpretation of the narrative passages dedicated to the city of Helsinki I observe a general appreciation of the harmonious mingling between the city and the natural world, cultural vivacity, good public transport and the functionality of the city as a whole. However, what emerges from the narratives is a generic reference to “places by the sea” and none of the students developed any strong affective attachment to a specific place linked either to beauty or a sense of reassurance or comfort. Even in terms of the bond with the city, therefore, one can detect what is almost an antithetical cul-

tural dynamic between Florence and Helsinki. WW (f, Eurasia) writes «I have a strong bond with the city. I love Florence. Even if I am alone, I would still want to live here. In Florence I do not need people, the city is all I need» and MU (m, South America) echoes «I feel connected. I love Florence. I really do love this city». The group of international students fell in love with the city of Florence». OM (f, East Europe) makes an interesting generalization: «All international students have one thing in common: they all love the city of Florence. That is the first reason mentioned by any international student I met»; later in the autoethnography she adds:

«Nobody I met mentions studying as a reason to come to Florence. The only reason is the love for the city».

Only one autoethnographic passage clearly indicates affection for the city of Helsinki (or Finland / Finnish lifestyle) as the chief reason for being abroad – «Because I love it. I am still here because I deeply love this city» – whereas almost half of the students in Florence explicitly stated that they fell in love with the city, country, lifestyle etc. The passion for Florence (Tuscany, Italy) is a confirmed expectation, while the enthusiasm for Helsinki (Finland) appears to develop during the stay, without any preconceptions molded by clear representations and images found in the media (movies, documentaries, books, internet, social media, etc.).

As we have seen, the analysis of the collected autoethnographies reveals how, contrary to what is commonly believed, studying abroad at Master level is not necessarily intimately connected with the acquisition of skills from a career perspective. Only 16 students out of 50 wrote that they were abroad for academic reasons. However, the narrative and comparative approach adopted in this study casts light on the differences between the two study destinations. Eleven of those students were in the Helsinki group.

Beyond comparing numbers, which does not make exceptional sociological sense in a qualitative study, it's the extensive analysis of all the collected narratives that allows us to give hermeneutic weight to the international students in Helsinki, who seem more convincing about education as the key motivation. HV (f, South Asia, Hel) wrote «my whole purpose of being here is education» and elsewhere in her narrative discloses her educational and biographical strategy.

*I was looking for a master's degree to complete my studies. I talked with one of my supervisor and he suggested that if I wanted to study \*\*\*. Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland) are good choices because they have direct collaboration with \*\*\* [leading research center, based in Switzerland].*

Although international students did not tend to fall in love with Helsinki, they did see the city, and Finland in general, as a place where they could build their life, their real life. This leads us into the next narrative prompt of the arrival-postliminal section, where the students were also encouraged to reflect on their immediate prospects: returning home, staying in the host country, moving somewhere else.

Even though there were several students who wanted to remain in Finland after the Master, they had reservations about the viability of this choice. The main obstacle was seen as the language There are not that many jobs for English speakers in Finland, especially in the areas I am interested in, which makes it hard to find work experience. But I haven't closed the door to staying in Helsinki just yet» (PW, f, South Asia). In Helsinki the decision to stay or go is clearly tied up with job opportunities.

Many of the students in Florence, on the other hand, would like to remain because of the beauty of the city, the lifestyle etc. However, none of them saw Florence (Italy in general) as a place where they could concretely construct their future life. WZ (m, Africa, Flo) writes: «After the master I will go back home. I would like to stay here but as for job opportunities is better to go back home. Staying here with a master's degree will not make a difference».

Florence seems to represent a liminal phase filled with the colors and sentiments of a vacation from real life. Almost all the students fell in love with the city, and some of them are ready to make compromises to stay, but I tend to interpret their reflections as the desire to “prolong the vacation”. Only one student mentions Milan as a possibility, whereas it seems that none of the others sees Florence or Italy in general as a place for real life, and most importantly a place with job opportunities. Although some students mention the language barrier, in my interpretation this is not the main obstacle: the fact is that they don't see Italy as a viable setting for normal, everyday life in which work is central, but as the perfect place for an extra-ordinary life: a vacation. The length of the stay (two or more years) and their advanced students' status was not enough to sabotage the imaginative potential of the tourist connotation of Italy-Florence. However, at some point along the line they realized that vacations come to an end. RH (f, Eurasia) writes: «Actually, Florence is not a good city to live in. It's good to see museums, art, history, but it is not a city for normal everyday life».

Luzzi (2002: 61, emphasis mine) points out that Italy represents: «A locus of education and self-exploration, at a physical remove from the confines of one's normal life, and of *limited temporal duration*» The “limited temporal

duration” is a crucial point: Italy is, technically, a vacation from everyday life; but all good things come to an end: real life is back home, in the Global North or elsewhere, but not in Italy.

##### 5. CONCLUSIONS: ONE VAGUE COSMOPOLITAN DREAM, TWO DIVERGENT CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

The analysis of the collected autoethnographies reveals that the social, cultural and academic experience in Finland-Helsinki is, so to speak, more connected to the “reality” of ordinary everyday life. Using Freud’s famed cornerstones of humanness, Finland-Helsinki is ‘*arbeit*’, Italy-Florence is more ‘*liebe*’. Studying abroad in the *Belpaese* seems an extra-ordinary experience that goes beyond everyday life. The Italian dream has a limited temporal duration: namely, a vacation. And the Italian sojourn is like a play performed on a well-defined stage and with a clear script made up of articulated and internally consistent images-narratives derived from movies, advertisements, fashion, “Made in Italy” and previous visits during holidays.

However, the divergent cultural experiences have two strong common denominators: one is *pragmatic*, the other is *imaginative* in a transnational, global, cosmopolitan sense. For the former, HV (f, South Asia, Hel) writes: «When I was looking the internet I found that *Finland was tuition free for international students*. That convinced me for Finland because the overall costs of studying abroad would be way less». When I analyzed all the students’ stories, I discovered this key criterion for choosing either Finland or Italy: at the time of the study in both countries they did not have to pay tuition fees.

*The main point is the scholarship. My plan was to study in Finland, but it was hard to find a scholarship and I did not pass the admission. So I started to look for another scholarship to study in a European country. Luckily, I found one from the Italian Embassy in \*\*\*. There I found a scholarship promoted by Tuscan Region.* (KS, m, East Asia, Flo)

Moving on to the *imaginative* common denominator, it seems that students were exposed to a kind of academic mobility story that works at a global level. This is a species of global dogma that we can summarize as: better go than stay. This belief transcends the two countries-cities and, to a certain extent, even the educational motivation. International students in their “mobility capsule” (Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska 2021) respond to the imperative of ‘going’: mobility wins hands down over stasis. This academic mobility dogma is inserted in a sort of global story that endorses the generic validity

of travelling and living in the “cosmopolitan elsewhere”. And the importance of “elsewhere”, as Appiah (2019) writes, must be preserved in “defense of cosmopolitanism”. Yet, studying abroad in the cosmopolitan elsewhere, as MH (f, Africa, Flo) writes, is “idolized”.

*In my hometown living abroad is idolized. Having someone from the family living abroad is associated with a high social status. Europe in particular is associated with class more than other continents. It’s considered a prestigious thing to live or study abroad. Travelling in my hometown is associated with money and prestige.* (MH, f, Africa, Flo)

It is not an undistinguished cosmopolitan elsewhere with “abstract worldly outlooks” (Nowicka 2012) but an affluent one: United States, Europe. However, besides this motivation connected with class distinction, the interpretation of the collected narratives suggests another core, and potentially foundational, meaning for the studying abroad experience which I conceptualize as “existential” (Birindelli 2023). This individual and collective cultural significance has a latent but strong explanatory power linked to interrogatives about birthplace and dream place: “I was born here, but is this my place in the world? No, I want to travel and live somewhere else”. International students’ mobility seems to be supported by a sense of “elective belonging” (Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2005); it’s a place without a specific geographical connotation, a construct that resides somewhere in the space of global social imaginaries. It is an “elsewhere” where the young can express their human potential and live a life better suited to their personality and self-identity.

Beyond the quest for a “personal promised land”, this study revealed how studying abroad also embodies a dual transitional passage towards adulthood (Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska 2021) and global citizenship (Birindelli 2018). Nevertheless, in this training camp to become cosmopolitan (Hannerz 1990: 2005) it’s not altogether clear what “cosmopolitan student” means, since there are no cosmopolitan stories featuring international students as protagonists. In fact, analysis of the collected autoethnographies – and of secondary scholarly and non-scholarly sources addressing studying abroad – shows that there is no real narrative of what being an international student means. There is hardly a trace of a well-defined script derived from a structured plot in a book or a movie. What we can catch is a glimpse of a vague cosmopolitan narrative. This story upholds the generic validity of studying abroad for both instrumental and expressive reasons. It is constructed on a global scale by different actors and institutions and is partially dislocated from the society and culture of both the host

countries and those of origin. The actual practice constitutes an institutionalized rite of passage towards adulthood and global citizenship (Birindelli 2018).

However the story itself is nebulous, as are the characters, which means that the individual student has to find his or her own heroes and villains (challenges and helpers) along the path to discovering who is a good citizen of the world. At the end of the day, it is not clear what exactly the reward – or the lesson (Campbell 2008; Propp 2010) to be learned from the special “studying abroad world” – is or how it will serve the young person in adult life. I am convinced that this is no minor finding: the difficulty of connecting academic or educational cosmopolitanism with a recognizable narrative inevitably undermines its conceptual clarity and its use within the field of study.

Through a variety of “discourses”, imaginaries of mobility spread globally and can be re-embedded in specific foreign experiences, creating meanings that partially develop on local references (Salazar 2018). Such imaginaries can be considered unspoken schemas of interpretation, rather than explicit ideologies (Salazar 2012: 864) developing “upon implicit understandings that underlie and make possible common practices” (Gaonkar 2002: 4). International students “enact” (Jepperson 1991) on the everyday stage of the studying-abroad play. However, behind any script there is a story. The story has been increasingly standardized, conventionalized and abstracted and, ultimately, reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, icons, cliches, or stereotypes (Slotkin 1986). While the layperson enacts on the basis of scattered images, to interpret these stories in depth the social scientist must de- and re-construct them.

My interpretation of the (quasi-) ritual of studying abroad is as a script without the structured story, such as a book or a movie, that greatly increases the implicit and preconscious meaning of studying abroad. The young person’s self-story has no “center of narrative gravity”, so that he or she is alone both in acting out and recounting his/her epic (Birindelli 2023). As a result, the overall myth-ritual is sabotaged, and even the recognition of the new “cosmopolitan status” by the “community” (institutions, family, peers etc.) is indefinite. It is one thing to enact based on a story, another to enact without one.

The aforementioned quest for a personal “promised land” and the concomitant passage toward an adulthood characterized by the molding of a “cosmopolitan self-identity” follows a different path in Finland and Italy: the forked path of cultural practices and symbols. In my study this double transitional passage towards adulthood and global citizenship takes different shapes: the apparently uncontested global educational meaning of studying abroad is questioned by local and national cultures.

Another finding poses significant questions to both normative and non-normative (cultural) cosmopolitanism: in my study national and local cultures retain their cultural clout. If «developing a cosmopolitan identity is at the core of discourses on educational travels» (Huang 2021: 4), in this study we might simply say that, through two different *bildung* itineraries, the educational and overall life experience in Finland and in Italy shape two different kinds of “cosmopolitan selves” (George 2010): the northern cosmopolitan and the southern cosmopolitan. The former can be seen as someone who acquires a species of *ordinary cultural knowledge* that could later be utilized in the *world of work* and in everyday practices and experiences. The latter has experienced a species of *extra-ordinary cultural knowledge* more closely resembling that of a connoisseur, a worldly, refined person, someone who has good taste, be it in food, wine, fashion or art: an *aesthete*.

The northern and southern cultural experiences are constructed upon a polar meta-narrative, a sort of grand dichotomy: rational and progressive cultures of North Europe (where the *homo fictus* lives, the future fully-fledged new global citizen), versus the irrational, backward society of the south (Italy), inhabited by the southerner *homo naturalis* (Birindelli 2019). In another sense, we can encapsulate Finland as the present and the future of our late modern and globalized “real life”. Italy, instead, is neither the present nor the future, but simply the romanticized past, a sort of “vacation from real life”. In an (apparent) post-modern fragmentation, we are still blocked at the core narrative of full modernity with its epitomic North/South cleavage.

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## Crossing the Democratic Boundaries? Israeli protest against the Autocratization Perils of the 2023 Institutional Reform

ALON HELLED

**Abstract.** In the absence of the written constitution, Israeli society is institutionally anchored to the twofold premise of being as equally Jewish as democratic, according to the 1948 Declaration of Independence. These two properties are the foundation stones of the country's national habitus, the system of norms and codes interiorized by citizens. Yet, Israeli democracy has faced many challenges, both external (geopolitical conflicts) and internal (the ramifications of the Occupation of Palestinian Territories and the increasing messianism of its political religious parties). The latter have resulted in a process of seemingly unstoppable autocratization. The paper enquires the types of protest in Israel and delineates the uniqueness of the last wave of protest against the legal reform, promoted by Israel's 37<sup>th</sup> government. The analysis thus contextualizes moments of democratic friction, inspired by the Bourdieusian concept of hysteresis. This is situated in light of Israeli historical repertoire of manifested moments of dissent. By juxtaposing the (inevitable) clash between the country's Jewish exclusiveness and democratic republican universalism, the incompatibility between the two elements as the main factor of Israel's democratic backsliding towards autocratization reveals its sociological reasons.

**Keywords:** Israel, autocratization, 2023 institutional reform, protest, hysteresis, habitus.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH IN DECIPHERING THE ISRAELI PROTEST

This paper aims to contribute to the existing debate on Israeli political identity, as empirically applied to the wave of protest against the agenda of Israel's 37<sup>th</sup> government (until October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023). The last protest is taken as a salient example of the process of autocratization and the back-sliding of the country's democraticness. In addition, the analysis delineates the forces and social groups who seek a political turning point, as they emerge out of the complexities, contradictions and challenges of Israel as a contemporary democracy. The debate of Israel's democratic back-sliding does not concern, however, the sole, though significant, condition of contested territory and sovereignty around the consequences of the 1967 Occupation in relation to

the Palestinians. It has also an institutional weight “a priori”, given that the country has no written constitution, thus a frail codification of democratic rights. This is manifested in tendencies of electoral instability, the exclusion of minorities and government aggrandizement, hence signs of structural imbalance which engender debates over democratic regression (Tomini, Gibril and Bochev 2023; Cassani and Tomini 2019). The analysis, inspired by historical sociology, attempts to socially unpack processes beyond current contingencies by contextualizing trends of continuity and transformation, alike. It adapts and integrates the long-term stratification of institution-led nationalizing socialization through reproduction and banalization (Billig 1995; Malešević 2019), which put the habitus, i.e., the concept which delineates the acquisition and interiorization of socio-psychological dispositions, namely norms and codes of behaviour, by a determined collectivity (Elias 2001, [1939] 2012; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1998; Sapiro 2015). The habitus is, therefore, a generative and explicative principle of individual practices in relation to society. It dilutes social conflicts, at least in appearance, and dictates an out-to-do, ought-to-be mode. Moreover, its processual development entails a sense of belonging, namely the dichotomous We versus They, which is as anchored as it is inherent to a determined collectivity in a specific historical conjuncture. In political terms, it is the national habitus that collectivizes citizens into being part of a nation-state.

Since its establishment, Israel’s national habitus has been centred around the identification with being Jewish and democratic, as announced in Israel’s 1948 Declaration of Independence, soon transformed into the state-centric principle of “Mamlakhtiyut”, conceived by Ben-Gurion. This political guideline endorses a republican state-centric sense of belonging and a civil duty to the state (Kedar 2002; Bareli and Kedar 2011). In addition, it postulates a civic and procedural legalism as the primary normative arbiter of the state, making state’s sovereignty both a condition and a result of its *protego ergo oblige* (Mautner 2011). Therefore, all forms of social and political discontent derive from the dispositional balance between Jewish particularism and democratic universalism, potentially causing hysteretic conflicts.

Yet, the equilibrium the habitus maintains is dynamic and, as such, subject to tensions and pressures which may result in what Bourdieu referred to as hysteresis. The latter conceptually describes a state in which the acquired interiorized dispositions of the habitus clash with objective external environment, inasmuch as prior conditions change abruptly. According to Bourdieusian field theory, volatile times, characterized

by dislocation and disruption of societal regularities, produce such hysteresis effects (Bourdieu 1977; 2000). Such effects can produce actions that disturb the normal activities of society such as demonstrations, strikes, riots, terrorism, civil disobedience, and even revolution or insurrection. This makes hysteresis a useful concept to social phenomena labelled as “contentious politics” (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). The case of the socio-political protest in Israel in light of the 37<sup>th</sup> government well exemplifies this theoretical frame.

The tracing of causal chains is applied to the period of the Knesset’s winter session (November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022-April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023) which contextualizes the first political decisions and legislation promoted by the newly appointed government, result of the general elections of November 1<sup>st</sup> 2022, as the consequential escalation in the opposition expressed by both formal politics and civil society. Based on qualitative research of Israeli dailies and news broadcasts (sources to build up formal official documentation and public statements), the analysis constructs the last protest in relation to political agency and other typologies of discontent in Israel regarding the country’s national habitus. The next section provides historical examples of protest in Israel. Though not exhaustive, main events of social unrest are contextualized and labelled into types of protest and their thematic relevance. Hence, the reader encounters the different morphologies of hysteresis in Israeli history. These examples allow to trace the dialectics between politics and citizenry. As we shall see, the cases analysed cover various groups in Israel and delineate disputed features of Israel’s national habitus in times of friction.

## 2. ISRAELI SHORT-LONG HISTORY OF PROTEST: A SPECTRUM OF CLEAVAGE-DRIVEN UNREST

This section addresses the history of protest in Israel. It exemplifies different typologies of manifested hysteresis from the past. These are meant to delineate the structural properties of Israeli Jewish society that have shaped the Israeli national habitus concerning public institutions and juridico-societal norms. The table below summarizes the classification and morphologies of protestation that manifested socio-political hysteresis in Israel’s history. The types and morphologies may inter-cross and present varied degrees of social friction, while providing a general overview on the modes, motivations and themes of protest; linked to ethnical, religious, political and economic societal cleavages, considered as a junction of multi-layered inter-crossing social factors (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Some of the combine protest expressions

**Table 1.** Classification of protests in Israel.

<i>Types of protestation</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>Ethnical</i>	<i>Religious</i>	<i>Political (and ethical)</i>	<i>Economic</i>
<i>Morphologies of hysteresis</i>	Bottom-up participation of the "Arab-sector" Violent\ non-violent reactions	Demonstrations Wadi Salib (1959); The Israeli Black Panthers Movement (1971) Yeminite Children Affair Case	Riots Haredi Riots around haredi neighbourhoods in Jerusalem; The ultra-Orthodox demonstration against the Supreme Court (1999)	Collective Civil disobedience (threats) 1952 Reparations Agreement protest 1973 Yom Kippur War Protest 1982 Lebanon War and consequent Israeli Occupation The protest against the Disengagement plan (2004-2005)	Denouncement and boycott The 2011 Israeli social justice protests The hight-cost of living "Milki" Protest 2014-2015

Source: Authors' elaboration.

regarding both type and origin of hysteresis, and hence, feature an inclusive and dynamic fashion to categorize dissent and conflict, rather than looking at them separately as singular episodes (although historicized). This is somewhat intuitive, since protest participation may increase or decrease overtime as well as to combine and channel more than one issue. Although this classification may seem trivial, - insofar as such cleavages are present in many other democracies-, the discrimen of Israel is the lack of a republican written constitution which formulates and formalizes the balance of power between the country's stakeholders, i.e. representative government and governed citizens (government functions are anchored to the so-called basic laws which present structural lacunae and a juridico-political trajectory oscillating between political majority in terms of enactment and legal interpretation). This makes Israeli democracy structurally vulnerable to abrupt change.

The first type of protest includes episodes of manifested national contention, either violent or non-violent, by Israeli-Palestinians (also known as "the 1948 Arabs") as a "sectorial" reaction to Israeli authorities as to their own rights of those of the Palestinians living in the occupied territories. Many scholars have insisted over the years on the bloody and bitter reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict challenging Israeli democracy, namely the discriminatory double-standard of human and civil rights due to the legal absence of universal citizenry which changes its codes, according to the country's territorially differentiated democraticness (Ariely 2021). The national struggle, the core of the Israeli-Arab-Palestinian conflict, is a crucial element in Israeli history and politics. A pivotal example of such protest is the "Land Day" (Arabic: *ضُرَّالْأَمْوِي*, *Yawm al-'Arḍ*), March 30<sup>th</sup>, namely the day of commemoration for Arab citizens of Israel and Palestinians of the 1976 expropria-

tion of Arab lands by Israeli authorities. Apartheid-like policies in the post-1967 occupied territories of the West bank and the segregational siege of the Gaza Strip from the rest of Occupied Territories (the so-called "Green-line", i.e., the 1949 armistice border) have been implemented and added to forms of "democratic defectiveness" (Merkel 2004) shaping and shifting Israel towards increasingly Jewish-based ethnocratic regime; which a procedural democratic frame that encompasses a specific ethno-led national habitus whose historical background can turn into an ethnic-state, therefore, an "ethnocracy" that formalizes segregation by law (Smooha 1997, 2002; Yiftachel and Ghanem 2004; Yiftachel 2006).

With regard to the morphologies of protest, concerning hysteresis effects impacting the Israeli national habitus, i.e. Jewish democratic republicanism, the one feature which presents significative particularities is that of "civil disobedience" in relation to Israeli *Malmalkhtiyut*. Civil disobedience in Israel is intimately linked to the compulsory military service (the foundational concept of the "people's army"). In Israel, the term refers either to insubordination or to a complete refusal to serve due to disagreement with the Israeli government policies as carried out by the IDF. This disobedience, however, is not necessarily linked to pacifism (other reasons of fear, fatigue, convenience, etc. are defined as refusing an order only, and are not included in the definition of refusal). Moreover, after the 1956 Kfar Qasim massacre by Israeli border police, the term "obviously illegal command" was coined, describing a situation in which a soldier must refuse to carry out an order, inasmuch as it is clearly illegal. Refusal to obey such an order does not amount to refusal. Notwithstanding, civil disobedience may find various motivations from both the left and right ends of the political spectrum. The refusal on the left is connected to reasons of paci-

fism, but also to the reluctance to serve in the occupied territories of Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip (consequently, the participation in military activity which violates international law). The refusal on the right concerns the principle of serving in the army under a government that implements a policy of handing over parts of Israel or in the evacuation of Jewish settlements (e.g., the 2005 Israeli disengagement from Gaza).

The State of Israel is defined as a democratic state and therefore opposition to the government is permitted in principle. However, in the eyes of many in Israeli society, the refusal is considered illegitimate, as it is seen as an attempt by the minority to impose its opinion on the majority, which democratically decided to send the army on certain missions. This is in addition to the militarism in Israeli society, which the “refuseniks” tend to criticize. The refusers usually claim that their refusal is not political but conscientious. It is their conscience that does not allow them to obey the order they received. A general objection to serving in any army, motivated by a pacifist worldview, is formally acknowledged as a reason for non-drafting girls into the IDF. On the other hand, objection to a specific mandatory draft for the IDF as the army of the State of Israel or a refusal to follow certain orders is sometimes called “partial refusal” or “selective refusal” (Linn 1989, 1996). The partial recognition of ideological stands vis-à-vis the state, however, does not mean the absence of collective restrictions. As pointed out by Barzilai (1999: 318): «the political establishment imposes compulsory recruitment of people and economic resources, controls information, and curtails individual freedoms of expression, association, and demonstration. The state promotes the emergence of exacting sociopolitical and legal norms and endorses severe sanctions against the opponents of war»; whose political fallout further strengthens non-liberal trends in the public opinion (Ben-Eliezer 1993).

The other component of the Israel is, of course, its Jewish character. With regard to protests, many episodes of protest by ultra-Orthodox Jews have defined the so-called “religious coercion” which has gained visibility in Israeli media, since the 1980s. Haredi riots around haredi neighbourhoods in Jerusalem against Sabbath desecration or against the selling of pork reacted to the demand of nonobservant ex-USSR Jewish immigrants (especially in the 1990s). The topic of “religionization” of Israel’s public sphere and political representation became a central parameter of measurement of Israel’s liberalism, pluralism and democraticness (Don Yehia 1986; Rubinstein 2017). Over the years, the use of the term by religious parties has almost disappeared, whereas its use by secular parties increased. Parties such as Ratz, Shinui, Meretz and for a short time also the Israeli Labor

Party miraculously lifted the claims of religious coercion, which together with the claims against the ultra-Orthodox not serving in the IDF facilitated electoral gains. The fight for the separation of religion and state, which had been rejected by almost all parties in 1948, has been often fought on the banner of secular parties with a centre-left political orientation. This trend is what has brought the observant Jewish population to espouse more rightist stands that was able to appropriate the Jewishness of the State in religious terms, whereas the non-observant became more frequently identified as democratic universalists. “Secularists” of the second and third generation after the founding of the state feel associated and less connected to Jewish orthodox traditions. Therefore, compromises in religious matters constitute a great deal to those educated on the teachings of the hegemonic lay Zionism. In addition, Israelis have become more aware of the growing gap between the standards of the status quo regarding state and religion and the prevailing norms in the Western world concerning family law, transportation, entertainment and commercial activities on the official day of rest (Saturday, hence Jewish Sabbath). According to Barak-Erez (2007), the increase in polarization between the secular and the religious, due to influences from Western culture, as well as to inner political and social changes, the bans on growing and selling pork in Israel have moved from the status of reasonable national or social prohibitions during the mandate period and the 1950s and 1960s to the status of religious prohibitions that constitute religious coercion in the 1980s and 1990s. Consequently, the preservation of some of the status quo orders has intensified.

In 1999, an ultra-Orthodox demonstration (and prayer rally) against the Supreme Court reached an undoubtable peak. The demonstration was held against the Supreme Court’s policy on matters of religion and state, which was initiated by Rabbi Yaakov Aryeh Alter and organized by MK Menachem Porush. According to police estimates, about 350,000 demonstrators participated in the protest. Other commentators estimated the number of demonstrators at a quarter of a million. Among the ultra-Orthodox public, the demonstration was called “The half-million demonstration”. A counter-demonstration, in favour of the Supreme Court, took place at the same time in Saker Park, and according to police estimates, about 50,000 people demonstrated there. Other demonstrations were also held in the various ultra-Orthodox cities in Israel. The latter attested the growing cleavage between the biggest groups in Israel’s Jewish population. According to jurist and rabbi Friedman (2021), formalized by institutionalized non-democratic public policies of separation, namely in the education system, by the

ultra-Orthodox community challenges the formers' participation in Israeli democracy. Hence, the application of judicial instruments in front of any political protest would only increase the religion-led cleavage, while Israeli citizenry has been experiencing an awakening of religiosity, though in a very much individualistic manner (unlike in ultra-Orthodoxy), and beyond any legal cadre.

That said, another major characteristic in Israeli Jewish society is the ethnical cleavage between Ashkenazi Jewish (of Central and Eastern European descent) and the so-called Mizrahim (lit. "Orientals"), namely Israeli Jews whose origins are to be found in Arab-speaking countries. As demonstrated by the table, the history of tensions between this group and the political establishment (which was hegemonically Ashkenazi, given the origins of Zionism in European Jewry) is already rooted in first years of Israel's independence. This is exemplified by the Wadi Salib protest; a series of street demonstrations and riots that took place in 1959 in the Wadi Salib neighbourhood in Haifa. The events were a social revolt against deprivation and discrimination on sectarian grounds, initiated by first-generation Jewish immigrants against the Socialist Zionist MAPAI establishment (the quasi-hegemonic party until 1977). The neighbourhood was originally an Arab one whose residents had to escape Israeli belligerence during the 1948. The "abandoned" houses were expropriated by the Israeli government who settled it with immigrants, mainly from North Africa; which engendered the cancellation of prior Palestinian life but also the separatedness of new Israelis within the urban area of the city (Weiss 2007).

The overt social unrest was eventually translated into collective mobilisation in the 1970s, a decade that proved to be a turning-point in Israeli politics. One of the reasons for that was the warm welcome Israeli authorities were extending to Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union – around 163,000 people – simply referred to as "Russians". The newcomers, generalised as "prisoners of Zion" (i.e., Jews imprisoned or deported for Zionist activism in the USSR), enjoyed financial benefits as well as access to advanced education services, thus the opposite of what Mizrahi immigrants had received two decades earlier. Certainly, the economic conditions of the Jewish State improved much since the years of austerity, as Israel was experiencing an unprecedented economic boom following the third Arab-Israeli War of 1967 (the Six-Day War). These were the grounds of the next great moment of ethno-economic protest in Israel, embodied by the Israeli "Black Panthers" movement. The latter consisted in young people in the Musrara neighbourhood of Jerusalem, in reaction to discrimination against Mizrahi Jews. All of the initial ten members of

the movement were children of Moroccan immigrants, around ages 18–20, and most of them had dropped out of elementary school and spent some time in juvenile delinquent institutions. This group protested against the establishment's apathy towards the social problems of the poorer strata in society. They also criticized the government's lack of support for the mass demonstrations that took place against the hanging of Jews in Iraq. The Black Panthers eventually moved into electoral politics, but without success, at least in part because of internal disputes and struggles. In the 1973 Knesset elections the party won 13,332 votes (0.9%), just short of the 1% threshold (Bernstein 1979).

A less important demonstration, though significant in the historical tracing of ethnical protest in Israel, is the 2018 demonstration related to the so-called "the Yemenite Children Affair". The latter refers to the disappearance of mainly Yemenite Jewish babies and toddlers of immigrants in Israel during the period 1948-1954. The number of babies affected ranges from 1,000 to 5,000 individuals who were declared dead to their biological families but who were actually given to childless Ashkenazi couples who adopted them. After decades of periodical manifestations by families leading to various investigation reports, parliamentary commissions, media reportages, and a supreme court ruling. All these compelled the state to release 400,000 classified documents regarding the affair.

In addition to the abovementioned examples, the table presents other types and morphologies of protest which are considered moments of hysteresis in Israel's national habitus. Whereas, the ethnical and religious protests are structurally unique to Israel, given the country's national habitus considered as the twofold combination of Jewishness and democracy, challenged by Israel's demographic composition, political and economic protests are more easily generalized. The 1952 Reparations Agreement between Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany exposed the cleavage between left and right in Israel in an already Mamalkhtiyut-based institutional order (unlike fights within and between Jewish factions in the pre-Independence period). From the moment the direct negotiations with Germany were revealed, in December 1951, heated political debates took place. The protest reached its peak on January 7, 1952, when the agreement was put on the Knesset's agenda. Opponents of the agreement held a demonstration in which many demonstrators participated (relative to the size of the population at that time). Menachem Begin, leader of the Israeli right-wing opposition, spoke very harshly against Ben-Gurion's government's collaboration with Germany, "a nation of murderers"

in light of the Shoah. He called for the non-payment of taxes and civil rebellion. Yet, on January 9, the Knesset approved the government's decision to hold negotiations with West Germany (by a majority of 61 against 50, with six abstentions) and authorized the Foreign Affairs and Security Committee to finally approve the text of the agreement that would be reached. In September 1952, the reparations agreement between the State of Israel and West Germany was signed (Weitz 2002).

Other political protests had achieved deeper impact. The 1973 manifestations against the Yom Kippur War, which ended with the Agranat Commission whose interim report led to the resignations of Chief of Staff David Elazar and eventually, due to increasing public criticism, to that of prime minister Golda Meir on April 11, 1974. Quite similar was the Kahan Commission, formally known as the Commission of Inquiry into the Events at the Refugee Camps in Beirut, which was established by the Israeli government on 28 September 1982, to investigate the Sabra and Shatila massacre (16-18 September, 1982) during the 1982 Lebanon War. The commission, called for under American pressure, forced Ariel Sharon to resign from his position as Minister of Defense. Yet, the war and the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon (1985-2000), and the consequent death toll that Israeli families paid for this controversial war and its aftermath led to the establishment of several groups of public protest (the 1982 "Committee Against the War in Lebanon", 1983 "Parents Against Silence" movement, the 1997 "Four Mothers" movement). Both these protests centered around geopolitical events and had much to do with anti-War sentiments as well as the left-right divide in Israeli society. Notwithstanding, public protest did not concern, at least not directly, the dual Jewish and democratic national habitus of the country.

Different was the protest against the disengagement plan from Gaza. In this case, protest began long before the disengagement plan was accepted by the Knesset. With the approval of the preparations for the plan in the Knesset on October 26, 2004 (but not for its actual implementation), the wave of protest intensified, and it grew stronger as the preparations for the disengagement progressed. It was marked with the colour orange, and led to one of the most powerful clashes in the history of Israeli democracy. Although among the opponents of the plan there were both secular Jews and ultra-Orthodox, the majority of the protestors belonged to the religious-nationalist stream in Israeli society. This sociopolitical group's opposition stemmed primarily from religious motives and the belief that the State of Israel's hold on the Land of Israel is part of the messianic redemption process. The protest, therefore, dialectically and simul-

taneously exacerbated both the religious and democratic features of the Israeli habitus. It crystalized the left-right divide, projected onto land versus state antagonism. Moreover, the protest questioned the good practices of politics, criticizing on the one hand the demagoguery by the opposition to its, and on the other hand, the executive aggrandizement eroding democratic representation.

After overviewing the most significant episodes of political protest in Israel's history, while delineating context, types of protestation and morphologies of hysteresis, one may assume that the Israeli habitus has succeeded in providing responses to these domestic crises. In all the abovementioned cases, the reaction of the state-system reiterated the principles of *Mamlakhtiyut* and responded to discontent and criticism through legally-bound solutions which aimed at safeguarding common weal and at keeping different sectors of citizenry within the boundaries of the Jewish-democratic habitus. Though contradictory, the Israeli republican ideal was able to contain and regulate those contestations democratically. It is paramount to keep in mind that Israel's political divide, has been based on the two major interpretations of Zionism, namely the socialist centre-Left vs. capitalist centre-Right, which assured a quasi-hegemonic government to the first and the role of opposition to the latter (until its victory in the 1977 general election). This point had left the Israeli right in a historically "underdog" position, rhetoric-wise, though most governments have been headed by Netanyahu himself, since 1996. Hence, the Israeli Knesset has always testified fragmentation in its composition (120 parliamentarians) often including up to 15 parties (1951, 1984, 1988, 1999). The representation of leftist, rightist, liberal centre, religious and ultra-orthodox, Ashkenazi, Sephardic or Mizrahi, Russian and Arab lists permitted the Israeli electorate to express divergence and diversity, as long as the rules of the democratic game remained solid and uncontested. In light of the latter, the nine months of protestation against Israel's 37<sup>th</sup> government and its institutional reform, interrupted by the Israel-Hamas war since October 7<sup>th</sup> 2023, seem to be exceptional. The next section contextualizes the reach and elements that have been crystallized in the outbreak of the protest and traces the challenging dynamics around the hysteresis of the Israeli national habitus.

### 3. THE CENTRIFUGAL HYSTERESIS OF ISRAELI 2023 PROTEST

As seen in the previous section, Israel has known various types of protestation which bore different issues. These were responded by politics that had placed the

national habitus, Jewish and democratic, at the heart of its reactions. The Israeli variant of republicanism contained cleavages and fractions. Unlike the historical examples, the last wave of protest, suspended by the trauma of October 7<sup>th</sup> and the belligerence that followed, has not been centered around the deeds or misdeeds of the state but encapsulates the very basic issue of the balance between Israel's Jewish identity and its democratic one, as it has been shaped since the country's independence. That said, this section traces the hysteretic centrifugal depth and breadth in the main occurrences of the protest; which, though interrupted, manifested Israel's fragile national habitus. It delineates the forces and social groups that have emerged and manifestly revealed Israel's contradictions.

About a week after the formation of the 37<sup>th</sup> government, sworn in on December 29<sup>th</sup> 2022, Justice Minister Yariv Levin presented his plan for significant reform in the current judicial system, based on the jurisprudence as developed in the 1990s which has been strongly identified with Supreme Court Judge Aharon Barak. Named by the plan's opponents a "regime coup", claiming that it would harm Israeli democracy and the country's system of checks and balances. But what is the content of the plan? The proposed reform consists in four parts: 1. the disqualification of laws bypassing Supreme court rulings; 2. the composition of the selection committee of judges passes from nine to eleven members with 7 of them representing the governing coalition, whereas the nomination of Supreme Court Judges will be subject to a public hearing before the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee of the Knesset; 3. the cancellation of the reasonability clause for the disqualification of instructions received in accordance with the law; 4. the appointment of the Attorney General and ministerial legal advisors is not binding for the government. These points became the central motivation of the fight against the reform, considering Netanyahu's ongoing triple trial for corruption (alleged bribery, fraud and breach of trust), which manifestly reached high levels of personalization and self-interest.

Following the presentation of the plan, the protest wave against the government began. The protest found its outlet on January 7<sup>th</sup>, when the first significant demonstration against the reform's program was held in Tel Aviv. Thousands of citizens participated in it. A week later, on January 14, about 80 thousand people demonstrated in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa and other places throughout Israel. On January 21, over 100,000 people demonstrated in Tel Aviv and tens of thousands more in various cities. After three days (January 24), a one-hour strike was held, joined by more than 130 high-tech

companies; hence, both an internationally important economic sector (15% of national GDP via 54% export) that numbers 10.4 percent of Israeli employees. High-tech employees also initiated a website for others to join the protest. The protest increasingly took on a form of a proper organization with headquarters and activists throughout Israel. The Saturday evening protest became a weekly manifestation of dissent. Yet, not only did the protest opt for the national coordination of demonstrations but it also declared strikes and mobilization of the economic sector. This capacity has been made possible due to the protest's several financial sources. The latter include a crowdfunding campaign (over NIS 18 million had been collected, as of March 30<sup>th</sup> 2023), along with donations from private individuals, as well as funding from the New Israel Fund which awarded grants to a number of associations operating in the protest. Moreover, the already established black flags movement (born in March, 2020) and the movement for the quality of government have been among the leaders of the protest and its funding. An organization called "Brothers in Arms" (Hebrew: קשנל מיהא) founded in January 2023 became the protest's main organizer.

The wave of protest reveals several peculiarities in relation to past manifestations of dissent. Firstly, various sectors and social groups in Israel have taken part in the demonstrations, corroborated by many public figures such as party leader, former politicians and high-level state civil servants (e.g., former Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces and Israel's Defense Minister Moshe "Bogie" Ya'alon, former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, former prime ministers Ehud Olmert and Ehud Barak, Mayor of Tel Aviv Ron Huldai, former Director of the Mossad Tamir Pardo etc.). The core values of the protest participants can be summarized as new liberal democratic streams in Israeli society, or otherwise, the productive lay middle class and public servants who represent the barycentre of Israeli society in terms of left-right, centre-periphery and state-religion cleavages. Individuals who belong to this sociological fragment, often identify themselves as "the burden bearers of Israel", constitute the classes who serve in the army and pay taxes; unlike ultra-orthodox who are exempted from military service and largely benefit from social subsidies.

Secondly, the Israel Defence Forces, one of the state's embodiments of institutional non-partisanship (together with the justice system), found itself at the heart of the political protest. Already on February 26<sup>th</sup>, hundreds of members of the special operations forces signed a letter warning that they would not continue to volunteer for reserve service if the legislation was passed. The protest also spread to reserve pilots and navigators, over 50

flight controllers and about 40 aircraft operators who informed their units that they would not show up for training scheduled for that week and would devote their time to the fight against the legislation. A letter against refusal and disobedience was published on March 9<sup>th</sup>, signed by former chiefs of staff Shaul Mofaz and Gabi Ashkenazi and other 34 former generals. Ten days later, the military attorney's office decided, in order to prevent polarization within the IDF, that there was no obstacle for soldiers to participate in demonstrations, provided that they do so in civilian clothes only. This is meaningful evidence of the rupture within the myth of the "people's army" in a democracy where the militarization of law enforcement is a widespread and persistent phenomenon, reaching "enimising" contrasts and decline (Levy 2022; Kimmerling 2001). The protest encountered violent response by police officers, exacerbated by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir who qualified protesters as anti-Zionist leftist anarchists. The clash within the army's ranks reached its culmination on March 25<sup>th</sup>, when Defence Minister Yoav Galant convened a press conference calling for a halt to the institutional reform legislation until after Independence Day. He warned against the consequences of advancing the legislation in light of the phenomenon of refusals in the IDF. The day after, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced Galant's dismissal from office (never finalized). On March 27<sup>th</sup>, Galant spoke at the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Security Committee, before which he stated that situation endangers the security of the country. Increasingly the state apparatus entered the protest directly, also in the case of Israeli academia and municipalities (placing Hamas's attack on October 7<sup>th</sup> in a context of evident domestic fragility that leads to a geopolitical one).

Thirdly, given the out-front clash over Israeli democraticness, the protest began to increasingly echo with international references, as banners (and slogans) at demonstrations showed the Hungarian prime minister Orbán, the Russian president Putin, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Turkish president Erdoğan, and the Iranian Khamenei as a unified group of authoritarian leaders. In this respect, protest organizations in Israel sought to generalize their operations and position Israel as a democracy at risk, similarly to the European cases of Hungary and Poland. Noteworthy is the fact that members of the Israeli protest and some pro-democracy activists from the two European countries were planning to unite forces and launch a joint body in the European Parliament in Brussels in mid-October, 2023 (an initiative abruptly suspended as a result of the October 7<sup>th</sup>). Furthermore, some women manifested their protest

against exclusion and discrimination by ultra-Orthodox parties, while being dressed in the Handmaid's Tale salves' red outfit; a reference to the TV series based on Margaret Atwood's futuristic dystopian novel, hence showing a symbolic "international contamination" against the government's patriarchal religious tyranny. Another example of the international echo of the protest was the disruption of Netanyahu's diplomatic visits abroad in Rome and London (March 5<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> respectively), with local protests by Israelis living in those cities and others worldwide (e.g., Paris, Madrid, Sydney and Berlin).

The protest came to a seemingly temporary stop only with the events of October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 (not even the much-discussed presidential compromise had found transversal consensus).

#### 4. THE POWDER KEG OF ISRAELI POLITICS: A LAB FOR HABITUS' HYSTERESIS

Israeli society is institutionally anchored to the two-fold equally Jewish as democratic national habitus. The two properties are the foundations of Israel's as a collective polity, given the plurality of socio-political and sociocultural sectors in the country's demographic fabric. The article traced types of protest in Israeli history and delineated the morphologies and moments of hysteresis, namely episodes of friction between government and citizenry in light of the Israeli habitus, based on the principles of civic republicanism (*Mamlakhtiyut*). The article then examined the last wave of protest in Israel against the institutional reform endorsed by Israel's 37<sup>th</sup> government, a full-right coalition. The construction of events, reveals the combination of several processes and actors. By analysing the Israeli protest through the pillars of the country's national habitus, one understands the tensions characterizing Israeli society. The sociological cleavages present in Israel has crystallized in the outbreak of the protest which has amalgamated different claims and sectors for the democratic feature in Israeli politics to be kept in the existent status quo vis-à-vis the country's Jewishness. Nevertheless, it is the same democratic component that has engendered the political majority and this government's formation. Due to this contradiction the nuances in Israeli democracy seem to blur and oscillate towards even greater polarization within Jewish Israelis, whilst encapsulating an unseen spectrum of issues deriving from the macro-question regarding Israel's own national habitus in its democratic capacity. Certainly, the project of institutional reform pushed unilaterally by the governing

majority – the result of political instability expressed in five electoral rounds in two and a half years – demonstrates the wish to formalize the executive's predominant position, beyond tactical aggrandizement. Netanyahu's government sought to anchor its ideological stands to the institutional cadre of the state. Nevertheless, the eruption of a seemingly inter-sectorial opposition to the government and judicial reform combined all types of protest in relation to systematic risks impacting the rule of law, the economy and sociocultural pluralism. This protest equally attests the risk of tangible autocratization, which has not been related to Israeli Arabs or Palestinians and occupation; issues that has been largely trivialized, till the October 7<sup>th</sup> attacks and the belligerence that followed.

No wave of protestation in Israeli history has ever manifested such an elevated degree of hysteresis between the container of Israeli democracy (the state) and the normative and behavioural content (the country's collective habitus). Unlike historical protests, the ongoing protestation has been transversal and omnivorous. It includes a multitude of topics and social sectors. More importantly, it is the first time in Israeli history that protest directly concerns the ranks of the IDF, perhaps the most significant pillar of Israeliness and patriotic state-building. The protestation against the reform further enhances the cleavages and divides persisting in Israeli society. Possible democratic backsliding towards procedural illiberal democracy, shaped by a determined majority, is the main worry amongst protesters. In this sense, it is properly the vitality of protest which expresses the democratic creed of Israel's burden bearers. As in other democratic societies belonging to the often (self-) identified Western world (e.g., Italy, France, USA etc.), social discontent find outlet in collective protestation. Despite differences linked to its geopolitical situation, the lack of a written constitution, and especially the ambiguous structural duality of the Jewish and democratic state (since any juridical step towards further Jewish particularism or democratic universalism would mean relinquishing one of Israel's constitutive features) reproduces inner contradictions in Israel's democraticness. Yet, for the time being, Israel shows that democratic principles, once perceived as threatened by any authoritarian drift, set aside social fatigue. While manifestly claiming dialogue and the abandon of unilateral top-down reform, the basic, somewhat populist, interpretation of democracy fully emerges: the rule of the common people; may it be a majority or minority. The frail democratic playground will determine its resistance and/or resilience in front of undemocratic trends.

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## Dall'influenza della politica alla politica degli *influencer*

GIULIA MIRRA, MATTEO PIETROPAOLI

**Abstract.** This work aims to face an issue that underlies the political dimension of today: to what extent politics and social media communication *influence* each other, to the point of provoking the constant contamination of the *politician-influencer* and *influencer-politician* figures. Through the reflection presented here, which starts from the theme of the *infosphere* and the *swarm* of *citi-netizens* in order to identify virtual *hubs* for the interpretation of reality, the authors will try to understand the cultural change that forces the commercial and the political figures to become opinion leader of both fields. This also in order to identify the characteristics of a profiled citizen-voter, made a participant without his knowledge, in a process of defining the political image that finds its fulcrum (and filter) precisely in the digital, where he is both producer and consumer (subject and object) of communication.

**Keywords:** political communication, influencer, infotainment, *citi-netizens*, psychopolitics.

Il presente lavoro ha come intento quello di affrontare una questione che sottostà alla dimensione politica odierna: in che misura politica e comunicazione “social” si *influenzano* a vicenda, al punto da provocare la contaminazione costante delle figure di *politico-influencer* e *influencer-politico*.

Partendo dal presupposto che l'azione della parola conforma essa stessa il mondo e la sua rappresentazione, il panorama post-ideologico all'interno del quale si muovono i comunicatori politici di oggi è quello di fornire in maniera coerente uno dei *mondi possibili*, una delle tante interpretazioni della realtà. La comunicazione diviene così, in un'epoca priva di verità assolute e narrazioni totali, a un tempo il mezzo e il messaggio (McLuhan 1964) per costruire non tanto la politica ma *i politici*. Perché ciò accada e cosa comporti, soprattutto sul piano degli *influencer social*, è necessario partire dal nuovo substrato all'interno del quale si muovono gli attori della comunicazione politica: l'*infosfera*.

Definita per la prima volta sul *Time* del 12 aprile del 1971, dal giornalista R. Z. Sheppard, l'*infosfera* è «quello strato concentrico e avviluppante di “smog” elettronico e tipografico composto da cliché tratti dal giornalismo, dal mondo dell'intrattenimento, dalla pubblicità e dalle informazioni gover-

native». È il flusso all'interno del quale ogni giorno sia il politico che il cittadino devono immergersi per prendere possesso e coscienza del mondo di cui fanno parte. Lo spazio informativo all'interno del quale si muovono risulta così composto da un insieme di *hub* e snodi intorno ai quali si aggregano e si dipanano tanto letture di senso quanto interpretazioni di singoli fatti. Venute meno la credenza nelle grandi religioni e ideologie (persino civiche), nella funzione dei corpi intermedi della società che ad esse più o meno si richiamavano (dalle parrocchie ai sindacati, dai giornali alle scuole), i cittadini ricercano quotidianamente una bussola per orientarsi nell'intricato mondo degli accadimenti.

Tali individui sono a un tempo soggetti attivi e passivi di questa comunicazione, osservati e osservanti, consumatori e consumati (vedasi l'esempio dei Big Data). Essi, privi di punti fermi, isolati, ma smaniosi di senso e connessioni, di sempre nuove notizie (*news*) e informazioni da fagocitare, vengono proiettati specie dal mondo digitale in una geografia sociale che il politologo Paragh Khanna (2016) ha accuratamente identificato come *connectography*. Qui il *reale* perde la sua dimensione tridimensionale e, con l'effetto di ridondanza proprio del virtuale, viene rilanciato in numerose forme e contenuti che provocano un *overload* informativo quasi impossibile da gestire.

Il "messaggio" comunicativo, come afferma il filosofo Byung-Chul Han (2013), si nutre perciò della sua stessa *viralità*, andando ben oltre il piano reale dal quale era originato. La società odierna, iperconnessa, diviene una società virale e *infetta*: la propagazione e diffusione dell'informazione procede con una velocità maggiore di quella della riflessione e della selezione (Lewis 1996; Kahneman 2011). L'informazione digitale non si cerca, infatti, né è oggetto d'analisi, la si riceve anche contro voglia e così la si digerisce, in maniera additiva e bulimica. Tra queste connessioni incontrollate, in questi *canali* di comunicazione, gli *hub* e snodi divengono punti d'orientamento che forniscono agli abitanti del virtuale, sopraffatti dal carico informativo, la digestione consona e comoda del percepito. Tali *hub* e snodi sono appunto gli *influencer*.

Prima di affrontare però questo aspetto ci si domanda un'altra cosa: chi è propriamente che abita questi "canali"? Quali sono le *soggettività* che ricevono e rilanciano bulimicamente i "messaggi" propri del "mezzo"? Secondo Han tali soggettività coincidono nel loro insieme con lo *sciame digitale* (Han 2013: 22), ossia un aggregato temporaneo di individui isolati che frequentano la rete. Tale sciame è completamente differente dalla folla poiché privo non solo di corpo (virtuale) ma anche di "anima": gli individui digitali si raggruppano occasional-

mente per obiettivi personali, incapaci di sviluppare un vero *Noi*. Per lo più risultano del tutto isolati e incapaci di rapportarsi all'altro, come degli *hikikomori* sociali.

L'aggregazione agente propria della *società di massa* cede il passo alla virtualità: prima gli individui vengono isolati tramite i media digitali e poi si addensano intorno a *cluster* d'interesse o indignazione. Per tale ragione, essi non possono costituire una forza d'impatto politica, poiché privi della loro corporeità e d'intenzione a lungo termine, ma rappresentano soltanto un insieme di profili *anonimi* sovraeccitati e sovraesposti. I corpi, svuotati del loro peso, sembrano risultare privi anche del loro potere, e di fatto non ottengono mutamenti d'ampio respiro, anche perché i loro fini sono *personali* e non *collettivi*. Ognuno spinge nella sua direzione che a volte si interseca con quella di altri, ma solo in maniera temporanea e casuale, senza pianificazione e programmazione.

Eppure l'analisi della comunicazione politica ci dimostra qualcosa di importante: tale sciame, seppur privo di massa, trova il suo potere nella sua imprevedibilità e capacità di *influenzare* a sua volta i singoli. Parfrasando Schmitt (1922) secondo il quale "il sovrano è colui che decide sullo stato di eccezione", in relazione allo *stato* dello sciame *nella rete*, possiamo affermare che "sovrano è colui che detiene lo stato di eccitazione": l'utilità dello sciame dipenderà difatti dalla capacità del *sovrano* di saper catturare l'interesse, di sfruttarlo e polarizzarlo su una determinata tematica, di saper attrarlo *nella rete* al punto di generarne una risonanza orientata.

Ma la rete, come dimostrano gli studi di Granovetter (1973), è il luogo che predilige i legami *deboli*: la non conoscibilità tra gli utenti che si muovono al suo interno (una sorta di anonimato condiviso), l'assenza di vincoli affettivi e finanche civili, come la mancanza del *rispetto reciproco*, garantiscono la *trasparenza* persino oltraggiosa delle informazioni e la loro diffusione. Gli individui privati della loro corporalità, del loro sguardo *verso* l'altro – non è un caso che la parola rispettare significhi *distogliere lo sguardo* (Han 2013: 11). I singoli qui sono slegati da quel senso di pudore e di vergogna che tiene su la civiltà reale e che condizionerebbe il loro agire: nella rete tale impostazione relazionale viene meno, favorendo le connessioni rapide e fluide, così come la circolazione della comunicazione. L'informazione diviene così virale e va propagandosi come un'onda invece di rimanere circoscritta a poche persone e a rapporti di *fiducia* (credenza nelle persone e negli intermediari).

Il multilivello all'interno del quale l'individuo è immerso grazie all'utilizzo delle diverse tecnologie e dispositivi che lo costituiscono a sua volta, fa sì che l'interconnessione cui è sottoposto il fruitore dei social

medio lo privi di ogni distanza con gli utenti. L'assenza di distanza, insieme all'imposizione della *trasparenza*, è dunque ciò che connota l'interazione in rete, la quale si configura come un mero *spectare* senza *respectare* (Han 2013): una società priva del *pathos della distanza*, diviene una società senza rispetto, che sfocia necessariamente nel sensazionalismo e nello spettacolo.

Tale assenza di distanza digitale comporta delle implicazioni sulla nostra sfera pubblica, poiché va a interferire con quel principio fondante dello spazio comune che si basa sul "prendere le distanze". La sfera pubblica per essere tale, presuppone che si distolga lo sguardo dal privato. Eppure quello che avviene oggi è esattamente il contrario: la sfera pubblica viene invasa continuamente dai contenuti intimisti rilanciati nel virtuale ed è privata di ogni inquadramento ampio, prediligendo il *narrow framing* personalistico. L'intimità è ripetutamente messa in mostra, spesso messa in esposizione o in vendita come una merce, sicché il *privato* diventa *pubblico*. La piazza pubblica virtuale non è più *agorà* ma diviene *mercato*.

Come riconosciuto da Castells (1996), le reti compongono una nuova morfologia sociale della nostra società, in quanto la stessa logica di rete modifica dall'interno i processi che dovrebbero governarla. Ciò è reso possibile grazie alla tecnologia, la quale fa da fondamento infrastrutturale per la sua espansione, pervadendo in maniera capillare la società in maniera performante. I nuovi soggetti che abitano la rete, nonché le modalità con cui manifestano la loro presenza in essa, determinano la nascita di una nuova *ecologia* dell'interazione sociale.

Secondo quanto affermato da Habermas (1961), la condizione essenziale, affinché si realizzi un'opinione pubblica critica, è l'esistenza di una dimensione "dialogica". Possiamo notare come tale discussione, tale scambio, nella rete sia facilitato dalle diverse piattaforme digitali dalle quali origina una nuova forma di dibattito pubblico: uno spazio pubblico non più abitato da corpi ma da codici. L'individuo diventa un nome, un codice, un algoritmo che viaggia nella rete. La domanda che sorge spontanea è: come può conformarsi un "dia-logo" tra tali entità, che per lo più non si riconoscono come persone ma quali *profili*? Come si struttura il dialogo quando la rete è composta da singoli sciamanti e *hub* o snodi di interpretazioni del reale, i cosiddetti *influencer*?

Ciò sembrerebbe in netta contrapposizione anche con quanto elaborato da Judith Butler (2015), la quale parafrasando la Arendt (1958) afferma che lo spazio politico per essere tale necessita sì di uno spazio dell'apparizione, ma anche di corpi che appaiano in esso: l'apparizione è la preconditione essenziale per il discorso,

motivo per cui solo il discorso pronunciato in pubblico ha un valore reale di azione. Si può chiamare *pubblico* il discorso (o il *post*) esposto nella piazza virtuale?

Quello a cui stiamo assistendo è l'assenza di *persone* che abitano la rete (insieme ovviamente all'assenza dei corpi), poiché sostituite da *immagini* e *profili*, la nuova schiera dei *cittadini digitali* (*citi-netizen*). Di conseguenza ciò che risulta profondamente mutato è il rapporto tra i politici e i loro pubblici, e tra i pubblici e i leader. Questi ultimi, tramite l'uso intensivo dei social media, sono riusciti a trascinare nel discorso politico milioni di *citi-netizen* che prima dell'avvento dei social riuscivano a esprimersi con difficoltà, i quali ora invece partecipano spesso con virulenza a una qualsiasi discussione politica in rete (Mazzoleni e Bracciale 2019).

Già Mosca (2015) aveva prontamente indentificato con il termine *webpolitica* il substrato all'interno del quale si sostanzia l'agire politico. Il "web" o la rete, annullando ogni distanza, realizza il sogno di tutti i leader politici: garantisce il superamento dell'*intermediazione*, permettendo finalmente al *politico* in genere, e in particolare a quello con tendenze "populiste", di rivolgersi ai suoi sostenitori *bypassando* l'intermediazione sia dei corpi sociali sia dei media informativi tradizionali. L'avvento della rete digitale nella politica rende possibile, agli attori politici che sanno farne uso, riconquistare quel *potere d'agenda* sequestrato, agli albori della democrazia innanzitutto statunitense, dai giornali e poi dalla televisione. L'aggiornamento (e svilimento) di qualsiasi tipo di mediazione e filtro tra i cittadini e sedicenti loro "portavoce", ribalta il paradigma del *politico di partito* proprio della *società di massa*, trasformandolo in uno *one man show*, apparentemente privo di qualsiasi struttura che rallenterebbe la comunicazione diretta con il suo elettore (Mosca 2017). La forma *partito* sempre più muta da *gioiosa macchina da guerra* comune a "bestia comunicativa" al servizio di uno, senza necessità di delegati, sedi e programmi, in quanto il nuovo paradigma politico può comunque esistere e resistere virtualmente grazie alla rete. La comunicazione di massa dal partito con la sua ideologia alla folla in ascolto e attesa, si trasforma in «auto-comunicazione di massa», dal leader che racconta se stesso ai singoli che recepiscono e commentano, ridefinendosi così in maniera intima e personale le nuove forme di interazione (Castells 1996).

Tale processo di metamorfosi della comunicazione prende il nome di *equalizzazione*, secondo cui la rete ha offerto ai partiti marginali gli stessi vantaggi che i grandi partiti avevano goduto nell'era dei media offline (si vedano esempi come il Partito Pirata, Il Movimento 5 Stelle e Podemos, retti inizialmente dalla rete). Ma, a fronte di diversi studi, quello che si dimostra è esat-

tamente il contrario: i partiti più grandi continuano a mantenere lo stesso atteggiamento dell'era pre-internet, prediligendo i media tradizionali, portando così avanti a un tempo un costante contro-processo di *normalizzazione*. Sarà l'avvento del web 2.0, secondo Gibson e McAllister, a dare una sostanziale parità di accesso alle risorse comunicative online anche per i soggetti politici e i candidati marginali in termini di equalizzazione (Gibson e McAllister 2014).

In questo "web 2.0" possiamo includere la riproposizione massiccia e continua delle immagini, anche tramite social networks sempre nuovi e sempre più slegati dai testi scritti. L'*immagine* del leader politico diviene a tutto tondo il *messaggio* politico, nel senso anche che tali aspetti si contaminano vicendevolmente. Già nell'epoca di Facebook, e dell'utilizzo del selfie, ciò che viene riproposto in maniera ossessiva nello scenario collettivo virtuale è il *profilo* dell'esponente di riferimento: non più mediato dalla televisione con i suoi conduttori o relegato alla lettura scelta da altri tramite l'articolo di giornale, ma finalmente il *politico* appare così come è, o meglio come vuole che sia la sua rappresentazione. Tutto ruota intorno alla sua immagine e all'uso quasi "pornografico" che se ne fa, volto al simulato e dissimulato *denudamento* dell'intimo. Qualcosa di ben diverso dalla rappresentazione "teatrale" che si usava per i partiti di massa dell'800, tra manifesti statuari e scenografie significative. L'obiettivo primario dell'autorappresentazione del leader è ancora nella costruzione di un *simbolo*, che, come ci ricorda Edelman (1964), è l'unico in grado di produrre effetti psicologici sulla coscienza dell'individuo e nella sua percezione (Mazzoleni 2012). Solo che questo *simbolo* ora invece di essere un simbolo *statico* e *universale* tende a mostrarsi *intimo* e *personale*, "prossimo" secondo la teoria attuale invece che "forte", così da far breccia nella società degli individui che ha soppiantato la società di massa.

Questo è possibile perché, come affermato da Han, le immagini non sono solo delle riproduzioni, ma dei modelli ideali, di cui la società attuale ormai non può fare a meno: «ci rifugiamo nelle immagini per essere migliori, più belli, più vivi» (Han 2013: 42). Il medium digitale rende le immagini persino *più vivide della realtà*, non a caso sono sempre più numerosi i programmi per modificarle e per migliorarle tramite l'adozione di "filtri". La realtà ormai è *filtrata*, non più mediata. Come per l'*overload* d'informazione vi sono degli *hub*, degli snodi, dei filtri che fungono da centraline di smistamento per i singoli sciamanti del virtuale, digerendo l'enorme mole di *dati* secondo il loro interesse per fornire *narrazioni* e *immagini* comprensibili adatte ad avere dei "followers". Le immagini vengono rapite dal reale, filtrate secondo le proprie necessità narcisistiche e politiche,

in ultimo "addomesticate" per essere consumabili dal pubblico. Questo perché il reale *spaventa* e farsi addomesticatori del reale è una caratteristica che tutti i *follower* cercano nei propri *influencer*, così come gli elettori nei propri leader. Per tale ragione i leader di oggi comunicano riproponendo principalmente le foto più belle che hanno di loro stessi, le quali, come immagini ideali, schermano dalla sporca realtà (Ivi: 43). Così come ogni superficie non liscia di una narrazione politica viene levigata e non si vede più un difetto, ugualmente l'immagine viene *photoshoppata* per evitare ogni imperfezione. La percezione della realtà come imperfetta, infatti, ormai fa scaturire nelle persone un istinto di difesa e di fuga, esattamente ciò che non vuole l'*influencer* e politico, così da fornire, invece della complessa e ruvida realtà, immagini e narrazioni levigate, filtrate.

Ma l'immagine è già sempre un'immagine mentale, la percezione che l'individuo ha nel momento in cui una qualcosa colpisce il suo sguardo e a un tempo l'insieme di significati che egli vi proietta sopra. Secondo Mauro Barisione (2006) l'immagine proiettata si connota come immagine *performativa*, ossia l'insieme degli attributi politico-personali che permettono al cittadino di valutare se l'attore politico di turno ha le qualità per essere eletto, le quali gli consentono anche di valutare che tipo di leader sarebbe una volta eletto. Tale immagine, costruita innanzitutto secondo le logiche del *marketing*, fa leva su tutta una serie di messaggi subliminali, che vengono recepiti e filtrati dal soggetto percipiente tramite i propri schemi mentali, e che gli permettono di vederlo come dovrebbe essere nella sua concezione più intima. Di fatto un processo bidirezionale, inconsapevolmente partecipativo, in cui il cittadino-elettore, adeguatamente stimolato da una raffigurazione tendenziosa, riempie da sé gli spazi lasciati vuoti e si autoconvince della propria rappresentazione. L'immagine, dunque, diviene tra i fattori determinanti che definiscono i termini e le modalità di lotta per il potere, in quanto potere anche *psichico* delle immagini (Mazzoleni 2012).

Date tali evidenze, oggi, ha sempre più senso parlare sia di *psicopolitica* sia di *politica-pop*, ossia di una politica che reclama per sé tanto le conoscenze e gli espedienti psicologici quanto le tecniche dello spettacolo e i significati della cultura popolare. Se infatti inizialmente nell'era dei mass media la produzione dei contenuti rispondeva a una logica editoriale volta al maggior profitto possibile tramite la produzione di *infotainment* (prodotti di informazione e intrattenimento), nel mondo dei social media, le imprese-piattaforme di social networking traggono il loro profitto dalla *gestione* dei contenuti degli utenti, essi stessi produttori di contenuti. Sulla base di ciò vengono costruiti algoritmi sofisticati

ti, utili per sfruttare al meglio i profili e i gusti, anche politici, degli utenti: ciò che spinge a *postare* sui social media diviene anche il frutto di una selezione di argomenti molto personalizzata, riguardante principalmente l'autore (che ne è a un tempo soggetto e oggetto). L'algoritmo interviene tecnicamente su tale logica, in quanto fattore principale di reintermediazione, andando a colpire direttamente l'individuo con dei contenuti che lo interessano così da condizionarne la sua riproduzione online (Mazzoleni 2012).

Per questo la diffusione dei contenuti sul *web* risponde perfettamente alla logica della viralità dei social che "infettano" la società *influenzandola*: gli algoritmi giocano un ruolo essenziale nel creare connessioni tra ciò che viene riconosciuto come popolare, tra le persone che condividendo gli stessi gusti la pensano anche allo stesso modo, incrementando così la creazione e il consolidamento di "bolle ideologiche", *echo chambers* e *polarizzazioni* tematiche (Wojcieszak 2015; Sunstein 2017; Palano 2019). I *news feed* e i *like* dei contenuti condivisi dagli utenti connessi in rete forniscono gli stimoli mentali, le tonalità emotive e quel senso di identità condiviso, essenziale in politica per sentirsi parte di una comunità (Klinger e Svensson 2015).

Se da un lato anche i *mass media* producevano nuovi bisogni rispondenti alle logiche di mercato in maniera tale da generare quel livellamento della società su di un'unica dimensione marcusiana (Marcuse 1964), con i social media dominati dalla logica degli algoritmi, non solo assistiamo al compimento di quella società autoindotta nella produzione dei contenuti, ma noi stessi diventiamo il prodotto da consumare. La gratuità delle piattaforme che da un lato può sedurre per la facilità del loro utilizzo, al tempo stesso rende "schiavi" e parte di un sistema di condizionamento, in cui i cittadini per primi danno la chiave di accesso del nostro inconscio.

Han osserva infatti come si sia passati dall'era della *biopolitica* attenta ai "corpi" dei cittadini, all'era della *psicopolitica*, ossia di quella società che grazie alla rete, al tracciamento dei dati degli utenti che si esprimono con i loro *like*, *feed*, sono facilmente anticipabili e orientabili in termini di "psiche". Quella che sembra pertanto una libera scelta del cittadino nella condivisione di un contenuto in rete, non è altro che una scelta autoindotta dall'algoritmo, in quanto, grazie alla raccolta dei dati, è possibile accedere a una sorta di "inconscio collettivo", misurarlo e determinarlo: lo *psicopotere* risulta così più efficace del *biopotere* in quanto riesce a sorvegliare, controllare, e influenzare gli individui dall'interno. Per questo, la politica entra in contatto con le società di raccolta dati, poiché queste possano fornire modelli che permettano di impossessarsi del comportamento sociale delle

masse in maniera più accurata, profilando e condizionando i singoli individui (Han 2013).

Possiamo quindi affermare che mentre i *politici*, nel senso ampio dei *policy makers*, restano sempre i soggetti di questo processo di potere, con i loro obiettivi più o meno vicini al bene comune, gli *influencer* meramente commerciali (e quindi portatori solo del proprio interesse) sfruttano a loro volta questo meccanismo in maniera ibrida. Molti di loro, infatti, comprendono che per *essere presenti* in questa società fortemente virtuale devono fornire al pubblico (di consumatori) una funzione ulteriore rispetto a quella di meri *commercianti* di qualcosa. L'iperconsumismo dell'epoca attuale d'altronde è già un consumismo *riflessivo*, che chiede molto più del bene materiale e dell'esperienza di consumo: chiede emozioni, narrazioni, identità (Lipovsky 2006). Lo sciame virtuale quindi si addensa, e fornisce attenzione, in prossimità di quegli *hub*, snodi e filtri, che permettono di leggere la realtà multiforme. Lì è dove la maggior parte dei consumatori e dei cittadini, dei cittadini-consumatori, si "ritrova" e, anche inconsciamente, si informa. Occupare quegli snodi, in un mondo iperconnesso, significa necessariamente non limitarsi solo a un aspetto del reale (cantante, attore, imprenditore, storico etc.), ma espandersi alla multidimensionalità del virtuale e alla sua *contemporaneità* dei vari compiti (*multitasking* e *multidentity*). L'*influencer* autentico, e quindi di successo, ha compreso che ciò che propone (e vende) non è *qualcosa*, bensì *se stesso*. Meglio ancora: egli vende la sua *immagine*, il suo *profilo*, come modello e narrazione onnirappresentativa della realtà (ovviamente filtrata). Così l'*influencer* di successo deve diventare *necessariamente* politico, come accade per il politico che diventa o meglio è già diventato *influencer*, dacché ormai il pubblico dei consumatori è il pubblico dei cittadini, ossia il pubblico dei *followers*. Tale pubblico si muove con le stesse logiche sia in campo commerciale che in campo elettorale, libero da qualsiasi ideologia generale e vincolo sociale: compra e vota un'*immagine funzionale*, un *profilo personale*, un *simbolo prossimo*. Al fondo un'interpretazione del reale fornita da quel *hub*, snodo e filtro virtuale che l'*influencer* politico e commerciale rappresenta.

Questo perché, a sua volta, la politica è stata depauperata da ogni aspetto formale e ieratico, d'una religione civile, ed è stata piuttosto ridotta in buona parte, nella società del sensazionalismo qual è quella attuale, a *intrattenimento popolare* (*politica-pop* appunto). Dovendosi infatti adeguare alla *logica dei media*, al loro riconosciuto potere di *agenda setting*, poiché le persone vengono influenzate dal tipo di post che la piattaforma social decide che questi visualizzino, il politico per inserirsi in tale narrazione deve egli stesso diventare *produ-*

cer, i cui contenuti, commenti, immagini, più diventano virali, più gli consentono di imporsi come *opinion leader* digitale o *influencer*. Tale fenomeno, legato alle strategie di marketing e delle relazioni pubbliche online, rientra perfettamente all'interno del paradigma secondo cui *la politica vende*: la riproposizione continua di immagini riguardanti la vita intima del politico, i luoghi che abita o visita, gli oggetti che indossa ne permettono la pubblicizzazione. Inoltre, il politico commentando attraverso l'utilizzo dei social media le sue attività quotidiane, anche le più banali, fa sì che la via alla personalizzazione dei politici e dei leader si sviluppi anche attraverso le strategie di *celebrity politics*, che trovano nella rete nuovi palcoscenici dove dispiegarsi (Boccia Artieri 2019). Gli ambienti online infatti, grazie alle loro caratteristiche strutturali, consentono di ibridare la notorietà del soggetto politico, servendosi di un insieme di tecniche di accrescimento della propria popolarità e di strategie di marketing, tramite la produzione e circolazione dei contenuti e di gestione del proprio *audience* composto da *followers and friends* (Senft 2008), comportandosi in maniera identica agli odierni *influencer*, i quali a loro volta si comportano da *opinion leader* in ambito politico.

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## Fake News and Populism: New Threats to Public Trust

FRANCESCO PIRA, ROBERTA CASAGRANDE

**Abstract.** The article analyses the growing distrust of cultural intermediaries and social and political actors, fuelled by phenomena such as fake news, disinformation and denialism. Indeed, post-modernity has eroded trust in traditional media, facilitating the dissemination of unverified information and making it difficult to discern between reliable and unreliable sources. Events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict highlight how communication strategies can profoundly influence public perception. In this context, populism exploits simplifications and emotionally charged narratives, promoting alternative versions of truth that challenge official narratives and contribute to a further polarization of society.

**Keywords:** democracy, disinformation, fake news, populism, trust.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The weakening of individuals' ability to recognise between reliable and unreliable information has led to a development of the phenomenon of post-truth in public discourse. McNair (2017) observes that disinformation is a direct result of the age of post-modernity, the symbol of a manipulative use of data to construct specific narratives.

The advent of post-modernity has contributed to the decline of trust in traditional cultural intermediaries, such as the media, which used to play the primary role of guardians of information (Freedman 2014). The current media environment is fragmented and dominated by multiple unverified sources, thus disinformation has found fertile ground to flourish. Sunstein (2014) points out that the spread of false information is facilitated by this fragmentation, which makes it even more difficult for individuals to recognise and trust.

Disinformation, therefore, arises as an inevitable consequence of the mediated society of post-modernity, where the distinction between true and false becomes increasingly blurred. Baudrillard (1981: 1-7), in his study of the relationship between reality, representations and the total indistinction between the two, describes this phenomenon as simulacra, stating that our era is one in which simulacra, or copies, have supplanted and preceded reality itself.

The essence of Baudrillard's thought revolves around the notion that representations, or simulacra, are no longer merely copies of a pre-existing reality, but create an entirely new one.

The pandemic emergence from Covid-19 accentuated this substitution and showed us how the proliferation of disinformation at a time of great disorientation contributed to fuelling communication flows that in their alternative or altered representation of reality attempted to replace it. A process that was able to exploit those elements that specifically characterise the way in which fake news and disinformation propagate: appeal, strength, virality, speed, fluidity and cross-media.

- Appeal: it is news that intrigues most people and has an attractive capacity, because it manages to ride the wave of topical issues and penetrate the agenda setting;
- virality: they manage to spread very effectively and reach a large number of people. Fake news has a very high redemption;
- speed: the spread of fake news is rapid and uncontrolled;
- cross-media: this type of news is able to be transversal, i.e. to pass from one media to another, so much so that, in many cases, the news appears on Facebook and is subsequently picked up by the media;
- flow: fake news represents a flow, i.e. it is a series of information aimed at proving a thesis or conveying public opinion towards a clear position that does not always reflect reality;

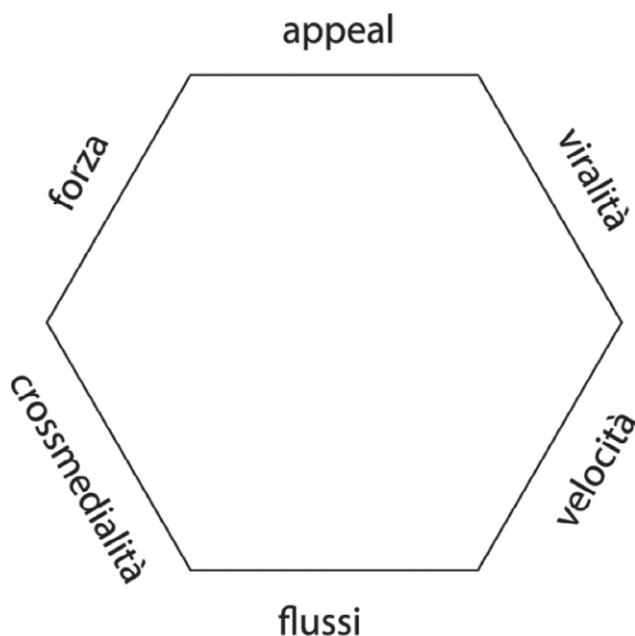


Figure 1. The Exagon of Fake News. (*Ibidem*).

- strength: fake news, even if unmasked, manages to leave a deep trace in the memory of readers and public opinion (Pira and Altinier 2018: 60).

The Covid-19 pandemic represented a global emergency that had a profound impact on citizens' lives and represented – as Bordignon, Diamanti and Turato (2020) have pointed out – a challenge to the values on which liberal-democratic regimes are founded.

It is precisely the reduction of the spaces of personal freedom, the suspension of rights, that have altered the relationship between citizens and institutions, further modifying and weakening the dimension of the public sphere, which, as Sorice (2020: 372) defines it, represents a spatial metaphor «the result of a collective narrative that takes on meaning in the relations between citizens, political actors and institutional life. It constitutes, in a way, a sort of protected area, a normative space however unstable and transactional».

Therefore, if that normative space is lost, space is left for drifts that alter the dimension of the public sphere. By feeding on extreme simplifications of reality and promoting narratives that emotionally shake the public and distort facts, populism has a direct impact on the perception of truth. The frequent use of polarising statements and the creation of a common enemy further fuels a climate of distrust in institutions, thus challenging the very foundations of democracy and public debate.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is an example of how disinformation is now a structured phenomenon. After all, Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018) had already analysed the use of information manipulation as a tool of war, with the aim of influencing public perception through this type of communication. As did Bradshaw and Howard (2018: 12) who stated the strategic use of manipulation as a consequence of the actions deployed by what they define as «cyber troops» to spread junk news and conspiratorial or polarising information that can be used to support a broader campaign of manipulation.

## 2. FROM PANDEMIC TO WAR IN UKRAINE. EXPLOSION OF DISINFORMATION AND LOSS OF CONFIDENCE

Hyper-mediatisation is certainly one of the main factors in the crisis that has radically transformed the information landscape: the democratisation of content production and distribution has allowed anyone to publish anything, often without any control over quality or veracity, creating a real fragmentation of the information landscape that has made it increasingly difficult for the

public to discern between reliable and unreliable sources, contributing to the spread of misinformation and fake news (Sunstein 2014), all of which is amplified by the tendency of social media platforms to privilege sensationalist and polarising content, through engagement-oriented algorithmic mechanisms, further amplifying the problem (Pariser 2011) and fostering the formation of «echo chambers» (Sunstein 2017).

Thus, the filter bubble relegates us to our information ghetto, not allowing us to see or explore the huge world of possibilities that exists online. Network planners must strike a balance between relevance and casual discovery, between the pleasure of seeing friends and the excitement of meeting new people, between comfortable niches and open spaces (Pariser 2011: 179). The continuing crises are a factor of profound destabilisation, which have exacerbated the phenomena already in place. The impact of technologies in all social processes shows us how a rapid transformation of the construction models of our social action is taking place. It is the era in which platforms exploit that cancellation of boundaries that profoundly alters the ability of individuals to understand the context, to generate conflict between different value systems and move on the basis of opaque dynamics (Van Diick, Poell and de Waal 2018).

Zuboff's (2019) reflections on the formation of new powers at the emergence of what she calls «surveillance capitalism», which generates a veritable act of digital dispossession, is also along the same lines.

In this context of fragilisation, we are witnessing a construction of public discourse increasingly focused on platform-induced dynamics.

Thus the disinformation industry and the fake news factory fuel fear, mistrust, and fan the flames of social anger that is growing everywhere in a situation of economic crisis, which the pandemic has greatly exacerbated by making social imbalances even more evident. In such a framework, individuals seem less and less capable of coming together for the achievement of common goals, as a consequence of the disruptive drive that surveillance capitalism generates to give impetus to the expropriation of experience. Indeed, there is a key component of the very definition of social capital that is severely fragilised, trust, as investigated by Giddens (1994), Beck (1999), Fukuyama (2018) and Luhman (1989) who attribute to it a key function for the development and survival of society. Where we witness the proliferation of dynamics of entropisation of the experience of the social world resulting precisely from the increasing flows of disinformation (Pira 2021).

This dynamic has been particularly evident in recent political events, such as the Brexit and the 2016 US pres-

idential election, where disinformation has shaped public perceptions and manipulated electoral opinion (Suiter 2016), challenging the very foundations of rational discourse and fostering a culture in which emotional claims and personal narratives prevail over data and empirical evidence. The fragmentation of information sources has eroded trust in traditional institutions such as the media, universities and government authorities. Freedman (2014) emphasises how this decline in trust has paved the way for alternative figures, often with little or no credibility, who nevertheless manage to gain a wide audience through their ability to manipulate emotions and perceptions.

The Covid-19 emergency and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine represent two global events that have further shaken the disinformation problem. This strategy exploited fears, uncertainties and geopolitical tensions, demonstrating how crises can be fertile ground for the proliferation of false and manipulative news. During the Covid-19 pandemic, disinformation reached unprecedented levels, with direct consequences on public health. The «infodemic» (Rothkopf 2003) of fake news made it difficult for people to find reliable sources of information and made informed decisions about their health. The physical distancing and global lockdown of millions of people acted as a magnifying glass on the dynamics and structures of online sociality (Colombo and Rebughini 2021), highlighting moments of solidarity but also an exacerbation of the phenomenon of misinformation. This period exposed our vulnerability regarding the beliefs and value systems we adopt. The pandemic has manifested itself as a profound bio-social crisis, affecting both our physical health and the foundations of our civilised coexistence. Not only did it highlight epidemiological issues, but it also forced a reorganisation of our social life (Belardinelli 2022) and the way we interact with information (Hassan and Pinelli 2022).

Both institutions and the world of politics have contributed to this climate of uncertainty, with often contradictory statements. A climate that persists and has led to a crisis of authority among experts and a climate of distrust towards politics in particular. We have witnessed the collapse of the «expert system» (Giddens 1990), of their ability to influence our actions, of trust. This leads us to introduce reflection on the very notion of trust and its dimension, where according to the vision proposed by Luhman (1989), it presupposes a situation of risk. Indeed, we have crossed the dimension of risk and danger. Just as the danger was looming, the system of experts gave way, so our willingness to trust broke down, because we felt the guarantees of the system of rules to which we were accustomed breaking down and

uncertainty prevailed (Pira 2021). A CENSIS survey in 2020 showed that 29 million Italians (57.0% of the total) found news on the web and social media during the health emergency that later turned out to be false or wrong about the origin, mode of contagion, symptoms, distancing measures or treatment related to Covid-19.

Fake news about Covid-19 covered a wide range of topics, from false remedies and cures to conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus. An emblematic example is the theory that the virus had been created in a laboratory, which found wide space on social media despite the lack of scientific evidence, in fact in that case, the survey (Censis 2020) found that there was a good 38.6% who believed it to be real. These numbers confirm what has been said so far and are useful in understanding the thread that links this health crisis and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict to the explicit manifestation of the phenomenon in question, rather than the fact that populisms have in fact exploited disinformation as a strategy and thus as a weapon.

At the same time, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been an example of disinformation, a veritable war on information that has seen both sides involved use manipulative narratives in order to influence domestic and international public opinion: Russia, in particular, has used disinformation as part of its hybrid warfare strategy, seeking to destabilise Ukraine and divide its Western allies, a hypothesis previously developed by Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018). Not only re-shared news, but the widespread dissemination of manipulated videos showing fake or out-of-context military attacks were intended to manipulate public perceptions and foment hatred and fear among the affected populations.

Misinformation related to the conflict also aimed to influence the policies of Western countries: for example, narratives portraying NATO as the aggressor sought to undermine support for the alliance's defensive actions. This type of disinformation was particularly effective in creating political and social divisions in NATO member states, hindering a unified response to the crisis. The manipulation of information has also had an impetuous impact on the Ukrainian population, aiming to demoralise citizens and create confusion about the real intentions of the armed forces, favouring cyber attacks targeting critical infrastructure, highlighting how disinformation and cyber operations are closely intertwined in modern warfare strategies (Rid 2020). Kapferer (1987) pointed out how the introduction of concepts of truth and falsehood in the scientific definition of rumour can sometimes be misleading for the study of counter-narratives as tools for altering dominant narratives and

social change: it is a true narrative warfare, as described by Jedlowski (2022) that shapes the perception of the present through a combination of testimonies and inventions. In this dynamic, the success or failure of a narrative lies not so much in its ability to attest to the truth, but in its ability to imitate reality.

In this context, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is emblematic insofar as communication focuses on mutual accusations of distorting reality, often accompanied by the use of narrative elements that manipulate or attack symbols and collective identities, concerning the historical memory or mythologies of the peoples involved. These narrative elements become powerfully transmissible tools in their continuous public use. Memory thus becomes a crucial reservoir for a universe of representations and images that allow the narrative to bind with group identities, pre-existing and newly acquired ideas, worthy of being preserved and passed on (Affuso and Giungato 2022).

Populism in the post-modern era not only exploits misinformation, but actively fuels a culture in which multiple and conflicting narratives become instruments of power. This, characterised by the ability to use the public's emotions to construct a narrative that pits the «pure people» against a «corrupt elite» (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 6), uses disinformation to delegitimise traditional sources of information, creating an environment in which people are inclined to believe information that confirms their pre-existing prejudices, regardless of its veracity (Waisbord 2018: 7). As highlighted by Raffini (2022), it feeds on the distrust of traditional institutions and proposes a worldview in which alternative truths proliferate, sustained by the fragmentation of the information landscape. The phenomenon is further amplified by transmediality, which allows content to cross different media platforms, creating a multiplicity of narratives that are often beyond the control of traditional information sources.

Transmediality also implies that content is no longer confined to single media, but can range from one platform to another, facilitating the dissemination of coherent and engaging narratives that can be exploited for disinformation purposes (Jenkins 2006: 96). This creates an environment in which truth becomes subjective, with narratives competing for the audience's attention. The strategic use of transmediality by populist movements makes it even more difficult for individuals to discern between reliable and unreliable information. Raffini (2022) points out how populism exploits the fragmentation of the information landscape to promote a political discourse based on delegitimising opponents and creating a simple, polarising narrative. This approach not only

undermines trust in traditional institutions, but also contributes to the spread of a culture of post-truth, in which alternative narratives become instruments of power, also creating a continuous flow of information that is often beyond the control of traditional information sources.

The cases analysed so far are emblematic examples of how disinformation can be used to manipulate public opinion in different contexts. During the pandemic, disinformation exploited fear and uncertainty to spread conspiracy theories and undermine trust in health institutions (Cinelli *et al.* 2020: 4). In parallel, misinformation during the war in Ukraine used polarising narratives to influence public opinion and justify political actions (Starbird *et al.* 2020: 10), which highlight how misinformation can adapt to different contexts, exploiting the peculiarities of each crisis to achieve its goals.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The digital era has profoundly changed the structure of society, influencing not only how we receive and disseminate information, but also how we perceive and construct reality. The predominant role of digital technologies in these processes has raised discussions and concerns about their ability to influence the public and private spheres, prompting some to consider these technologies as a potential threat to democracy and individual and collective identity formation.

The distinction between public and private spaces becomes increasingly invisible in the digital sphere, and individuals often share details of their personal lives in spaces that, while seemingly private, are in fact global stages, changing even the very concept of privacy and exposing users to new levels of public scrutiny and manipulation, both commercial and political. The ability of platforms to influence commercial preferences and political opinions poses yet another obstacle to democratic institutions, which have to balance freedom of expression with the need to protect the democratic process from manipulation and disinformation.

In this context, strategies to combat disinformation have become an essential component of the defence of democratic societies, although the effectiveness of these tools is always difficult to assess, especially since disinformation constantly evolves in response to the measures taken to counter it. The greatest danger is that disinformation is not only a technological or informational problem, but also a cognitive one, as human nature, already vulnerable to confirmation bias and emotional influence, is exploited by disinformation. Therefore, in addition to purely technical solutions, a cultural change

is needed to promote critical thinking and public deliberation as core values in the digital society.

Curbing this obstacle is only possible through the cooperation of all social actors: governments, businesses, educational institutions and citizens themselves, in order to create an information environment that is more transparent and less susceptible to manipulation, should take into account the regulation of digital platforms.

The challenge posed by disinformation and digitisation is complex and multifaceted, but it is at the same time a great opportunity to renew the commitment to a more informed, fairer and freer society, and the ability to navigate this new landscape will be a decisive step not only for the resilience of democracies, but also for the quality of civil coexistence in the digital future.

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

SANDRO BUSSO, MICHELE GARAU

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

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

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 5. CONCLUSION. STILL LOOKING FOR A HOME

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Breaking images. Aesthetic activism in anti-speciesist movements in Italy

GIACOMO LAMPREDI

**Abstract.** This article discusses findings from qualitative social research on anti-speciesist aesthetic activism in Turin and Verona (Italy). Such activism seeks to provoke moral-affective ruptures by making animal suffering visible. The social movements under examination are involved in call-to-responsibility action by showing images and videos of the systematic killing of animals. Displaying these gory and violent images aims to challenge established and habitual ways of shaping morality and to prompt reflection on the causes of animal exploitation. This work describes the ‘funeral rituals’ of these social movements and how these are employed to communicate the social and structural causes of the systemic killing of animals. Being a vegan activist often means being a source of disturbance, annoyance and discomfort for others, but also of curiosity and wonder. The research was conducted by using multiple ethnographic and qualitative methods to provide an in-depth analysis of the processual and relational aspects of this form of aesthetic activism.

**Keywords:** emotions, aesthetics, animal suffering, social movements, veganism.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to discuss some results that emerged from qualitative research on the *aesthetic activism* of some anti-speciesist social movements. Such activism aims to provoke moral-affective ruptures through the visibility of animal suffering. The social movements studied (*Anonymous for the Voiceless*, *Go Vegan Verona*, *Animal Save*) are involved in *call-to-responsibility* action by making visible the violence that happens behind the walls of the food industry, and by asking people to reflect on their relationship with this reality. This research focuses on the aesthetic-affective role of images, exploring how they gain political significance by “breaking into” the perceptions of people who do not fully know about the problem. Therefore, this is not a study of images, but rather of what images pragmatically do, promoting disruption and reflexivity on these issues. Through this type of activism, the images can acquire an ethical “voice” that compels us to (re)evaluate of our own existential coordinates.

The research was carried out using multiple ethnographic and qualitative methods (participant observation, in-depth interviews, informal conversations, digital ethnography) to provide a thorough analysis of the processual

and relational aspects of this form of aesthetic activism. Leo Tolstoy is credited with saying “*If slaughterhouses had glass walls, we would all be vegetarians*”. Although different, the movements studied here share practices of visibilization, through which they are able to render the walls of slaughterhouses “virtually” transparent. *Anonymous for the Voiceless* and *Go Vegan Verona* organize their events mainly in public areas, such as streets or squares. Here, they show the violence perpetrated in the animal industry. This is done by means of TV screens physically held by the activists themselves. *Animal Save* is more typically involved with the ritual of “vigils”, where activists meet outside slaughterhouses and wait for the trucks to bring in the animals destined to be slaughtered. Scenes of the events are recorded in the form of images and videos, which are then shared via social media. All three social movements seem to have taken Tolstoy’s words almost to the letter, making them the heart of their activism.

The theoretical framework used to study the actions of these movements is based on pragmatist theories of emotions and aesthetics. The core idea of this approach is that the disruption of habits generates new styles of perception, attention and, in some cases, responsibility. Applying this theory to the performative activities of some anti-speciesist movements allows us to investigate new responsibilities that emerge through the unexpected, the non-ordinary, and the dismantling of what is taken for granted. Some aesthetic choreographies can cause profound affective disruption. These acts of expression aim to break consolidated and habitual ways of creating a sense of belonging. Extending these acts to forms of responsibility that involve the animal kingdom is certainly a step forward in rethinking the human-nonhuman relationship. This change in perspective is already a reality for many people.

That animals receive affection from humans is nothing new. However, the distinction between pets (dogs, cats, hamsters, etc.) and animals destined for food (pigs, cows, horses, chickens, fish, etc.) is the result of a historically rooted and shared social construct rather than an incontrovertible and immutable fact. In many regions of the world, dogs and cats are eaten; in others, cows are considered sacred. In some cases, even pigs and horses can form emotional bonds with humans and be treated as pets. Despite this, it is not uncommon for people to be shocked by the thought that someone might kill and eat a dog while they are themselves busy cooking some meat. The same people might go shopping for a cute cat sweater while also buying some ham for their children; or they might be horrified at the thought of drinking dog or mouse milk while having cow’s milk every morning

for breakfast. This exemplifies the *speciesism* that these movements criticize and oppose. Their aim is to dismantle any hierarchical discriminations that deny rights to some animals that are considered less important than others merely for cultural reasons.

In the first section of the essay, the theoretical framework through which the data were interpreted will be introduced. The second section will describe the methods, social movements studied, contexts observed, and analysis strategies. The third section will cover the research phase, where the focus will be on the types of aesthetic activism employed by these movements in the production of affective reactions. The fourth section will examine the movements’ “funeral rituals” and how they are used to communicate the social and structural causes of systemic animal killing through images of animal suffering. Being a vegan activist can often be a source of disturbance, annoyance and discomfort for others, but it can also be a source of curiosity and wonder. It has the potential to produce acts of moral rupture. Finally, the fifth section will illustrate the aesthetic strategies of these social movements and the distinctions between them.

## 2. AESTHETIC ACTIVISM IN ANTI-SPECIESIST MOVEMENTS

Animals have rarely been the subject of reflection by social scientists, although there are some notable exceptions in the classics (Cooley 2017; Mead 1934; Bateson 2000; Elias and Dunning 1986; Ingold 2016). However, in recent decades we have witnessed a growing interest in human-nonhuman relations, particularly within the Critical Animal Studies (Franklin 1999; Peggs 2012; Taylor and Twine 2015), social movement theory (Bertuzzi 2018), political sociology (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011) and feminist approaches (Haraway 2003; Donovan and Adams 2007; de la Bellacasa 2017). Moreover, the animal question is a topic of growing interest for politics, both institutional and “bottom-up”. The consumption of animal products has a significant impact on global CO<sup>2</sup> emissions, biodiversity loss, water consumption and the use of primary resources. In addition, the ethical issue of animal exploitation is increasingly resonating with the public, leading to a growing sense of responsibility and awareness. Many organizations and social movements have long been active in establishing animal rights through a call to responsibility. It is not surprising that such causes have arisen in parallel with the increase in intensive livestock farming worldwide. The farther away animal exploitation is from people’s

awareness, the more efforts are required to make it visible and help people become conscious of it.

Many anti-speciesist movements use aesthetic strategies to promote their goals. The use of images and videos showing animal suffering aims to stimulate a reflective experience, both in public protests and on social media. The connection between aesthetics and political protest is not new and has been studied in various ways. Some authors have discussed “artivism” (Milohnić 2005), “the aesthetic dimension of protest” (Kershaw 1997), “direct theatre” (Schechner 1999), and “ethical spectacles” (Duncombe 2007). Furthermore, hybrid forms of activism have become more prevalent since the turn of the millennium, with the *Gezi* protests in Turkey, the *Indignados* movement in Spain, the Arab Spring movements, and the American No-Global movement of “Occupy Wall Street”. All these social movements have strategically used digital communication (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so on), as well as demonstrations in city squares to spread their presence. These are examples of “bodies in alliance” (Butler 2015) that employ aesthetic strategies to highlight social, ethical and political positions. Bakhtin’s (1984) term “carnavalesque” is used by Schechner to describe these protests. Carnival, according to Bakhtin, is defined by the creation of a space for freedom and creativity using masks, costumes and stages. It is a counter-culture zone. Anti-speciesist movements have become more performative over time, employing rituals, choreography, masks and shocking media artefacts (such as images depicting animal suffering).

Violent visual materials, particularly audio-visual materials, in conjunction with discourses and narratives (Fernández 2021), play an important role in inducing moral shock (Jasper 2008) and promoting vegan activism. Furthermore, in contrast to dominant media narratives about animals, these performances produce forms of “counterframing” (Wrenn 2012), showing that what constitutes an “animal” is socially constructed. The movements examined in this article all aim to portray all animals as sentient, sensitive and deserving of ethical consideration. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) describe the diverse responsibilities toward humans and non-humans, starting from the relationship between full citizens and non-citizens. Just as there are different types of citizen based on their varying rights, animals have different types of rights according to their roles within human societies (e.g. pets, labour, pet therapy, meat, animal derivatives and others). Some have privileges and rights based on their “civilized” behaviour (Hall 2018) and the role they play in meeting human needs. Some species are “worth more” as they have greater value for

human communities based on the affective relationships we have with them (e.g. dogs and cats). Others are generally used to produce meat, animal derivatives and hides (e.g. sheep, pigs, poultry). However, this boundary between animals that have worth and are worthless is arbitrary, socially constructed and historically variable.

The performative and choreographic activity of these social movements can be interpreted as a form of aesthetic activism. The term aesthetic is used in Dewey’s (1980) sense. Dewey defines “aesthetic” as a quality of experience that gives rhythm to and marks life. “*An experience*” is a delimitation of an event that is progressing toward completion, conclusion and meaning. Aesthetic is the refined development of the characteristics associated with each experience. Making and creating is artistic when the perceived result is of a nature such that its perceived qualities have dominate the production problem. The experience takes on an aesthetic quality to the extent that its emergence is governed by the relationship between these relationships. Moreover, for Dewey, emotions are aesthetic when they are associated with an object formed by an expressive act, diverting the spontaneous direction of emotions (through previous interests and channels) into new forms, and arousing, through the mediation of reflexivity, a new emotional response. Whoever performs an expressive act must incorporate in themselves the attitude of those who are the recipients of this act, arousing in themselves possible responses. Therefore, even the anti-speciesist activist, preparing, choreographing and performing their own activity, must incorporate the possible affective attitudes (compassion, shock, indignation, guilt, etc.) of those who will witness these images. Such emotional and aesthetic responses are, with varying degrees of intensity and frequency, disruptive.

The type of aesthetic activism employed by anti-speciesist movements is generally oriented towards breaking habits and the *habitus* of meaning with which we generally classify the lives of living beings and “naturalize” their value according to the use that the human species can make of them. The aim is to “break into” people’s affective sensitivity, causing a rupture and a break in their most rooted habits. It is from the pragmatist theories of emotions (Mead 2017; Dewey 1894; Candioto and Dreon 2021) that we learn the role of disruption of emotional experience. Emotion is the adaptive tension between habit (affective, perceptive, ethical, aesthetic) and its rupture in the face of the surprising, the unexpected, and even the shocking. These are moments that provoke *emotional reflexivity* (Holmes 2010; Burkitt 2012): we reflect on what we feel, what we are attached to, and why. Everyone is guided by affective habits that

do not need to be interpreted until the chance for their breakup arises. In some cases, the rupture and its reflexivity are politicized and contested. This consists of provoking what Jasper (2008) calls “moral shock”, in the rupture of what is morally taken for granted. This process is channelled and skillfully handled by many forms of activism that emphasize and elicit the affective aspect of reflexivity.

From very different perspectives, rupture has been thought of as the main process of politics. Indeed, Rancière argues that politics begins when there is an «irruption» by a «part of those who have no part» (Rancière 1999: 11) that redefines the orders of effective power. The author distinguishes between “police” and “politics”. The first is the process of organizing powers, places and functions by disciplining bodies through ways of doing and being; politics, on the other hand, is that which disrupts the configuration of the police: it is the act that establishes a conflict and renders inequality visible. “Police” is a partition of the sensible, i.e. of what is given to us to perceive and what makes things visible. “Police” is a way of articulating between the ways of doing, the forms of visibility of these ways of doing, and the ways of thinking about their relationships. “Politics”, on the other hand, is the disruption and redefinition of the partition of the sensible governed by police: that which we can perceive through its visibility. Politics is thus not a habit, but rather its disruption and interruption. According to Rancière, the political community is a «community of interruptions» (Ivi: 137). The partition of the sensible is the system of evidence that makes visible who or what can have a part in the “common”, what is legitimate and recognized as important; politics is what overturns these legitimate aesthetic/political configurations. While the sensible is divided into boundaries (moral, legal, political, aesthetic, perceptual, and so on), politics is the act of rupture that overturns, transgresses and shatters these boundaries. Some things become visible, audible and perceptible as a result of the break-up. They appear in consciousness and claim a new position. Emotions emerge in concert with the manifestation of things and events. To incorporate the moving dynamics of events, the visible now calls for an affective (as well as epistemic and interactive) adaptation. What is important, legitimate and visible is so because it is embedded in a group’s set of habits and practices. Emotions, as interruptions of the “partition of the sensible”, have always played a role in political conflicts and cultural transformations.

Aesthetic expression, under certain conditions, produces affective ruptures that can be transformed into

long-term reflective and political transformations. Some anti-speciesist movements actively perform, choreograph and articulate these conditions. Aesthetic expression is a type of that performatively promotes affective ruptures through visions of animal suffering in order to elicit ethical reflexivity. Such aesthetic activism is the activity that produces new ways of feeling affectively connected to others, the environment, and other forms of life by drawing attention to a morally disruptive fact. Anti-speciesist movements use this type of activism in explicit ways. They make visible what is usually invisible, deliberately ignored or denied, such as animal exploitation and suffering in the food and clothing industry. The aim is to redefine activism as the activity that produces acts that break habits (Isin 2009) and consolidated the *habitus* of sensitivity. Feeling affection for something that is considered illegitimate, undeserving or unimportant can be a real act of citizenship (Isin 2008). It establishes moments of listening and responsibility towards what is not generally the object of affective involvement. These are acts that bring visibility to facts and events that require a person to transform their responsibilities. They shape and produce citizenship (*Ibidem*), insofar as they transform the responsibilities of individuals. Responsibility concerns everything that is an object of involvement.

### 3. SEARCHING FOR AESTHETIC DISRUPTION IN ANTI-SPECIESIST ACTIVISM

The following results come from qualitative research aimed at investigating the relationship between anti-speciesist activism and the use of visibility to promote affective and ethical reflection. I conducted this research by participating in the activities of three social movements, *Anonymous for the Voiceless* (AV), *Go Vegan Verona* (GVV) and *Animal Save* (AS) in Turin and Verona (Italy). The movements were chosen as special cases because they share practices, albeit different ones, in making animal suffering visible. AV and GVV are very similar movements that organize their events mainly in public areas, such as streets or squares, where they display the violence perpetrated in the animal industry using TV screens physically held by the activists themselves. *Animal Save* is more typically involved with the ritual of “vigils”, where activists gather at the entrances to slaughterhouses and wait for the trucks bringing in the animals destined to be slaughtered. I used various qualitative techniques: ethnography, auto-ethnography, digital ethnography, in-depth interviews (18) and conversations on the street.

I participated in AV and AS activities in Turin for four months and GVV activities in Verona for ten months, making a total of 14 months of participation and direct observation. Throughout the study, I included an auto-ethnography (Jones, Adams and Ellis 2016), which investigated my emotions and perceptions regarding the use of these images. Having been vegetarian for ten years and vegan for three years, it was not difficult for me to join these organizations, as I share their anti-speciesist values. However, participating in the activities of these movements was extremely painful for me due to my sensitivity to animal suffering. Seeing the slaughterhouses with my own eyes and smelling the blood during AS's actions deeply shook me. Even during the choreography of GVV and AV, the repetitive images of killings, violence, blood, and lifeless bodies disturbed me to the point that, for the final observations made in my research, I preferred to hold the screen myself so as not to see the images that appeared on it. I became increasingly aware of how the use of these images has a powerful impact on those who are sensitive to these issues. I conducted 18 interviews with members of these movements, including activists, organizers and videomakers. Conversations on the street with people observing AV and GVV choreography in Turin and Verona, however, were the most important oral sources. These primarily

consisted of discussions about anti-speciesism with people who stopped in front of the screens, as described in section 3. AV organized one event per month, whereas GVV was more consistent: as it was present every Saturday evening, for a total of four or five events per month. Considering that I had between five and seven conversations per event and attended two to four events per month, I had approximately 50 conversations with passers-by. In addition, I incorporated moments of digital ethnography, such as monitoring the social channels of these movements and analysing the use of visual materials and public reactions.

The combined use of these techniques was important to record the relational and dynamic dimension of affectivity in relation to the more reflective and intimate one. In collecting and analysing the data, I used an abductive approach (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), which is oriented towards the mutual and simultaneous constitution of data and theory. Therefore, I did not start with a specific theory in mind and then look for data to confirm it. Rather, I used the data that emerged to produce a micro-theory, which was then used to search for new data, leading to the development of a more comprehensive theory, and so on. This approach allowed me to organize the theorization process and anchor it as firmly as possible in the specific data.



Figure 1. Images shown in GVV and AV activities.

#### 4. PUBLIC VISIBILITY

In every type of activism I have explored in this research, activists make extensive use of images and videos. The visual impact of these images can be disturbing and shocking, yet they are also capable of provoking emotional and moral reflection. Some of the images used by AV and GVV are shown in Figure 1.

AV is a grassroots animal rights organization that fights animal exploitation through street activism, organizing events called “Cubes of Truth”. A “cube” consists of a performance enacted by a group of volunteers disguised as the historical figure Guy Fawkes. The activists hold TV screens showing videos from intensive animal farms. The aim is to make the suffering that lies behind the walls of slaughterhouses visible to the public. The “Cube of Truth” is an outreach tactic employed to encourage people to talk to activists and learn about a vegan lifestyle and animal exploitation. The movement has a clear abolitionist stance on the exploitation of animals. GVV organizes performances that are very similar to those of AV. The GVV’s Verona group carried out its activities under the name of AV, but after a disagreement with the international leaders of AV, they decided to continue their activities under a different name. However, the two groups I observed continue to have similar ways of using images and conducting their “outreach” conversations. Rather than showing the actions of a single intentional oppressor, these movements reveal how most people, unconsciously or not, support animal violence through the purchase of products (meat, animal derivatives, cosmetics, clothing). Below are two photos (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) showing these two groups’ use images.

The choreography of AV and GVV, as seen in these images, is very similar. The AV performance features a group of masked volunteers who form a “cube” in the street, attracting passers-by with gory, violent images. The masks have the function of hiding the identity and face of the activist while, in turn, allowing the passers-by to watch and reflect without feeling observed or judged. Other volunteers stand by and wait for people to stop in front of the screens. The activists then wait for about 30 seconds before approaching them. They explain that the scenes they are watching result from structured and systemic oppression, fuelled by daily consumption choices made by everyone. In order to combat this, the activists propose a vegan lifestyle. The rationale behind this is to approach people who show interest, as they are more likely to engage in a meaningful conversation. The kind of conversations they have are aimed at helping people understand how every consumer (of meat and animal derivatives) is directly involved in perpetuating the acts shown on the screens, and that the only way to avoid being responsible for this suffering is to adopt a vegan lifestyle. This method of engaging with people in this manner is referred to as “outreach”.

This choreography is a form of aesthetic activism. «It’s an effective form of activism» says Sara, one of the organizers of AV, «because the images reach people’s heart». It is a “call to responsibility” through the irruption and visibility of what is unknown. «It is a type of activism that puts you in front of reality, in a way that is not nice but incontestable» (Michele, AV activist). The recipients of this type of activism, as the participants believe, are people who may be sensitive to the issue but do not yet know it, or who might not have taken deci-



Figure 2. AV’s Cube of Truth in Turin on 5 November 2022.



Figure 3. A GVV Event in Verona on 30 July 2023.

sive steps towards a vegan lifestyle. The aim is not so much to convince those who will never be convinced (like those radically opposed to animal rights activism) but rather those who are willing to stop, show their sensitivity and talk to activists. The affective responses from people who stop are extremely varied. Some people are in a visible state of shock. Sometimes they even show tears. Others do not believe the images they see, suspecting that the videos have been manipulated, or claim that the practices they see take place elsewhere, not in Italy. Although these people show sensitivity to what they see, they do not feel directly involved in the reproduction of the suffering. Others will walk past and shout provocative remarks such as «seeing these images made me really want to go to McDonald's!», mocking and denigrating the activists. Once, while I was holding the screen, a group of young people tossed a piece of chicken at us, which remained there on the ground all evening.

I participated directly in this form of activism, both by wearing the mask while holding the TV screens and by doing “outreach”, talking and conversing with passers-by. What you see on the faces of passers-by from behind the mask is a wide range of emotions, such as anger, disgust, helplessness and disbelief. Some people stop for up to 40 minutes with teary eyes fixated upon the images. In addition, I observed certain patterns in the conversations that I had with passers-by. Some, usually the youngest, were already aware of what happens in meat production and were inclined to adopt a vegan lifestyle, but they were afraid that their choice would not be understood by their family and friends. They usually asked more questions about the way in which the activist experienced the transition to a vegan diet, as they were worried about the danger of excluding certain foods. Others oscillated between a strong emotionality and sensitivity to what they were watching and a more defensive attitude, expressed by comments like «it is natural, it has always been like this». Others considered it natural and right but say «I would never do it myself». We can observe a deep clash between the sensitivity towards animal suffering and the interpretative strategies that derive from the culture in which people deeply live. The impact of culture, in this sense, is much more rooted than we might think. Some people conversed with the activists for a long time in order to understand their way of life at a deeper level. They appeared to be curious and amazed by the experience. This form of activism is perfectly in line with the goals of the movement. It is a form of action that involves people directly and leaves no escape, preventing them from ignoring the connection between what they eat and the mechanisms of violence and exploitation that allow its production.

AS carries out very different activities but is always focused on the collection and use of images. AS is a movement that is part of the worldwide movement The Save Movement (along with Climate Save Movement and Health Save Movement). Their activism is aimed at organizing vigils outside slaughterhouses, where activists wait for the trucks bringing in the animals destined for slaughter. Their actions include stopping the vehicles and giving some relief to the animals by means of providing water and physical comfort. In addition, activists try to establish a dialogue with the drivers and slaughterhouse workers to understand their motivations and at the same time convince them not to become accomplices in the animal elimination system. Furthermore, one of the objectives is to witness the procedures of the elimination system, sharing videos and photos of the “vigils” on social media. The “vigils” aim to provide comfort to the animals entering slaughterhouses and bear testimony to the existence of these places while recording their experience through pictures and videos for media coverage. This aims to make the structural nature of animal oppression and exploitation more visible.

AS events elicit direct antagonist reactions from slaughterhouse owners and workers. This is understandable, because slaughterhouse and livestock workers, whose economic livelihoods depend on meat, feel directly attacked. However, in some cases there is a particular emotional connection between AS activists and some slaughterhouse workers who are sensitive to animal suf-

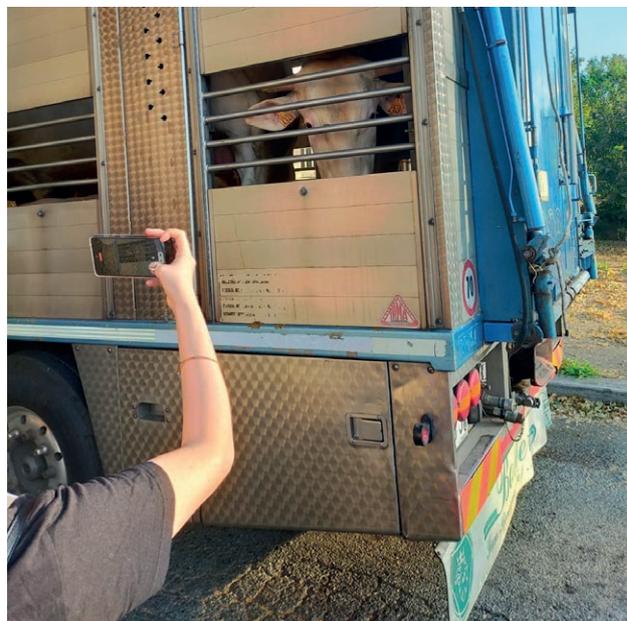


Figure 4. An Animal Save vigil in Turin on 11 July 2022.

fering. These are usually exploited workers, often immigrants with precarious social situations. «I can't afford to quit this job, but I don't want to do what I do to these animals anymore» a tearful worker told Susanna (AS activist). As in other contexts, it is immigrants and those who have no alternative who are most exploited and who perform the most terrifying jobs, which are detrimental to their mental health. On the other hand, owners (of slaughterhouses, dairy companies, or cheese producers) are quite aggressive toward the activists. Thomas says:

*I approached this animal and tried to pet it to give it comfort. This gentleman approached me and said: just try to touch it and I will break your face. At that point, I walked away, and he kept telling me that he would wait for me outside. In the end, fortunately nothing happened, despite me staying where I was. (Thomas, AS activist)*

Another reason why AS organizes vigils is to record the scenes in which activists are involved. Through the physical presence of activists, many other people can be present digitally, either through live streams or by viewing recorded social media content. The images manage to reach a wide audience, who may either support or oppose AS's actions. Through these images and their online reproduction, it is possible to understand the vast structure that underlying animal exploitation and how the world reacts concretely to the cause of animal rights.

However, there are some substantial differences between the actions of AV, GVV and AS. These social movements promote a sense of responsibility towards animals within very different political frameworks. AV is primarily focused on engaging people on an ethical level, paying less attention to issues like food, climate issue or other social matters that may intersect with speciesism. AV does not address other forms of oppression and concentrates solely on promoting a vegan lifestyle. AS, on the other hand, politicizes its activities as part of a wider struggle against oppression. On their website, we read: «Animal Save Italia is a horizontal and intersectional movement, active against xenophobia, racism, fascism, sexism, homobitranphobia, ableism and any other form of oppression and discrimination» (AS website). GVV also frames its activism, similar to AV's, as deeply political, connecting anti-speciesism with feminism, anti-racism and opposition to current systems of domination. AS and GVV promote their actions as intimately political, while AV «depoliticizes» its actions by focusing solely on the moral dimension. However, individual AV activists tend to politicize the animal issue much more than AV as an organization does: «It is political because it is based on an injustice, and therefore it is necessarily political. Usually, when it is not considered political, it is

because it is not understood and it is considered a fad» (Michele, AV activist). Usually, as Michele said, a vegan lifestyle is not treated as political, yet it is so for many who have adopted it as a personal and individual ethical choice.

## 5. RITUALITY AND PERFORMATIVITY OF EMOTIONS

These forms of activism, as discussed in the previous section, aim to create affective disruptions and the circulation of materials that can trigger certain types of emotion. However, the emotional involvement that is obtained is far from improvised. These choreographic and performative activisms are real social rituals (Collins 2004; Durkheim 2001; Garfinkel 1967) that have the effect of generating emotions that seek to manifest themselves as appropriate (Hochschild 1983) and widespread. During the AV «Cubes of Truth» and GVV events I participated in, the organizers suggested making «funeral faces» when watching the videos from outside the performance. This was meant to draw the attention of passers-by to the gravity of the images that appear on the screens. It is, in a rather classic way, a way to institutionalize new feeling rules (Hochschild 1983) through the linking of the emotions shown with the images of animal suffering. This produces some desired results: 1) it immediately captures the attention of passers-by by looking stern and solemn, making explicit and visible a ritual that has the effect of drawing their attention; 2) it shows and promotes what emotions it is *appropriate* to feel in front of those images; and 3) it makes it easier for passers-by around them to share their emotions.

In this activist ritual, volunteers symbolically embody images of animal pain through the images on the screen that they are holding, producing affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009) that promote some emotions rather than others. The atmosphere is therefore heavy and funereal, but it «allows us to speak directly to the emotional sphere of people» (Michele, AV activist) and elicit amazement, wonder and disturbance. Subsequently, during the conversations between activists and passers-by, we enter the phase in which we «guide» the affective reactions of people with the aim of helping them arrive at a vegan lifestyle. «[it's aimed at] making you feel responsible, but not guilty», says Sandra (activist). The objective is not to cause people to feel guilt and frustration, which are often the spontaneous emotions of the most sensitive passers-by, but rather to generate emotions that activate a path of awareness and reflection on what they have seen and heard. To instigate guilt would be to raise a wall between the «We» and the

“You”, between the good and the bad, and to ignore the cultural and most pervasive roots of speciesism. Animal exploitation is a structural oppression; therefore, it is based on the often implicit and unconscious involvement and participation of consumers. The objective is to elicit *emotional reflexivity* (Holmes 2010; Burkitt 2012), to reinterpret one’s moral habits and to make transformations. Sometimes, even though people are sensitive, they find blocks and obstacles of a relational nature. One of the emotions most present in passers-by inclined to adopt a vegan diet is the fear of being excluded or not accepted by loved ones. People are afraid that being vegan would mean being out of place in their family and circle of friends, so they feel discomfort and frustration. Activists will then share with the passers-by their own experiences, their difficulties, but also the enthusiasm that this kind of life can bring. However, the danger of exclusion is always present, not only in eating habits but also in one’s moral and relational life.

AS’s activities are directed toward encapsulating emotions and turning them into digital artefacts such as photos, videos and informative posts on social media. In addition to establishing an open and reflective dialogue with slaughterhouse workers, the ritual of the vigils aims to collect images of animal confinement and disseminate them. However, the ritualistic and funereal dimension is also present in the actions of AS. The “vigils” that AS organizes outside of slaughterhouses and places dedicated to animal exploitation are acts of presence and testimony to the life of the animal before it disappears forever behind the walls of the slaughterhouse. «Every time you are in front of it, you feel death [...] when you decide to eat an animal, you decide on its death,» says Tommaso (AS activist). Indeed, during the participant observation phase, vigils were the most painful part of this research. I think it would be so even for those who are more “detached” from their object of investigation. As we breathe in the smell of animal flesh, looking at the miserable and haggard snouts of calves, full of scars and abscesses, we cannot help but reflect on the existential pain of these animals, guilty of belonging to an unfortunate species. Their body crosses the threshold of the slaughterhouse that is the barrier between life and death, a wall that makes them goods to sell, buy and taste. Many pieces of them will end up on the plates of people who will never know their story of torment and agony.

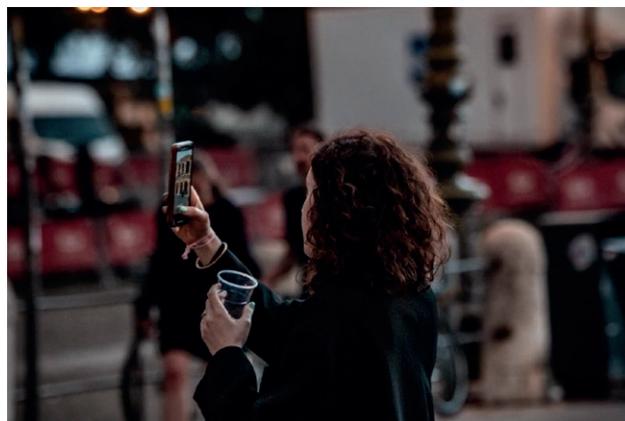
## 6. AESTHETIC CONTRASTS

This activism’s performativity is rich in aesthetic contrasts. The shock is caused by activists precise-

ly because these images of animal suffering suddenly appear in unexpected contexts. AS activism entails image circulation in the media, with images of animal suffering appearing on the homepages of social network accounts of sympathizers and supporters of animal rights, as well as of those who are unaware and have never reflected on the problem. Such images can arouse curiosity and a desire to learn more, but they can also elicit reactions of rage and indignation towards these movements. The violent nature of the images and the contrast they create in everyday life highlight the moral boundaries of speciesism. Even GVV and AV activities on street corners and in squares emerge as “disturbing” contrasts in city aesthetics. GVV, in particular, has developed a keen awareness of this. Every Saturday evening, GVV activists stand in front of the *Arena di Verona*, “forcing” passers-by and tourists to notice their images. The decision to position the event in front of the *Arena di Verona*, one of the city’s symbols along with Juliet’s iconic balcony, was motivated by a desire to stop passers-by in the middle of their tourist walks by means of glory images. These images stand out even more against the background, combining artistic beauty with shocking brutality. On one side, one of Europe’s most popular monuments; on the other, some of the most hidden scenes of human economic activity. From the conversations I had with passers-by on the street, it became clear that it was the contrast that brought out the “dissonance” of the images being shown.

To my and the activists’ surprise, many passers-by stopped in front of the event without noticing it and took pictures of the *Arena* or took selfies with the *Arena* in the background, as shown in the photo below (Fig. 5).

The girl, who was standing directly in front of images of animal suffering, did not notice them. She paid



**Figure 5.** A passer-by photographs the Verona Arena during a GVV event.

the choreography little attention and captured a view of the *Arena di Verona*, as seen on her screen. I have asked myself and the other activists several times whether these cases are influenced by distraction (i.e. people not noticing the choreography) or something else. Indeed, when such episodes occurred, I focused on the gazes of passers-by in order to capture the moment when people noticed the images, which did not always occur, as they stopped in front of the event for several minutes taking photographs.

The activists who have been organizing these events for many years believe that these images have an effect on those who are “already” potentially sensitive «but are unaware of it» Cristina (GVV). These are the people who stop to talk to the activists because they are conflicted or curious. They are typically people who have reflected on animal suffering in the past but have lacked information and a group with which to discuss and further explore these issues. «Those who have never considered the issue hardly stop or are hardly moved by these images» (Roberta, GVV activist). These images produce effects as a result of a number of factors, including aesthetic contrast, potential sensitivity and curiosity, amazement and an interest in delving deeper into these issues with someone who is familiar with them.

The aesthetic activism of these activities is such that the encounter with these images becomes, in the words of Dewey (1980), “an experience” that leads to a conclusion and meaning. Through affective and moral contrasts that are reinterpreted with reflexivity, these images provide rhythm to the experiential flow. Furthermore, these images are political in the sense that they “break into” an aesthetic-moral order and alter the configuration of sensitivity, as defined by Rancière (1999).

The irruption of animal suffering makes more visible, marked and contrasting the moral boundaries that structure speciesism and the domination of humanity over other forms of life that inhabit the planet. The activists who talk to them, on the other hand, co-manage the “rhythm” of the experience of passers-by, their affection and reflections. The rhythm is relational in this sense, as their emotions are combined with the affective dialogue that passers-by have with activists. Dialogues are contrast-based developments. «When people say you should manage farms in a more ‘humane’ way, I say, okay, would it then be acceptable to breed and slaughter cats and dogs in these more “humane” farms as you say? People’s expressions change, displaying a mix of disgust and amazement» (Emilio, GV). The contrast between beloved animals (dogs and cats) and violent conditions draws people’s attention to the tacit, invisible and overlooked bounda-

ries of speciesism within the dialogue. This contrast is an aesthetic activity performed with a variety of tools. The choreography grabs the audience’s attention, the images surprise them, and the dialogue with the activists forces them to face these matters, highlighting the contrasts and blind spots in morality.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS: A MORE-THAN-HUMAN AESTHETIC POLITICS

The kind of aesthetic activism I have described is certainly based upon political actions that intentionally engage people’s emotionality. Although these movements employ various strategies and arguments, their actions are based on an attempt to penetrate people’s sensitivity through dialogue. Images and audio-visual materials are especially important. The intentional use of such images aims to show what is not directly visible due to its confinement within the walls of slaughterhouses. Furthermore, these images, along with subsequent face-to-face dialogue (as in the case of GVV and AV) or via social media (as in the case of AS), facilitate the development of a moral and political dialogue on animal exploitation.

Images do things as a result of this type of activism. They generate contrasts, internal conflicts and contemplative emotions. People react to the images with a variety of emotions, including surprise, disbelief, indignation and anger. For this reason, anger is sometimes directed at activists who “should not” show these images, as they are considered “disturbing”. This type of aesthetic activism is expertly organized and governed with visual materials prepared specifically to cause disruption in the spectators. To plan these activities, activists must anticipate and incorporate potential reactions and address them in advance. Through the activists’ choreography, the images “speak” on behalf of the “voiceless”, i.e. the animals. Indeed, the issue of the animals’ voices is incorporated into the name AV (*Anonymous for the Voiceless*). Images, in some contexts, “speak” their own language, which is immediately affective and aesthetic, obstructing, interrupting and disrupting people’s daily lives. Only in the face of these interruptions, as supported by the pragmatist theory of emotions, can a reflective dialogue be established.

## ETHICS STATEMENTS

Names of participants were changed throughout this article for privacy reasons. The information and consent forms provided to participants were drawn up in accord-

ance with the EU regulation 2016/679 relating to the protection of physical persons.

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## L'autorità in questione. Per un'analisi della tarda modernità in Michel de Certeau

DAVIDE LAMPUGNANI

**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to analyse some reflections developed by the French author Michel de Certeau about the coming of the late-modern society. Even though de Certeau cannot be considered primarily a sociologist, his thought can certainly stimulate new theoretical and empirical studies at political, economic, social and cultural level. In particular, the paper focuses on the question concerning authority in society, as interpreted by de Certeau in two articles written in 1969 and 1973. On the one hand, a generalized lack of credibility can be identified more and more in relation to many key social authorities, such as political parties, trade unions, enterprises, schools, universities and churches. On the other hand, this lack of credibility may lead to increase the spread of critical phenomena, such as social exclusion and social violence. The paper, then, analyses the specific conception of authority as proposed by de Certeau, which can be conceived as a form of always fragile and unstable coordination between representations and individual and collective beliefs.

**Keywords:** authority, de Certeau, late modernity, credibility, exclusion.

### 1. INTRODUZIONE

Il 9 gennaio 1986 Michel de Certeau scompare prematuramente per un tumore al pancreas. Storico, sociologo, antropologo, studioso di linguistica e di psicoanalisi, nonché gesuita e sacerdote, tra gli anni '60 e agli anni '80 del secolo scorso ha dato vita ad un corpus di opere difficilmente inquadrabile e sintetizzabile in un'unica traiettoria teorica o di ricerca (Giard 1987; Dosse 2002; Di Cori 2020; Lampugnani 2023). Per comprenderlo, è bastevole ricordare tre dei suoi testi più celebri: *La scrittura della storia* del 1975, dedicato all'epistemologia della storiografia (de Certeau 2006a); *L'invenzione del quotidiano* del 1980 dedicato alle pratiche della vita quotidiana (de Certeau 2001); *Fabula mistica* del 1982, dedicato alla storia e alla spiritualità della mistica cristiana dei secoli XVI e XVII (de Certeau 2008). A questi si aggiungano, ad esempio, i testi e gli articoli dedicati alle trasformazioni del maggio del '68 (de Certeau 2007b) oppure a quelle della cultura (de Certeau 1993), così come quelli dedicati al rapporto tra storiografia e psicoanalisi (de Certeau 2006b) oppure ai processi di secolarizzazione e di trasformazione del credere (de Certeau 2020). Non stupisce, dunque, che proprio negli anni successivi alla sua scomparsa, questo corpus scritto abbia aperto una pluralità di percorsi

di riflessione e ricerca lungo una pluralità di versanti (Giard 2017).

All'interno di questa importante disseminazione intellettuale dell'opera certiana, un particolare tema sembra essere stato, tuttavia, significativamente meno esplorato nel corso dei decenni successivi alla sua scomparsa: quello che riguarda l'analisi di alcune specifiche trasformazioni politiche, economiche, sociali e culturali innescate con l'avvento e lo sviluppo della così detta «tarda modernità» (Giddens 1994), «seconda modernità» (Beck 2000) o «modernità liquida» (Bauman 2006). Difatti, è esattamente vivendo e scrivendo tra gli anni '60 e agli anni '80 del secolo scorso che Michel de Certeau ha l'opportunità di interrogarsi e di riflettere circa il passaggio da una società prevalentemente industriale e caratterizzata da un ruolo ancora fortemente egemonico a livello politico, economico e culturale degli stati nazionali ad una società progressivamente ristrutturata da grandi processi di globalizzazione economica, tecnoscientifica e mediatica. Non a caso, è proprio la crisi, la «frattura instauratrice» (de Certeau 2006b) venutasi a creare a seguito delle contestazioni e degli scontri del maggio del '68 a suscitare in lui un profondo desiderio di comprendere ciò che è successo e, soprattutto, ciò che sta accadendo nel cuore delle società avanzate. Un desiderio che certamente non va ad esaurirsi anche negli anni successivi e che lo vede impegnato in prima linea insieme a tanti altri nel tentativo di comprendere la transizione progressivamente in atto.

Alla luce di questo scenario, il presente contributo si propone di provare ad approfondire l'analisi di alcune specifiche trasformazioni innescate dall'avvento della tarda modernità, così come presentata da Michel de Certeau in alcuni suoi articoli caratterizzati in modo particolare da uno sguardo di tipo sociologico<sup>1</sup>. Per farlo, si intende utilizzare quale chiave di lettura principale la categoria di «autorità», quale possibile tratto comune trasversale per interpretare alcuni processi storici che, proprio a partire dalla fine degli anni '60 e dall'inizio degli anni '70 del secolo scorso, acquisiscono una specifica rilevanza a livello macro così come a livello micro-sociale. Più precisamente, il contributo intende concentrare l'attenzione su due fenomeni che, all'interno delle analisi dell'autore francese, ricorrono con grande fre-

<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau non può essere certamente definito primariamente un «sociologo di professione». Il suo campo disciplinare prevalente può, infatti, essere individuato nella storiografia e, in particolare, nella storiografia della spiritualità cristiana dei secoli XVI e XVII. Tuttavia, confrontandosi con le sue opere, risulta essere evidente l'influenza di temi e questioni di tipo sociologico sul suo pensiero. A titolo di esempio, si pensi solamente al ruolo chiave di sociologi come Pierre Bourdieu oppure come Harold Garfinkel in un'opera come *L'invenzione del quotidiano* (de Certeau 2001).

quenza nella definizione dello specifico scenario della società tardo-moderna. Da una parte, il primo paragrafo intende mettere a fuoco alcuni tratti del processo di progressiva perdita di credibilità nei confronti delle autorità politiche, economiche, culturali e religiose tradizionalmente poste ai cardini delle società avanzate nella prima modernità. Dall'altra parte, il secondo paragrafo vuole evidenziare alcuni possibili processi sociali caratterizzati dalla progressiva espulsione di individui e gruppi dalle strutture del sapere e del potere e dal rischio dell'esplosione di forme di violenza sociale. Alla luce di entrambi i processi, la «questione dell'autorità» acquisisce una grande rilevanza a livello politico, economico, sociale, culturale e religioso, quale possibile posta in gioco cui rivolgere particolare attenzione nello scenario della tarda modernità. È questo, infine, l'obiettivo del terzo paragrafo: presentare e analizzare la specifica concezione dell'autorità così come formulata da Michel de Certeau e provare a mettere in luce alcuni meccanismi che contribuiscono al suo funzionamento.

Il contributo intende approfondire queste specifiche trasformazioni legate all'emergere della società tardo-moderna utilizzando, in modo particolare, due articoli scritti da de Certeau tra la fine degli anni '60 e l'inizio degli anni '70 e raccolti successivamente nel volume dal titolo: *La culture au pluriel* (de Certeau 1993). Il primo articolo, intitolato *Les révolutions du croyable*, è stato pubblicato per la prima volta sulla rivista *Esprit* nel febbraio del 1969 (de Certeau 1969). Il secondo articolo, intitolato *Le langage de la violence*, è stato pubblicato per la prima volta nel gennaio del 1973 sulla rivista *Le Monde diplomatique* (de Certeau 1973)<sup>2</sup>. Entrambi i testi, pur certamente in parte caratterizzati da temi, questioni e linguaggi che risentono della distanza temporale che li separa dal presente, si dimostrano, tuttavia, ancora oggi incredibilmente significativi e generativi in termini di possibili spunti di riflessione, a livello di teoria sociale così come a livello di ricerca empirica.

## 2. UNA PERDITA DI CREDIBILITÀ

Un anno dopo lo scoppio dei disordini e degli scontri del maggio del '68, Michel de Certeau si interroga sull'atmosfera che sembra pervadere la società francese e, forse più in generale, l'intera Europa. «È difficile credere a qualcosa», «non ci crediamo più» (de Certeau

<sup>2</sup> L'analisi effettuata in questo contributo si basa sulla versione dei due articoli raccolta in *La culture au pluriel* (de Certeau 1993). Come indicato nell'introduzione al volume, entrambi sono stati leggermente rivisti dall'autore in vista della pubblicazione successiva.

1993: 19)<sup>3</sup>, sono espressioni che sembrano ritornare e riecheggiare con frequenza all'interno di una pluralità di mondi sociali pur lontani e diversi tra loro. Così avviene, ad esempio, nel mondo del lavoro e della produzione, segnato dal progressivo passaggio da un modello socio-economico industriale ad un modello definito «post-industriale» (Touraine 1969; Bell 1973) e, più ampiamente, da un vero e proprio cambio di paradigma economico e politico con il passaggio da orientamenti di tipo keynesiano a orientamenti marcatamente segnati dalla dottrina neoliberista (Harvey 2005; Dardot, Laval 2010). Così avviene, però, anche nel mondo della politica e, in particolare, nei confronti di tutto ciò che riguarda l'identità offerta dagli stati nazionali. La sfiducia nei confronti delle istituzioni statali sembra crescere di pari passo con la crescente fragilità del loro funzionamento (O'Connor 1977). Infine, pur seguendo traiettorie diverse tra loro, così avviene anche nei mondi della cultura e della religione. Valori, credenze e simboli che nei due decenni successivi precedenti parevano essere patrimonio comune perdono progressivamente la loro forza, lasciando spazio ad una crescente frammentazione e individualizzazione degli stili di vita (Lyotard 1979; Bauman 2002).

De Certeau vive e si interroga riguardo a questa perdita di credibilità generalizzata che sembra pervadere l'atmosfera delle società avanzate tra la fine degli anni '60 e l'inizio degli anni '70. L'aspetto più rilevante che, a suo avviso, va emergendo non è tanto la perdita di credibilità nei confronti di una singola istituzione, quanto, più in generale, la perdita di credibilità nei confronti di una pluralità di istituzioni e, più in generale, nei confronti del funzionamento dell'autorità stessa, dalla quale tutte le istituzioni dipendono (Magatti, Martinelli 2021). Scrive, infatti, nell'articolo del 1969:

*Qualunque siano le sue modalità o la sua estensione altrove, il discredito delle autorità è la nostra esperienza. I sintomi si moltiplicano. Questi impediscono di sbarazzarsi del problema confinandolo in questo o quel settore, politico, religioso o sociale. Risorgendo dappertutto, essi toccano tutti i "valori", quelli del regime, quelli della patria, quelli delle chiese o quelli della borsa. Una svalutazione si estende. Proprio là dove è compensata o nascosta, essa riappare altrimenti. I dogmi, i saperi, i programmi e le filosofie perdono la loro credibilità, ombre senza corpi che né la mano né lo spirito possono afferrare e la cui evanescenza irrita o delude il gesto che ancora le cerca; esse non ci lasciano che l'illusione o la volontà, spesso tenace, di «tenerle» (de Certeau 1993: 20).*

L'immagine dell'ombra senza corpo e del gesto che cerca di afferrare e di tenere quest'ombra rende perfettamente l'idea di una duplice questione che, proprio negli anni a venire, diventerà all'ordine del giorno per una pluralità di istituzioni politiche, economiche, culturali e religiose. Da una parte, la questione ruota attorno alla mancanza di adesione e, soprattutto – in termini weberiani – di «legittimazione» che sembra sempre più colpire le autorità che governano il funzionamento e la riproduzione della struttura sociale. Dove sono coloro che un tempo sembravano riconoscersi nei valori, nelle credenze, nei simboli e nei discorsi di imprese, partiti, sindacati e chiese? Perché la loro fiducia viene progressivamente meno? A proposito di questi ultimi, de Certeau non esita a parlare di veri e propri fenomeni di «emigrazione» («*émigration*») dalle istituzioni e dalla loro autorità (Ivi: 21). Questi movimenti di spostamento e di fuga certamente non riguardano solamente il piano territoriale, con il crescente abbandono del proprio paese per cercare all'estero nuove opportunità e, soprattutto, nuovi stili di vita. Essi riguardano anche il piano sociale e, soprattutto, esistenziale, con il rifiuto e l'abbandono di valori, credenze e simboli «tradizionali» al fine di cercare altrove nuove possibilità di senso e di adesione<sup>4</sup>. Scrive de Certeau a questo riguardo:

*Un esilio si produce. Come i monumenti i cui curatori assegnati pensano di mantenere la verità occupandoli, molte istituzioni sembrano abbandonate proprio da coloro che si vogliono fedeli ad un'esigenza di coscienza, di giustizia o di verità. Ciò che migra, qualche volta con scintille e proteste, ma più spesso senza rumore e come lo scorrere dell'acqua, è l'adesione – quella dei cittadini, quella degli iscritti a un partito o a un sindacato, quella dei membri di una chiesa. Lo spirito stesso che animava le rappresentazioni le abbandona. Non è sparito. È altrove, partito all'estero, lontano dalle strutture che la sua partenza trasforma in spettacoli desolanti o in liturgie dell'assenza (Ivi: 22-23).*

Dall'altra parte, di fronte alla perdita di credibilità generalizzata, va emergendo con forza la questione legata alla possibilità di compiere un pericoloso capovolgimento: sacrificare la «realtà» per preservare un «bisogno», perseguire l'«utile» a scapito della «verità» (Ivi: 20). Il bisogno è quello di fare come se queste autorità fossero ancora vive e in perfetta salute, mentre, di fatto, la realtà è quella di una progressiva mancanza di vita dentro e attorno a loro, in termini di convinzione così come di adesione. Il perseguimento dell'utile porta a cercare di riesumare a tutti i costi valori, simboli e credenze

<sup>3</sup> La traduzione degli estratti de *La culture au pluriel* è stata effettuata dall'Autore.

<sup>4</sup> Si pensi, ad esempio, al grande fascino esercitato negli anni '60 e '70 del secolo scorso dall'«Oriente», dalla sua cultura e dalla sua spiritualità, su alcuni movimenti su-culturali e contro-culturali come quello hippie.

del passato. Anche a prezzo di un loro utilizzo ormai meramente strumentale in termini politici, economici, culturali o religiosi. La verità in molti casi è che queste rappresentazioni appaiono ormai completamente svuotate del loro senso e, soprattutto, ormai completamente slegate da qualsiasi investimento personale o collettivo. Conclude, infatti, de Certeau:

*Un ordine è indispensabile, dichiarano; il rispetto dei "valori" è necessario per il buon funzionamento di un partito, di una chiesa o di una università; la fiducia condiziona la prosperità. Senza alcun dubbio. Tuttavia, la convinzione viene a mancare. Agire come se esistesse e perché si tratta di una fonte di profitti nazionali o particolari, significa sostituire surrettiziamente l'utile alla veracità; significa sopporre una convinzione per la sola ragione che ne abbiamo bisogno, decidere di una legittimità poiché preserva un potere, imporre o fingere la fiducia a causa della sua redditività, reclamare la credenza in nome di istituzioni la cui sopravvivenza diventa l'obiettivo primario di una politica. Strana inversione! Ci si attacca alle espressioni e non più a quello che esprimono, ai benefici di un'adesione più che alla sua realtà (Ivi: 20).*

### 3. ESPULSIONE E VIOLENZA

Quali sono le conseguenze più evidenti di questa perdita di credibilità generalizzata nei confronti dell'autorità? A quali rischi va esponendosi la nascente tarda modernità? De Certeau si pone questa domanda tra la fine degli anni '60 e l'inizio degli anni '70, in un clima certamente caratterizzato grandi fratture e tensioni ma anche da un senso di profonda disillusione e sfiducia nei confronti delle rivendicazioni e delle conquiste del maggio francese. La «presa della parola» avviata nelle strade e nelle università di Parigi si trasforma già pochi mesi dopo in una «parola ripresa» e resa innocua attraverso una molteplicità di articoli e libri, analisi e interpretazioni ad opera di giornalisti, esperti, accademici e politici (de Certeau 2007b). È il tentativo di un'intera società di ripristinare un ordine improvvisamente e inaspettatamente entrato in crisi. Lo sforzo collettivo per trasformare l'evento di rottura in un mero oggetto di potere e di sapere e per confermare la stabilità e la solidità della struttura sociale.

Eppure, la credibilità viene meno. Eppure, appare sempre più difficile «credere in qualcosa». E questo ha almeno due importanti conseguenze secondo de Certeau. La prima riguarda un fenomeno che va sempre più generalizzandosi all'interno delle società tardo moderne. Per coglierlo, il gesuita francese utilizza il termine «espulsione» e, più in particolare, quello di «società dell'espulsione» («*société de l'éviction*») (de Certeau 1993:

78). Con questa espressione egli vuole cercare di mettere a fuoco la configurazione di una società che, assistendo all'apparentemente inarrestabile perdita di adesione nei confronti delle proprie autorità, accetta che intere porzioni del proprio tessuto politico, economico, sociale e culturale siano messe ai margini e, appunto, escluse dal funzionamento delle strutture del potere e del sapere. Scrive, infatti, in *Le language de la violence*:

*È l'uomo stesso che è infine estromesso dal sistema i cui prodotti ripetono e moltiplicano la legge posta al suo principio. L'universalismo anonimo della città, della cultura, del lavoro o del sapere conduce all'impossibilità di situarsi come differenti e di reintrodurre l'alterità, e dunque il conflitto, nel linguaggio. [...] È sorprendente vedere generalizzarsi, come se fosse generato da questo sistema, il timore di essere di troppo. I genitori, i bambini, i borghesi, i contadini, gli insegnanti, gli uomini, le donne ... In modi diversi, la macchina minaccia di escludere le particolarità e le differenze. Essa scomunica gruppi e individui, posti nella posizione di marginalizzati, costretti a difendersi come esclusi, e destinati a cercare sé stessi dalla parte del rimosso (Ivi: 78-79).*

La seconda conseguenza si lega strettamente alla prima. Anche in questo caso, è possibile trovare un termine sintetico per coglierne immediatamente la concretezza: «violenza». In entrambi gli articoli, difatti, de Certeau parla della possibilità che questa perdita di credibilità generalizzata nei confronti delle autorità conduca verso l'esplosione di forme di violenza. Per un verso, si tratta di una violenza che si manifesta come una forma estrema e, per certi aspetti anche «irrazionale» (Ivi: 23) di rivendicazione nei confronti dell'alienazione generata dalla mancanza di riconoscimento e di adesione nelle istituzioni politiche, economiche, culturali e religiose, così come in particolare nei loro valori, nelle loro credenze e nei loro simboli. È una violenza che cerca di rispondere all'espulsione generalizzata di individui e gruppi dai circuiti del potere e del sapere. Una violenza che in molti casi si esprime attraverso meri gesti di oltraggio e di profanazione (Ivi: 79), come distruggere la vetrina di una banca o di un fast food, oppure come imbrattare un monumento del passato o un'opera d'arte in un museo. Tuttavia, per un altro verso, si tratta di una forma di violenza che, pur certamente manifestando l'esistenza e la resistenza da parte di individui e gruppi, si limita a distruggere, a fare a pezzi, a oltraggiare, senza avere la capacità di instaurare e di generare qualcosa di nuovo. Spiega, infatti, de Certeau:

*Politico, erotico o gratuito, l'oltraggio maltratta il linguaggio. Non fonda. Taglia. È uno stile, una maniera di parlare. È una festa effimera. Sorge come l'assurdo. Proprio in que-*

*sto modo, rivela la violenza nascosta in un ordine. Scatena il furore. Fa uscire la rabbia da coloro che vivono in un sistema di produzione. Eppure, dopo che questo gioco della verità ha riportato la violenza alla superficie di un ordine, cosa può accadere? (Ivi: 80).*

Di fronte alla perdita di credibilità delle autorità, la violenza rappresenta una forma estrema – seppur effimera – di rivendicazione di tipo «espressivo» (Ivi: 81): come se fosse un segno o, ancora più significativamente, un «lapsus» all'interno di un tessuto politico, economico, culturale e religioso, al tempo stesso, sempre più saturo e sempre più vuoto. Difatti, né l'espulsione di individui e gruppi, né l'esplosione della violenza, sembrano essere in grado di affrontare la vera grande questione dischiudasi alle soglie della società tardo moderno: quella dell'autorità.

#### 4. LA QUESTIONE DELL'AUTORITÀ

A fronte di una perdita di credibilità generalizzata, esposti al rischio sempre più frequente di fenomeni di espulsione e di violenza, perché, dunque, non cercare di fare a meno delle autorità? Perché non arrendersi di fronte all'inevitabile, provando così a rifondare una società priva di autorità di qualsivoglia tipo o natura? È questa la questione con cui de Certeau va confrontandosi in questi, così come in altri articoli e saggi, scritti tra la fine degli anni '60 e l'inizio degli anni '70<sup>5</sup>. Dopo la crisi delle autorità, è possibile una società senza autorità? La risposta che egli propone a queste domande è, tuttavia, chiara e non lascia eccessivo spazio a fraintendimenti. Scrive, infatti, ne *Les révolutions du croyable*:

*Nel senso più ampio del termine, le autorità significano una realtà difficile da determinare, e tuttavia necessaria: l'aria che rende una società respirabile. Esse permettono una comunicazione e una creatività sociale, poiché esse forniscono, a una, dei riferimenti comuni, all'altra, delle vie possibili. [...] Esse si guastano anche, ma è soffocando che ci accorgiamo che sono stantie. Le malattie della fiducia, il sospetto verso gli apparati e le rappresentazioni politiche, sindacali o monetarie, le forme successive di una debolezza restante ci ricordano oggi questo elemento che dimentichiamo durante i tempi di certezza e che non appare indispensabile che quando manca o si guasta. Ma dovremmo concludere che, senza aria, tutto andrà meglio; che senza autorità, la società non conoscerebbe più queste*

*malattie? Questo sarebbe sostituire la morte del malato alla guarigione della sua malattia (Ivi: 17).*

Dunque, le autorità come «l'aria che rende una società respirabile». L'immagine è fortemente evocativa e rende molto bene l'idea che soggiace ad una concezione dell'autorità come elemento vitale per la costruzione e la riproduzione di qualsivoglia ordine sociale. In modo particolare, le autorità svolgono due funzioni fondamentali. Da un lato, esse permettono la comunicazione attraverso la definizione di riferimenti comuni, i quali possono esprimersi sotto forma di valori, di credenze, di simboli. In questo senso, parlare di «comunicazione» significa parlare molto di più di un mero scambio di informazioni tra individui o gruppi. Piuttosto, significa parlare di vere e proprie forme di riconoscimento sociale mediate dal riconoscimento di riferimenti simbolici comuni<sup>6</sup>. Dall'altro lato, le autorità permettono la creatività e il mutamento sociale attraverso l'apertura di nuove possibilità di pensiero e di azione, nuove «vie possibili» che sono, al tempo stesso, legate ma non determinate dalla condivisione di riferimenti comuni. È quest'ultima una concezione dell'idea di autorità come necessaria condizione «autorizzante» all'interno di qualsivoglia ordine politico, economico e sociale<sup>7</sup>.

Proprio come l'aria, tuttavia, anche le autorità possono inquinarsi oppure venire a mancare, rendendo così irrespirabile un'intera società o parti di essa. Durante i tempi di certezza e di stabilità, quando appaiono pienamente riconosciute e legittimate, esse possono forse essere date per scontate, fin quasi a sparire. Tuttavia, è nel momento in cui si guastano che esse tornano in primo piano, dischiudendo una questione che, come sottolinea de Certeau, non può essere affrontata semplicemente facendo passare la morte del malato per la sua guarigione. Torna così in gioco quella perdita di credibilità che, come detto all'inizio, sembra sempre più caratterizzare in modo generalizzato le società tardo moderne. «È difficile credere a qualcosa», «non ci crediamo più», sono le espressioni che nella concretezza del quotidiano testimoniano la dissociazione tra le autorità e le convinzioni, tra i valori, le credenze e i simboli e ciò che dovrebbero incarnare per individui e gruppi. Proprio in questo punto, tuttavia, la posta in gioco diventa estremamente elevata:

*Dal fatto che, forse, una civiltà stia svanendo, dal fatto che oggi stiamo vivendo nel nostro linguaggio sociale come dentro una ragione (o un sistema) la cui ragione non ci è*

<sup>5</sup> Ad esempio, Michel de Certeau riflette sulla questione dell'autorità alla luce delle trasformazioni del credere e della religione cristiana nel capitolo IV de *La debolezza del credere*, intitolato *Autorità cristiane e strutture sociali* (de Certeau 2020: 77).

<sup>6</sup> Sulla questione del riconoscimento si veda, in particolare, il lavoro di Honneth (2019).

<sup>7</sup> De Certeau approfondisce questa concezione «autorizzante» dell'autorità in *La debolezza del credere* (2020). Si veda anche: Magatti, Martinelli (2021).

*più visibile, non è necessario concludere un'assenza dell'uomo a sé stesso o la sparizione dei riferimenti fondamentali che organizzano la coscienza collettiva e le vite individuali, bensì piuttosto una mancanza di coordinazione tra questi riferimenti e il funzionamento delle autorità socioculturali. Queste diventano insensate nella misura in cui non corrispondono più alla geografia reale del senso (Ivi: 24).*

Si tratta di parole decisive che invitano ad approfondire una concezione dinamica e, proprio per questo motivo, sempre precaria e instabile di ogni autorità. Questa poggia la sua esistenza e la sua legittimità su un fragile rapporto di coordinazione tra le rappresentazioni politiche, economiche, culturali e religiose di cui è portatrice e la «geografia reale del senso» continuamente definita e ridefinita a livello individuale e sociale. Per de Certeau è impossibile fingere che l'una possa essere senza l'altra: ogni autorità necessita di credibilità e di adesione provenienti dalla società in cui è inserita; allo stesso modo, ogni società necessita di forme di autorità attraverso le quali possa rappresentarsi e mantenere viva la propria capacità di comunicare e di creare nuove vie possibili. Il «gioco dell'autorità» non è identificabile esclusivamente in uno dei due poli, bensì nella coordinazione che deve crearsi e continuamente ricrearsi tra essi. Nel momento in cui questa coordinazione viene meno, nel momento in cui questo rapporto si interrompe, non è possibile troppo facilmente assumere «un'assenza dell'uomo a sé stesso o la sparizione dei riferimenti fondamentali che organizzano la coscienza collettiva e le vite personali». Piuttosto, è necessario che questa coordinazione sia ancora una volta problematizzata e ricostruita.

Per fare ciò, de Certeau suggerisce due possibili fronti lungo i quali è possibile agire: il primo fronte è quello che riguarda il riconoscimento di tutte le possibili forme di vita sociale, politica, economica, culturale e religiosa accomunate da un «rifiuto dell'insignificanza» («*refus de l'insignifiance*») (Ivi: 24); il secondo fronte riguarda, invece, la responsabilità verso quel «compito infinito» («*tâche infinie*») (Ivi: 30) che è costituito dalla composizione di un mondo comune.

Da una parte, parlare di «rifiuto dell'insignificanza» significa parlare di coloro che non si arrendono di fronte alla perdita di credibilità generalizzata nei confronti delle autorità esistenti. Se, infatti, in molti casi appare certamente evidente la profonda dissociazione e la grande mancanza di coordinazione tra rappresentazioni e convinzioni, tra i valori, le credenze e i simboli istituzionali e la «geografia reale del senso» (Ivi: 24), ciò, tuttavia, non significa che, spesso proprio a partire dai margini della vita sociale, non possano generarsi forme di resistenza e rinascita capaci di riportare in primo piano questioni di senso riguardanti l'intera società. De Certeau

definisce queste forme come accomunate da un rifiuto che «dice no all'insensato» e che «difende un "altro paese", privato di segni e spogliato di diritti – il paese straniero che costituiscono le esigenze della coscienza e dove si cercano delle ragioni comuni di vivere» (Ivi: 25). Per il gesuita francese, alcune volte questo rifiuto di arrendersi di fronte alla mancanza di senso si manifesta attraverso parole e gesti privi di grande visibilità e, soprattutto, privi di potere. Altre volte, tuttavia, questo rifiuto prende la forma di vere e proprie «rivoluzioni nascoste» («*révolutions cachées*») (Ivi: 26), le quali fanno progressivamente emergere nuove possibilità del credere e finanche nuove autorità politiche, economiche, sociali, culturali e religiose. Nuovi valori, nuove credenze e nuovi simboli prendono vita attraverso lo spessore e attraverso i margini del tessuto sociale. Si tratta di «cominciamenti» (Ivi: 27) nati dalla volontà di piccoli gruppi locali, di reti create collegando territori e paesi tra loro lontani oppure di veri e propri movimenti sociali organizzati stabilmente per farsi portavoce di diritti negati oppure di rivendicazioni considerate necessarie. Scrive, infatti, de Certeau:

*Costantemente, questa storia ricomincia. Può essere politica o culturale, i due aspetti d'altronde si distinguono sempre meno. Molto spesso, al di sotto di gerarchie trasformate in proprietà di ciò che dovrebbero «permettere» e lasciare parlare, ci sono delle lotte oscure contro l'insensato, poetiche sociali che risvegliano ed esprimono autorità nascenti. Questo mormorio organizzatore di una lingua vera sorprende sempre gli dèi del potere e i personaggi del teatro ufficiale quando, per caso, per un istante, tacciono (Ivi: 29).*

Tuttavia, dall'altro lato, prestare attenzione alle forme nascenti di rifiuto dell'insignificanza e alle rivoluzioni nascoste tra le pieghe del tessuto sociale, non esenta dall'esporsi su un secondo fronte: quello lungo il quale è necessario affrontare quel «compito infinito» che è costituito dalla composizione di un mondo comune. È quest'ultimo il volto eminentemente «politico» della questione dell'autorità, così come posta e interpretata da Michel de Certeau. Difatti, quella mancanza di coordinazione tra rappresentazioni e convinzioni, tra autorità e «geografia reale del senso», può essere ricostruita solamente impegnandosi attivamente in un compito collettivo per identificare e preservare delle «ragioni di vivere proprie a tutti e a ciascuno» (Ivi: 31). Ragioni di vivere che non possono mai essere semplicemente derivate dal passato in virtù della storia che testimoniano e neppure considerate a priori «credibili» in virtù della loro utilità politica, economica, culturale o religiosa. Al contrario, proprio come le autorità che rendono possibile la loro comunicazione e il loro riconoscimento reciproco, esse

devono essere continuamente discusse e vagliate, al fine di verificare la loro effettiva capacità di esprimere ciò che è sempre necessariamente loro «altro» e che sempre necessariamente loro «manca»: quella credibilità che può generarsi e rigenerarsi solamente all'interno della storia di una società.

## 5. CONCLUSIONI

Il contributo ha cercato di far emergere e di approfondire alcune trasformazioni innescate nel passaggio alla tarda modernità, così come presentate da Michel de Certeau in alcuni suoi articoli scritti tra la fine degli anni '60 e l'inizio degli anni '70. Nei decenni successivi, molti altri significativi processi politici, economici, sociali e culturali contribuiranno ad un'ulteriore profonda ristrutturazione degli assetti delle società avanzate. Solamente a titolo di esempio, si pensi al grande valore simbolico – e non solo – assunto dalla caduta del muro di Berlino nel novembre del 1989 e alla forte accelerazione impressa da questo evento al processo di apertura e di integrazione tecnica ed economica globale (Beck 2009). Processo che in molti casi andrà a dispiegarsi proprio mettendo ulteriormente in discussione numerose autorità locali, regionali e nazionali (Sassen 2008b). Oppure, si pensi, ad esempio, all'avvento e alla diffusione delle tecnologie dell'informazione e della comunicazione digitale e, soprattutto, a partire dai primi anni '90, del *world wide web*, il quale, ampliando e pluralizzando la sfera mediatizzata, contribuirà a deterritorializzare i riferimenti politici, economici, culturali e religiosi (Mattelart 2002).

Scomparendo nel gennaio del 1986, Michel de Certeau non potrà assistere a queste trasformazioni e non avrà modo di confrontarsi con esse, sia dal punto di vista esistenziale che, soprattutto, da quello intellettuale. Tuttavia, ciò non diminuisce il valore e l'attualità delle analisi e delle riflessioni presentate nelle pagine precedenti: da quelle sulla perdita di credibilità generalizzata, passando per quelle sulla società dell'espulsione e sull'esplosione della violenza, fino a quelle legate alla questione dell'autorità come coordinazione sempre fragile e precaria tra rappresentazioni e convinzioni. Al contrario, tali analisi e riflessioni invitano ancora oggi a interrogarsi sulle trasformazioni in atto e sulle loro possibili conseguenze presenti e future.

In questo senso, avviandosi verso la conclusione, è possibile evidenziare almeno due snodi critici che, a partire del pensiero certiano presentato, possono fungere da ulteriore stimolo, sia a livello di teoria sociale che a livello di ricerca empirica. Il primo snodo riguarda il rapporto tra la questione dell'autorità, declinata a livello loca-

le, regionale e nazionale, e la questione dei processi di espansione tecnica ed economica globale che, soprattutto a partire dalla fine degli anni '80, contribuiscono a ridefinire i flussi della mobilità di persone, merci e informazioni (Sassen 2008a). Il crescente successo in termini di capacità di esercizio di potere e di controllo da parte di nuovi attori collettivi «globali» – quali, ad esempio, istituzioni politiche sovra-nazionali e imprese multinazionali e transnazionali – rende necessario interrogarsi circa la possibilità che autorità politiche, economiche, culturali e religiose, espresse attraverso discorsi e strategie di partiti, sindacati, università e chiese, possano perdere ulteriormente credibilità all'interno del corpo sociale. A questo riguardo, non è un caso che lo stesso Michel de Certeau, già all'inizio degli anni '70, provi a mettere in guardia contro il rischio che la società tardo-moderna possa trasformarsi in una sorta di «regno dell'anonimo» e in una forma di «tirannia senza tiranno» (de Certeau 1993: 77). Entrambi frutti impreveduti di un intreccio sempre più pervasivo e fuori controllo tra potere economico e potere tecno-scientifico a livello globale<sup>8</sup>.

Il secondo snodo riguarda, invece, il rapporto tra la questione dell'autorità e la questione dell'avvento di quella «società dello spettacolo» già preconizzata a partire dalla fine degli anni '60 (Debord 2002) ma forse più compiutamente divenuta realtà solamente nei decenni successivi. Difatti, la nascita e la diffusione delle tecnologie della comunicazione digitale, del web e, negli ultimi decenni, in particolare, delle piattaforme social (Van Dijck *et al.* 2019) ha contribuito a rendere ancora più fragile e problematica l'adesione a valori, credenze e simboli rappresentati attraverso autorità locali, regionali e nazionali. Per un verso, la moltiplicazione dei dispositivi e delle reti di comunicazione digitale ha certamente spinto verso la moltiplicazione e la deterritorializzazione dei riferimenti politici, economici, culturali e religiosi, indebolendo così ulteriormente quella coordinazione necessaria tra rappresentazioni e «geografia reale del senso». Per un altro verso, invece, proprio la generalizzazione di una logica comunicativa tesa ad enfatizzare in modo crescente la dimensione «spettacolare» a scapito di quella «referenziale» (Codeluppi 2021), non può che condurre a interrogarsi ulteriormente circa la possibilità che valori, credenze e simboli possano essere trasformati in nient'altro che meri «simulacri» (Baudrillard 2015), sorta di «surrogati di autorità» creati e ricreati artificialmente al fine colmare un vuoto che, nella realtà, va sempre più dischiudendosi nel cuore stesso del corpo sociale.

<sup>8</sup> Un caso emblematico a questo riguardo è rappresentato dalle cosiddette «Big Tech Companies», tra le quali, in particolare, spiccano le «Big Five»: Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta e Microsoft. Per una ricognizione generale si veda, ad esempio: Morozov 2016.

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## L'autocorrosione del carattere di una generazione. Cosa ha plasmato nei boomer un'identità programmaticamente incoerente

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**Abstract.** The characterization of boomers (even in their later maturity) has always been dual-sided, highlighting at times their identity awareness and at others the strong external influences shaping their social construction. This article outlines the formation of their character across the life course from an internalist historiographical perspective, one rooted not in external socio-technical contingencies but in a process of self-modification driven by internal dynamics, beginning with a “disturbed imprinting” experienced twice. The first disturbance occurred during their transition to adulthood when, faced with the inheritance of a rights-based and Welfare society generously *octroyée* by their forebears, perceived as a discouraging *finis historiae*, boomers reacted through opposition. They complemented the eudaimonic aspirations of the era with a widespread strategy of “exaggeration”. The second disturbance emerged at the turn of the 1970s, as disenchantment surfaced alongside an acceleration of “diversionary strategies”, boomers, driven by crisis-induced mindsets and exposed to the pressure of particularly harmful pragmatic paradoxes, responded with strategies of disconfirmation, manifesting as individual crisis behaviors. Thus, faced with a twice-disturbed imprinting, boomers adapted along the way, arriving at a contradictory social mask. A central feature of this mask is the legitimization of the right to inconsistency, which, in a surprising trajectory, shifted from an *ought rule* to mere transgression, eventually devolving into a residual norm.

**Keywords:** denial, crisis moods, paradoxical situations, inconsistency.

### 1. SUL CARATTERE DEI BOOMER, FORGIATO ALL'INSEGNA DELLA CONTRADDITTORIETÀ

Un nuovo soggetto avanza: gli “splendidi settantenni” approdati ai capelli grigi dopo una lunga e gloriosa carriera da boomer. Un recente saggio di Stefano Poli (2021) si propone di coglierne il carattere come risultato di un lungo piano-sequenza retrospettivo. Non accontentandosi di disegnare un idealtipo destoricizzato, ma tracciando un sentiero di sviluppo lungo il mezzo secolo di vita in età adulta di questi protagonisti. Apprezzabile intento, dunque, che illumina i boomer di una luce ambivalente, definendoli (Ivi: 17) «un complesso movimento di identità collettiva di una generazione, combinato a processi di costruzione sociale, spesso mossi da una visione di mercato».

Questa natura biface dei boomer risulta più evidente nella loro tarda maturità, quando i solchi formati sulla loro maschera sono sfaccettati e contraddittori – tra *healthy ageing* e partecipazione, consumo agiato e accumulazione prudente – e si fatica a trovare un quid unificante che non si riduca a una generica combinazione età-periodo (esser vecchi, oggi); non si coglie una peculiare filosofia di vita, una identità generazionale.

Forse questa natura caleidoscopica e contraddittoria del “carattere” del boomer anziano è un effetto ottico dovuti ai limiti della nostra capacità interpretativa: forse è invece un indizio prezioso per cogliere lo specifico di quella generazione. Nelle pieghe della loro traiettoria di vita così esemplare si incistano e si sedimentano infatti convoluzioni – che cercherò di portare alla luce – che porteranno a una stagione finale all’insegna di una programmatica incoerenza caratteriale.

Punto di riferimento in questa direzione è un saggio di Richard Sennett (1998) in cui la corrosione del carattere lungo tre generazioni di una famiglia americana è effetto corruttivo di una mutazione in parallelo del contesto del “nuovo capitalismo”, guidata dall’aspirazione a un valore ambivalente come quello di flessibilità. Qui invece proverò a ricostruire la mutazione del carattere di una sola generazione, i boomer italiani, in una prospettiva storiografica internista: andando cioè a esplorare le trasformazioni e le contraddizioni interne alla loro stessa filosofia di vita. Non di corrosione parlo perciò, ma di auto corrosione del carattere, messo alla prova da due cesure epocali: la prima, da giovani adulti, all’assunzione dai loro padri di un’eredità così rotonda e compiuta, da essere percepita come una scoraggiante *finis historiae*; la seconda, al giro di boa degli anni Settanta, quando verranno al pettine i nodi delle scelte prese a vent’anni. Ne risulterà un graduale, cumulativo processo di indebolimento del “giroscopio interiore” (Riesman 1953) dei boomer.

## 2. OCTROYAGE: UN TORNANTE DI ROTTURA MA ETERODIRETTO

L’etichetta di “generazione in atto” (Mannheim 1928), consapevole della propria identità, è stata forse assegnata ai boomer con una certa leggerezza. Ma è vero forse anche qualcosa di più. Anche la stessa immagine di generazione “polemica” (Ortega y Gasset 1928), di rottura rispetto ai propri padri, è in buona parte una costruzione (e un’auto-costruzione) mitopoietica.

A formulare questo dubbio è un ultra-65enne medievalista francese, Philippe Ariès (1979: 559) che stendendo la voce “generazioni” dell’enciclopedia Einau-

di lancia una provocazione intrigante che non trova attenzione. Parlando della generazione del ’68 e di quel suo «rifiuto assoluto di un passato inutile da parte di una generazione innovatrice, completamente rivolta verso l’avvenire», chiosa: «Si è soliti attribuire questa volontà di far tabula rasa solo alla gioventù di oggi. Essa ne ha tratto conclusioni più radicali e rivoluzionarie, ma la rottura in sé non è opera sua, è stata perpetrata dai sessantenni di oggi quando erano giovani, fin dagli anni Quaranta-Cinquanta del nostro secolo».

In questa prospettiva, la “rivoluzione” del ’68 più che un segnale di rottura è stato (Micheli 2013) un patto sociale disegnato dai genitori e *octroyé* ai figli. Un patto, peraltro, conveniente a entrambi: più indipendenza dai vincoli di specie per i genitori (i primi nella storia a reclamare uno spazio e un tempo per sé come coppia), più indipendenza dai genitori per i ventenni del ’68. Altri studiosi di costume degli anni Sessanta concordano con Ariès nell’attribuire molta parte della responsabilità della rivoluzione dei costumi ai genitori e alla loro “pigra e interessata acquiescenza”. Lo sganciamento dei teenager fine anni Cinquanta dal proprio destino ascritto è allora una ricaduta dello sganciamento dei loro genitori dai propri destini genitoriali, reso possibile dalla cornice economica di una crescita ininterrotta del benessere, lungo i Trenta Gloriosi.

Chi sono questi perpetratori di innovazione, nati (secondo Ariès) negli anni Venti? Nella tassonomia americana che suddivide il Novecento in generazioni a dimensione variabile (Strauss and Howe 1991), prima dei boomer, della generazione X e dei Millennials, compare la *Silent Generation* tra metà Venti e metà Quaranta. In Italia, nel primo tornante della generazione dei Silenti troviamo alcune figure rompigghiaccio del pensiero riflesso italiano, da Franco Basaglia a Lorenzo Milani e Mario Lodi, da Giulio Maccacaro a Achille Ardigò e Antonio Cederna: pedagoghi e disegnatori della società, tutti nati nei *roaring twenties*, il cui lascito era proprio la determinazione a muoversi col vento in faccia. Sono loro, non i loro figli, ad aprire la strada a cambiamenti emancipativi epocali nelle “tecnologie del potere”. È tra i silenti che si annoverano i protagonisti della grande stagione di riforme universalistiche e identitarie, varate in Italia nei primi anni Settanta ma messe in cantiere nei Sessanta: scuola media unificata, liberalizzazione dell’accesso alle facoltà universitarie, statuto dei lavoratori, istituzione del divorzio, riforma del diritto di famiglia, via via fino alla legalizzazione dell’aborto e alla riforma psichiatrica nel 1978.

Dunque, le grandi innovazioni anni Sessanta nell’architettura della società sono copyright della generazione dei padri e graziosamente *octroyés*, e lo sganciamento dei teen-ager fine anni Cinquanta dal proprio destino

ascritto segue e consegue allo sganciamento dei genitori dai propri destini. Se mutuiamo da Ortega y Gasset la distinzione tra generazioni tradizionali o cumulative (quindi eterodirette) e generazioni polemiche o di rottura (quindi – si presume – autodirette), polemico e autodiretto risulta proprio il tornante nato negli anni Venti. Cosa ben diversa sono i boomer: generazione polemica, sì, ma eterodiretta, sia dalla costruzione sociale e di mercato, sia dalla spinta dei padri.

Ora, la natura *octroyée* della società dei diritti e del Welfare ereditata dai giovani anni Sessanta ha prodotto un inatteso effetto squilibrante sulla loro costruzione del sé. Può sembrare sorprendente: in fondo, non siamo di fronte a una eredità deprivante ma a un di più gratis; nessuno si lamenta se gli piove dal cielo il biglietto vincente di una lotteria. A meno che quel cadeau non scompagini un suo percorso di crescita identitaria.

Conviene riflettere un attimo sulla natura di alcuni fenomeni mentali non intenzionali, come l'esperienza e l'identità. Max Jammer (1971) definisce "bifronte" ogni termine che possa indicare sia un'azione transitiva sia una suscettibilità passiva, ricettiva. L'esperienza è uno di questi. Così pure l'identità. In quella che Weber (1922) chiama azione razionale "rispetto ai valori", il senso non risiede nel raggiungimento di un risultato che ne sia diretta conseguenza, ma nello svolgimento dell'azione stessa. Tuttavia, comportamenti conformati a un criterio identitario producono sistemi di valori a essa coerenti, e si è soliti chiamare "identitarie" le azioni coerenti a quei valori. Ma questo non giustifica la sovrapposizione tra logica identitaria e logica di adesione ai valori che essa produce. Sono perciò due i modi di intendere l'identità: da un lato insieme di valori già "agiti", già sedimentati nel tempo nella cultura e nell'immaginario, e per questo oggi assunti come dati, dall'altro il processo che dà senso in tempo reale, come sistema in azione qui-e-ora.

Nella vita di ogni giorno i due differenti statuti dell'identità si confondono tra loro, nel rosario di decisioni quotidiane basate su regole condivise. Ma quando si aprano scenari in cui le norme e i valori consueti non sono noti o non sono efficaci, la logica identitaria si smarca da quella di adesione a valori condivisi e affiora in superficie. Perciò l'identità dell'atto è anche un fenomeno mentale intrinsecamente effimero: quando la spinta innovativa dell'azione si cristallizza in nuovi quadri di riferimento, sfuma dissolvendosi in mera conformità a norme, valori e regole di appartenenza; ma in quel caso la logica identitaria perde la sua forza desiderante e la sua capacità generativa.

Dunque, identità e esperienza sono stati mentali non trasferibili, chiavi in mano, ad altri. Neppure da genitori a figli. Né per eredità, né per negoziazione, neppure per

grazioso lascito. C'è, sì, un'elargizione unilaterale, graziosamente concessa, che lega la generazione dei boomer ai loro genitori. Sta in quello scatto di rivendicazione di dignità inciso nella memoria collettiva degli italiani che hanno vissuto il grande disorientamento del '43. Interrompendo il susseguirsi di generazioni cumulative, quei ventenni (chi prendendo posizione attiva, nell'uno o nell'altro campo, chi vivendo l'esperienza della terzietà) sono stati generazione di rottura. In quegli scenari senza via di uscita, le scelte in prima persona produssero, prescindendo dall'esito, "la sensazione di essere padroni del mondo, cioè padroni di sé" (Micheli 2011: 101). Quella rivendicazione di rispetto pose le basi per ricadute rilevanti su pratiche e valori dei tornanti succedutisi. Questa è la dote, anche immateriale, di diritti e libertà acquisiti trasmessa dai genitori. Ma l'esperienza vissuta, la "sensazione di essere padroni di sé", quella non è trasmissibile ai figli.

### 3. PRIMA CESURA: LA PERCEZIONE SPIAZZANTE DI GIOCHI GIÀ FATTI

Davvero l'*octroyage* è così vulnerante per i boomer? La risposta di Tony Judt (2010: 84) è eloquente:

*Due generazioni di americani, quelli che avevano vissuto la guerra e i loro figli che avrebbero celebrato i Sessanta, sperimentano sicurezza occupazionale e mobilità sociale come mai prima. [...] Ma] un grande divario separa le due generazioni. Per tutti coloro nati dopo il 1945, lo Stato sociale e le sue istituzioni non erano la soluzione a dilemmi precedenti: rappresentavano semplicemente le condizioni normali ed anche un po' noiose dell'esistenza. I boomer non avevano conosciuto altro che un mondo di crescenti opportunità, generosi servizi scolastici e sanitari, ottimistiche prospettive di ascesa sociale e (forse soprattutto) un indefinibile ma onnipresente senso di sicurezza. Gli obiettivi della precedente generazione di riformatori [...] venivano percepiti come restrizioni alla libertà e all'espressione individuale.*

Siamo di fronte a una sorta di imprinting disturbato (Bowlby 1980). Nei ventenni del '43 la scrittura della repubblica è conquista personale di un'etica pubblica, nei boomer al centro della percezione dello Stato sociale sta uno Stato invasivo costruito da altri e la spinta a emendarsi dal paternalismo dei genitori. Lo spiazzamento viaggia sottotraccia, intorbida il liquido amniotico della generazione nascente di giovani adulti, perché li mette in una situazione insostenibile e perdurante, che tocca non il benessere economico ma l'aspirazione stessa a realizzarsi e di essere "padroni del mondo, cioè padroni di sé". Del retaggio *octroyé* sfuggono ai figli le lacrime e il sudore, restano invece le tracce di due passioni tristi, il senso di inerzia e quello di saturazione: tutte le cime sono state

scalate, nulla resta da fare. Di quel senso di saturazione che provano i boomer a cui i genitori hanno “sottratte le chiavi per aprire il mondo” Concita de Gregorio (2019: 38) traccia un affresco:

*la Resistenza, la chiesa che fa i miracoli, la medicina, il Pci, l'aristocrazia col sangue blu, i movimenti degli anni Settanta, la lotta armata, i vegani, gli artisti, la vita nei boschi, la congregazione di Geova, la scienza. Il catalogo è completo, a contare tre generazioni dalla mia. Praticamente la storia del Novecento in una famiglia sola. Eppure io per tutta la vita mi sono sentito estraneo [...]. Non vedo ancora la strada davanti. Hanno cancellato prima del mio arrivo le tracce di ogni strada possibile.*

La percezione straniante di una “fine della storia” spinge i destinatari in uno stato di fruizione passiva, impedendo loro una appropriazione identitaria della dote. Donde il senso di insipida scontatezza con cui sono accolte le conquiste del Welfare strappate dai loro padri, un senso di soffocamento nei confronti di una presunta egemonia dei “tecnici del potere”. Parlando sarcasticamente di un’“epoca di Le Corbusier”, Judt (2010) tratteggia la sensazione di una dipendenza oppressiva da uno Stato panottico che non presta ascolto ai bisogni e ai desideri di coloro che sosteneva di rappresentare. Già a Elvio Fachinelli (1968: 32 sgg) era chiaro l’uovo del serpente nascosto nella pulsione desiderante, che al realizzarsi muta in logica di appartenenza: «Un’immagine o un fantasma di società che promette una sempre più completa liberazione dal bisogno, [e] nello stesso tempo minaccia la perdita di sé come progetto e desiderio [...]. Il desiderio appagato è morto come desiderio, e alla sua morte fa seguito la morte del gruppo».

È la prima cesura nella vita dei boomer: l’inquietante sensazione che tutti i giochi siano stati fatti, senza possibilità di tornare indietro. La sensazione del rocciatore incrociato in parete, tagliati i ponti per il ritorno ma senza i mezzi per concludere la propria salita, «così che non è più possibile né tornare indietro né avanzare [e] il salire si è rovesciato nello smarrimento» (Binswanger 1956: 2). Lo smarrimento di cui parla Binswanger prende i boomer all’entrata in vita adulta, e non è senza conseguenze. Un grumo di moods di crisi produce in loro una molteplicità di meccanismi di rifrazione della catena decisionale intenzione-azione (Micheli 2018). Jon Elster (1979) accenna ad alcuni di questi effetti, vistosi inceppamenti negli ingranaggi del processo di formazione delle azioni.

Uno è un senso di impotenza che toglie capacità di reazione e produce indifferenza agli stimoli (*akedia*). Un secondo è la perdita di capacità di adottare un ordine di priorità nelle scelte (paratassi): tutte le preferenze

alternative sono poste allo stesso livello, tutte desiderabili contemporaneamente e con la stessa determinazione, senza identificare precedenze, interdipendenze o priorità, senza inquadrarle in una sintassi. Un terzo rilevante effetto è la perdita di capacità di mettere in collegamento consequenziale intenzioni e azioni. Riscontrando gli stessi umori nei boomer, Judt ne coglie l’effetto su un epocale slittamento nella finalizzazione dell’azione, da pubblica a individuale:

*l’elemento unificante della generazione degli anni Sessanta non era l’interesse di tutti, ma i bisogni e i diritti di ognuno. L’affermazione del diritto di ogni persona alla massima libertà privata e alla libertà assoluta di esprimere desideri autonomi [...] divennero le parole d’ordine della sinistra [...]. Il dibattito pubblico iniziò a essere colonizzato dalla “identità”: privata, sessuale, culturale (con) un costo ineludibile, il declino del senso di uno scopo condiviso (Judt 2010: 88).*

Mi guardo bene dalla trappola della generalizzazione e della sineddoche. Di fronte all’offerta demotivante di una società *octroyée*, molti hanno stretto i bulloni dei progetti trasmessi dai genitori, che ancora si reggevano su palafitte fragili, o hanno sviluppato progetti straordinari alzando la posta in gioco (la doppia presenza come esperienza unitaria, un’organizzazione del lavoro razionale non alienante, un *role set* di genere non succube della cultura patriarcale, la liberazione di menti e corpi dalle mura asilari...). In quegli anni sono fiorite risposte radicali mirate a portare a compimento con coerenza le spinte rompighiaccio e pionieristiche di padri silenziosi. Ma lo spirito del tempo, quello dominante, era colorato più di umori di crisi che di strategie, più di rabbia che di ragione.

#### 4. FUORI DELL’ARGINE

Nei primi fermenti di Nanterre i fratelli Cohn-Bendit (1969: 7 sg) dettavano la linea evocando il comandante Gaveau al processo dei comunardi del 1871: decapitare ogni direzione del movimento.

«Ciò che contestiamo non è la necessità di organizzarsi, ma la necessità di una direzione rivoluzionaria». La pulsione dominante era quella ad uscire dall’argine, quale che fosse la direzione in cui muoversi. Era questo l’umore che si fece spirito del tempo. Ricostruendo gli anni Settanta ne *L’orda d’oro*, Balestrini e Moroni (1997: 5) raccontano una “ondata che travolse quasi tutto ma che ha lasciato dietro a sé dei depositi alluvionali”. Epoca traboccante di domande che Sidney Tarrow (1990) definiva “eccessive” e di definizioni vagamente paranoi-

che (il medico tecnico del capitale, lo psichiatra tecnico del controllo) e sorprendentemente durevoli: anche chi ha amato L'epoca delle passioni tristi è colpito dall'innata fascinazione con cui ancor oggi si evoca quella stagione: «Buenos Aires era una primavera. Frequentavo gli ambienti della psichiatria alternativa all'ospedale Borda. Nella sua dimora nel barrio di Belgrano David Cooper con la sua barba e il suo carisma ci parlava della "vera rivoluzione": l'esplosione della norma...» (Benasayag 2016: 8).

In molte manifestazioni di quegli anni si intravede in filigrana, sia pur semplificando, un'inconsapevole strategia di mera "esagerazione", senza il supporto di una qualche idea. «Esagerare vuol dire cominciare a inventare» campeggiava sui muri del Maggio. Cerco sul Tommaseo-Bellini (dato alle stampe dal 1861 ma ancora buon metro di paragone) la voce Esagerare: «Dal latino Ex (fuori di) e Agger (argine, riparo all'acque del fiume o del torrente o del mare), lo che mena al senso metaforico di Oltrepassare con parole i confini del vero. Meglio e direttamente dal verbo Exaggerare significante ammassare a guisa d'argine, d'onde il significato metaforico di Aggrandire, ampliare le cose per via di parole, Farle parer maggiori di quel che sono»

Esagerare è copula senza verbo, macchina celibe, incomprensibile, impossibile. È concepire l'intervento politico come costruzione di situazioni prescisse da un'idea purchessia, rappresentazione di momenti di vita collettiva affidati all'uso creativo di tutti i mezzi di espressione: puro ricamo sulla tela di Guy Debord (1968). Mario Perniola (2013) annota la rapidità con cui il movimento situazionista attecchì nel pensiero dei movimenti. Ex-post, si rivelerà un fattore cruciale nell'indirizzare il sentiero di crescita e formazione del carattere dei boomer.

Esagerare non è l'unica strategia di rivendicazione identitaria. Un'altra, che le tiene bordone, è per esempio quella di prendere le distanze con sdegnoso distacco (magari citando Flaubert: *la sottise est de vouloir conclure...*) da ogni aspirazione a "far bene il proprio lavoro", completando con coerenza un progetto. La ripulsa apriori della compiutezza è una pulsione romantica che riaffiora in ogni tornante *leading-edge* in cerca della propria identità. Così come si ripresentano regolarmente, nella storia del gusto e dell'arte occidentale, oscillazioni che portano ad esprimere spiccate preferenze per ciò che viene etichettato come "primitivo" (Gombrich 2023). Primitivo è Giotto: ma la sua non è semplificazione, è scarnificazione dell'essenza. Primitivo è van Gogh, ma in una lettera al fratello Theo (ivi: 243) scrive: «non voglio (figure) accademicamente esatte, la mia più grande aspirazione è di imparare a dipingere tali trasmutazioni della realtà, più vere della verità letterale». Anche van Gogh esagera ma

non semplifica: coglie l'essenza. Anche il primitivismo, come l'esagerazione, può generare quello che Imre Lakatos (1970) chiamava un "programma progressivo di ricerca", l'avvio di un motore di innovazione. Ma solo se «lo scivolamento progressivo dei problemi (è) utile a meglio comprenderli», cogliendone l'essenza. "Voler concludere" non è solo manierismo di chi disegni arabeschi: è (deve essere) voglia di trarre conseguenze coerenti.

## 5. NON SOSPINTI DA UNA ROTTA, NÉ DA UNA META

Esagerazione e primitivismo sono alimentati dalla convinzione che salpare verso il mare aperto espone allo schiaffo del vento ma libera dalle secche degli stereotipi, esponendo così alla possibilità di scoprire grandi tesori, come i principi di Serendip. È possibile; ma a condizione che levare l'ancora induca a mettere a punto il proprio giroscopio interiore (Riesman 1993). Lucy Suchman (1985), addentrandosi nei meandri delle differenze tra azione pianificata e azione situata, riporta un esempio suggestivo. Il navigatore trukese parte con la sua piroga senza un piano di navigazione ma con in testa una meta. Per raggiungerla utilizza le informazioni che gli danno il vento e le onde, le correnti e le stelle, le nuvole e il rumore dell'acqua contro la chiglia. Se richiesto, saprebbe puntare il dito in ogni attimo sulla destinazione, ma non saprebbe indicare la rotta. Come la piroga, che ha in mente una meta ma non un piano, il giovane boomer davanti una società apparentemente realizzata si trova nella necessità di trovare una meta, improvvisando. Ma qualcosa differenzia i due casi. Improvvisare, annota Claudio Ciborra (2002: 157), non è una mera accelerazione del tempo «ma una *extemporalis actio*, un situarsi 'fuori dal flusso normale del tempo' [che avviene] trascinandolo dentro al quadro non solo la situazione oggettiva esterna ma anche le circostanze personali dell'attore, catturate dai moods (*affectio*)».

Nell'improvvisare, nella missione impossibile di costruire qualcosa ripartendo da una tabula rasa, non c'è solo una normale azione di *problem solving*. Accanto e in sinergia con un sapere pur sempre cognitivo è coinvolta la sfera degli umori. È la "situazione o tonalità emotiva", il "come ci si sente" (Heidegger 1927). Non uno stato psicologico cognitivamente strutturato (un atteggiamento) ma uno stato d'animo. Né nella *planned action* né nella *situated action* entrano i moods dell'attore. Inerzialmente, cavalchiamo sempre un solo cavallo, quello della logica cognitiva, solo moltiplicando i parametri di cui tener conto. Invece ogni attore entra sempre – anche senza consapevolezza – nella situazione con un suo stato d'animo, elusivo e difficile da tener sotto controllo perché i

moods vanno e vengono come il vento. E come il vento a volte si fermano.

Dov'è allora il quid che separa l'azione della piroga da quella del boomer? La prima affianca a un raffinato sapere indiziario quel lampo di energia prodotto da stati d'animo "eudaimonistici" (Nussbaum 2001), che investono una meta di grande importanza e aspirano a una «piena fioritura del potenziale umano». Anche il boomer non ha una rotta tracciata (quella che aveva l'ha rifiutata) né una meta chiara cui tendere, ma non ha neppure dentro di sé l'effervescenza di umori desideranti. Ha solo stati d'animo di crisi che inducono all'inerzia stuporosa o alla reiterazione compulsiva di azioni senza meta, o alla frantumazione degli stati d'essere. Le storie raccolte con interviste in profondità negli anni Ottanta e Novanta (Micheli 2003; 2010) raccontavano una molteplicità di questi spasmi, che impedivano di mettere a fuoco una meta, una rotta e una motivazione.

Raccontavano per esempio di una gran voglia di realizzarsi moltiplicandosi in più "anime lavorative separate", pendolando tra una molteplicità di appartenenze (Micheli 2010: 114). Ed erano storie di insofferenza diffusa sorprendentemente assonanti con la ricostruzione clinica di un caso di "forma di esistenza mancata" stessa da Ludwig Binswanger (1956: 150): quella del giovane Jurg Zünd, «universitario vivace, sensibile e impulsivo», mossosi fin da ragazzo in mondi diversi e contraddittori, che per tutta la vita non riesce a mettere radici in nessuno di essi, seguendo ora questo ora quel modello offertogli dagli altri, adottandone le *allures*. Jurg Zünd esperisce uno stato di esistenza so- spesa, marcata da una perdita del centro, una moltiplicazione e frantumazione dei mondi di vita, il rigetto di tutto ciò che è irreversibile e l'impulso ad adattarsi volta a volta agli andamenti assunti dal mondo, senza un proprio giroscopio interiore. Binswanger racconta il caso clinico di Jurg Zünd quando i boomer avevano ancora i pantaloni corti, ma di loro *fabula narratur*. *How does it feel?* cantava, tre volte ripetendolo, Bob Dylan, proprio nel 1964, al cuore della stagione dei boomer: «Come ci si sente? A essere senza radici, senza un'identità, come una pietra smossa?». La piroga trukese non ha un piano ma ha una meta e dentro di sé un mood. Il giovane boomer punta al mare aperto con l'unica bussola del muoversi fuori dell'argine, ma senza una meta e senza un mood che lo aiutino a tenere la rotta.

## 6. SECONDA CESURA: DISINCANTO E SPAESAMENTO

Una seconda cesura tocca i boomers al giro di boa degli anni di piombo. Al disincanto per i falli-

del movimento degli anni Sessanta subentra nei più uno stato d'inerzia, ma anche un'accelerazione in minoranze consistenti di "strategie diversive" (Morris and Reilly 1987) di risposta: la lotta armata clandestina, l'esplosione del consumo di eroina. Il tasso aggiunto di violenza sale biforcandosi, dirigendo la propria aggressività verso sé e verso l'altro, come scriveva Walter Tobagi nel 1978: «Speranze e illusioni si restringono a un orizzonte tragico, si trasformano in spinta di distruzione e autodistruzione, che poi significa sparare al nemico o iniettarsi una dose».

Sia chiaro, lo scivolamento verso le armi non è decifrabile solo con un approccio storiografico internista: un pulviscolo di fattori di contesto (nazionali, internazionali) hanno giocato le loro carte nell'instradare il "sentiero di sviluppo" nella direzione che ha preso, e il loro peso è stato cruciale. Inoltre, anche dentro un'ottica internista, non c'è consequenzialità significativa tra strategie di autoaffermazione identitaria tout court "fuori dell'argine" nei Sessanta e intervento armato nei Settanta. Tra le distinte anime che Giorgio Galli (1986) individua agli albori dell'organizzazione armata (un'ala sindacalista militante, una marxista, una catto-comunista), la spinta all'accelerazione del conflitto sembra più affondare le sue radici nel bisogno di accentuata coerenza rispetto ai valori dei padri (si tratti della "resistenza tradita" o di un cattolicesimo radicale). Ma al precipitare degli eventi il rumore bianco, assordate che prevarrà è quello delle parole d'ordine ("alzare il tono dello scontro") ex-agenti e debordiani del Maggio.

Per tutti e comunque, quale che sia il groviglio di traiettorie seguite, la fiducia nel futuro e la rottura col passato lasciano il posto a un (nuovo e più acuto) spaesamento diffuso. Cronisti e storici iniziano a leggere quegli anni attraverso la chiave di lettura di umori di crisi che si diffondono. Citando i reportages di Alfonso Madeo sul Corriere all'indomani dell'assassinio di Bachelet, nel 1980, Crainz (2009: 129) riporta la percezione del dilagare di una "quotidianità passiva", priva di ansie e valori: «un silenzio che infastidisce, che comunica una sensazione di angoscia».

Chi sono, in particolare, gli attori che si caricano addosso questo fardello di umori? I boomer, d'accordo, ma quali? Perché una precisazione si rende necessaria. La generazione dei boomer include due tornanti (dal '46 al '55, dal '55 al '64), che vivono gli stessi eventi a età così diverse da non potersi immaginare come un tutt'uno omogeneo. Negli anni di piombo, i primi boomer erano intorno ai grossomodo trent'anni, i secondi poco più che ventenni. Karen Ritchie (1995) coglieva la diversa cifra dei due tornanti paragonandoli ai profili anteriore e posteriore dell'ala di un aereo: il primo tornante (*leading-edge*) rompe il vento o il ghiaccio e scompiglia il

quadro di riferimento, il secondo (*trailing-edge*) si muove di conserva. Allora quale tra i due tornanti è più coinvolto nella mutazione di stati d'animo degli anni '70?

Per rispondere bisogna distinguere due tempistiche: quella della svolta nelle scelte (il passaggio alla clandestinità, la lotta armata) e quella della rifrazione degli umori. La prima mutazione è senza dubbio stretto copyright dei *leading-edge*. Se scorriamo le biografie dei protagonisti della lotta armata degli anni Settanta, sono praticamente tutti (con l'eccezione di Renato Curcio) nati nel primo tornante. Il rebound psicologico e il collasso degli umori colpiscono invece duramente i *trailing-edge*, come scriveva Piero Craveri (1995: 722): «mancava al movimento del '77 l'ottimismo profondo, la carica psicologica di onnipotenza della generazione precedente». Contrariamente alla logica, la mutazione delle scelte anticipa quella degli umori. Nel clima di città militarizzate e servizi d'ordine spasmodicamente arroccati alla “difesa degli spazi democratici”, Guido Crainz (2003), cita una testimonianza da un collettivo di Napoli: «nessuno fu in grado di riconoscere che quella era un'altra generazione rispetto a quella del '68»: “generata in modo diverso”, portava con sé “molto più risentimento che utopia, molta più rabbia che progetto».

## 7. PARADOSSI PRAGMATICI E DISCONFERME

Dunque, ai meccanismi di rifrazione che hanno segnato i boomer nella loro stagione di entrata in vita adulta altri si aggiungono e cumulano negli anni di piombo, aggravandone la pressione. Altri esercizi di realtà aumentata, altre esasperazioni dell'esperienza fanno saltare il già labile confine tra scelte di morte e scelte di vita. Una testimonianza di Marino Sinibaldi è così icastica da essere ripresa sia da Crainz (2003: 573) che da Gotor (2001: 200): «C'erano i giardini dell'Università, fu il febbraio più caldo della storia, c'era già il sole e le margherite e si stava tutti là nei prati, un sacco di gente [...]. Tra noi c'era una parte che stava solo sdraiata tra le margherite e c'era una parte che solamente sparava, e c'era una parte tra tutte e due le cose».

È la seconda epocale rifrazione dell'umore collettivo in dieci anni. A generarla sono ora le trappole di alcuni paradossi pragmatici (Watzlawick *et al.* 1971): quando cioè da due sistemi logico-affettivi di riferimento entrambi irrinunciabili scaturiscono due ordini di implicazioni entrambe corrette ma inconciliabili tra loro – così che «viene a fallire la possibilità stessa di scegliere» (Ivi: 214), è radicalmente messa in questione l'architettura di senso di una persona e si resta in stallo, immersi in un'inerzia stuporosa, incapaci di prendere scelte.

*Mentre il rifiuto equivale al messaggio “hai torto”, la disconferma dice “tu non esisti”. Se paragonassimo la conferma e il rifiuto del Sé altrui rispettivamente ai concetti di verità e falsità (termini che si usano in logica), dovremmo far corrispondere la disconferma al concetto di indecidibilità, che è di un ordine logico diverso (Ivi: 78)*

Situazioni paradossali ci vengono incontro ogni giorno, e sono fattori di innesco di molti percorsi di deriva. Alcuni di essi, operando sul confine sfocato tra la vita e la morte, acquisiscono un peso più rilevante. Paul Fussell (1975: 397) racconta l'esperienza di «vicoli ciechi, frustrazioni e assurdità» che intrappolarono i soldati inglesi nelle trincee francesi del '15-'18 nella gabbia di un paradosso così formulabile: «se obbedisci al comando di stare in trincea sei destinato al massacro, se ti rifiuti la diserzione è un gesto antipatriottico e quindi infamante; dunque, ogni scelta dotata di senso è preclusa». Ritroviamo lo stesso paradosso sotto i riflettori degli anni di piombo:

*L'area dissacrante e pacifica del movimento, che esprimeva un'ansia di ribellione contro i persistenti vincoli gerarchici e patriarcali presenti nella società italiana, visse un rapporto con la frangia violenta e armata all'insegna di un'inevitabile ambiguità di valori e comportamenti [...]. La contiguità tra l'ala armata del movimento e quella pacifica regnava sovrana e sfuggente [...]. Era comprensibile la difficoltà per i secondi di ignorare le richieste di aiuto dei primi: [...] l'oggettiva prossimità esistenziale alimentava un'area di contiguità molto estesa che non implicava una connivenza con la scelta della lotta armata, ma non poteva prevedere il tradimento o la delazione (Gotor 2022: 201).*

La narrazione di Gotor descrive esemplarmente un paradosso pragmatico, esteso non solo agli studenti nei giardini dell'università ma all'ampia platea dell'opinione pubblica “democratica”: «se neghi l'evidenza della violenza vai contro la tua coscienza, se la denunci rinunci a far parte del fronte democratico dei “difensori dei deboli”, cui sei fiero di appartenere» (*Ibidem*).

Tra queste due istanze molti restavano intrappolati. Davvero quegli anni di spaesamento sono stati una trincea intrisa di vicoli ciechi, frustrazioni e assurdità paradossali. Ma anche una formidabile palestra dove imparare ogni arte e sotterfugio per scansare quelle trappole, senza restarne schiacciati. A quel punto, infatti, le strategie “polemiche” di negazione tramite esagerazione e paratassi, adottate negli anni Sessanta, non erano più sufficienti a fronteggiare quegli effetti devastanti. Non bastava negare, occorreva denegare. Stanley Cohen (2002) distingue il concetto di negazione (con cui ci si rifiuta che pensieri, fantasie o desideri ci appartengano) dal concetto di diniego o disconferma (*denial*) con cui si nega riconoscimento all'intero quadro di realtà che sta dietro

quei pensieri, fantasie o desideri. Nel diniego/disconferma Cohen (2002: 62) vede la cifra del nostro tempo: «la vera voce della “nuova barbarie” dei conflitti etnici nazionalisti, con i suoi ingannevoli circuiti di farisaica onnipotenza e giustificazione di sé incolpando gli altri».

Strategie di disconferma riemergono in quegli anni in tutti gli atti della banalità quotidiana, «in tutte le situazioni in cui un individuo prova ad uscire da un vicolo cieco o da una trappola paradossale» (Micheli, 2010: 153) che manda in pezzi l'architettura di senso del sé. Così, negando valore a ogni quadro di riferimento, l'individuo disconfermante si approntava vie d'uscita dalle trappole paradossali, generalmente in forma di condotte individuali di crisi.

Ma questo negar valore a ogni quadro di riferimento suona familiare: ci riporta indietro nel tempo, a sfogliare *La société du spectacle*, là dove Debord (1968: 204) raccoglie e ricompatta

*i fanti perduti di un esercito immobile» dopo il fallimento dell'abbondanza capitalista, incitandoli a seguire «un nuovo generale Ludd» che li lancia nella distruzione delle macchine del consumo permesso» (115), [in nome di una “società dell'immagine” la cui] «verità non è altro che la negazione di questa società» (199) e la cui «teoria critica comunica nel suo proprio linguaggio [che è] il linguaggio della contraddizione [...]: non una negazione dello stile, ma lo stile della negazione*

Così come era martellante, negli anni del fervore “polemico” (Ortega y Gasset 1923) dei boomer, il ricorso compulsivo evocato da Debord all'artificio – rassicurante oggetto transizionale – del rovesciamento hegeliano delle relazioni stabilite tra i concetti, e massime del rovesciamento del genitivo, «espressione stessa delle rivoluzioni storiche». Già negli anni Sessanta il messaggio debordiano anticipava tutti gli umori diffusi nella seconda cesura, quella dei Settanta.

#### 8. LA SORPRENDENTE PARABOLA DELL'INCOERENZA: OUGHT RULE, NORMA RESIDUA, MUST

Per due volte, dunque, i tornanti nati nel secondo dopoguerra, *leading-edge* e poi *trailing-edge*, lungo il loro tragitto in volo hanno attraversato violenti vuoti d'aria che hanno scosso in profondità le loro certezze cognitive e affettive: prima, all'entrata in età adulta, nell'imprinting disturbato dalla percezione che tutto era già stato fatto, poi, dieci anni dopo, nelle trappole paradossali degli anni di piombo. Tutto questo non poteva

non lasciare cicatrici sui loro comportamenti e sulle loro capacità di valutazione e formazione delle scelte.

La doppia perturbazione, in particolare, ha gradualmente portato i boomer dapprima a sposare nella lotta strategie paratattiche come regola normale di azione (come nel provocatorio pamphlet *Vogliamo tutto* di Nanni Balestrini, 1971) poi – in stretta consequenzialità – ad affermare come dominante la pratica di “una sorta di individualismo protetto”, descritto da Giuseppe De Rita (Censis 1992: 17) come «il massimo dell'individualismo con il massimo della protezione, quasi una società della bisaccia, della borsa a due tasche, tutt'e due comunque piene»; infine – in un crescendo rossiniano – a derubricare, nella valutazione delle scelte, l'incoerenza da parametro proscritto a mera “norma residua”, e talvolta a valore prescrivibile. Merita di essere capita meglio questa sorprendente mutazione. Cercherò di farlo usando come grimaldelli due concetti, quello di “effetto coorte” e quello appunto di “norma residua”.

Un “effetto coorte” è quel fenomeno che si osserva quando, a partire da un qualche impatto disturbato iniziale (come avviene per i boomer all'entrata in vita adulta), una generazione sviluppa un trait di carattere significativamente differente dalle generazioni che l'hanno preceduta ma che (attenzione) rimane di lì in avanti stabile lungo l'intero suo corso di vita. Seguendo i mutamenti valoriali nei boomer lungo tre *waves* dell'*European Social Survey* Poli (2021: 137) trova invece che «nei primi Ottanta i boomer si mostrano più indulgenti della media della popolazione verso alcune forme di devianza pecuniaria (tangenti, evasione fiscale) e verso le droghe leggere [ma] la disinvoltura cala a fine secolo» (quando invece il rifiuto è molto più diffuso).

È possibile – riflette Poli – che le vicende di tangentopoli abbiano realizzato un “effetto coorte” tra gli appartenenti di quella generazione, o si tratta piuttosto di un “effetto età” (del tipo: si nasce incendiari, si muore pompieri)? Perché se di effetto coorte si tratta, è un effetto molto particolare. Per comportamenti socialmente trasgressivi, infatti, l'atteggiamento dei boomer non si stabilizza ma segue una parabola opposta e speculare a quella della sfera pubblica generale: più trasgressivi a trent'anni rispetto a un'opinione pubblica più rigida, più intransigenti a cinquanta rispetto a un sentire collettivo più lasco. Il fattore di imprinting non marca quindi una generazione una *semper*, non la ingabbia in un idealtipo immutabile ma le assegna un suo peculiare “sentiero di sviluppo”, un “carattere” inconfondibile. Il doppio imprinting disturbato vissuto pare aver insegnato ai boomer ad evolvere in itinere, mutando anche radicalmente la propria filosofia. Un cammino esperien-

ziale cumulativo, insomma, come nei versi di Machado: *“Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar”*.

I contenuti della prima rifrazione sperimentata dai boomer nella loro “lettura della situazione” ci dice allora qualcosa di più, sulla cifra di questa generazione. La spinta a estenuare i contorni di ogni progetto identitario, senza una rotta e senza una meta, ha comportato anche – senza soluzione di continuità e senza che ce ne accorgessimo – la rivendicazione del diritto prima non contemplato a cambiare idea: il diritto all'incoerenza. Abbattendo come birilli anche robusti principi dell'etica e della logica come il principio del terzo escluso («ci sono situazioni in cui la strada percorribile è solo A o non-A, *tertium non datur*») e il principio di contraddizione («non possono essere vere, allo stesso tempo e nello stesso modo, A e la sua negazione»).

In questa superfetazione della incoerenza si sente l'eco della concezione debordista che (Perniola, 2011: 58) si trascina dietro la pulsione anticonfuciana manifestatasi nella Rivoluzione culturale dal 1966, all'insegna del motto «distruggere l'antico e incoraggiare il nuovo», contrapposto al principio confuciano «studiare l'antico per conoscere il nuovo». Così la parte trainante di quella generazione aveva presto appreso a muoversi oltre il tabù della coerenza, liberandosi «da ogni condizionamento non dico teorico, ma logico, esonerandoli dal principio di non-contraddizione, [...] autorizza(ndo) la loro incoerenza, la loro ignoranza, [...] infischiosene non solo della dialettica di Hegel, ma persino della logica di Aristotele» (Ivi: 80 sg).

Sbarazzarsi di un principio di coerenza è una scelta gravida di conseguenze imprevedibili. I processi di formazione delle scelte – non diversamente dai processi che portano a un buon modello interpretativo del mondo – richiedono infatti, direbbe un filosofo della scienza (Delattre 1981), un continuo esercizio di conciliazione tra le “metafisiche influenti” adottate e l'osservazione. Il che comporta una doppia e continua verifica sul modello o sull'azione adottata: da un lato la consistenza con la realtà (la sua razionalità esterna: che l'azione stia in piedi operativamente), dall'altro la coerenza o razionalità interna tra le parti del modello/azione (che stia in piedi logicamente). Analizzare la coerenza interna di un'azione o di un progetto richiede di scomporre le ipotesi, incrociarne le suggestioni, ricostruirle tracciandone una sintassi. E l'affidabilità di un progetto (individuale, collettivo) dipende tanto dalla coerenza interna quanto dalla sua consistenza esterna.

Forse la molteplicità di sfaccettature dei boomer ha a che fare con il nodo della coerenza, forse è il risultato finale di una lenta autocorrosione del carattere di una generazione cresciuta come Jurg Zund e divenuta giocoforza, al

termine della sua metamorfosi, uno Zelig cangiante. Solo i morti e gli stupidi non cambiano idea – quante volte sentiamo ripetere compulsivamente questa giaculatoria. Perché mai questo aforisma apparentemente di buon senso si diffonde da alcuni decenni con la virulenza di una Xilella? Resta l'impressione fastidiosa che serva a legittimare un sistematico, programmatico anche se del tutto inconsapevole abbandono del valore della coerenza.

In un celebre saggio degli anni Sessanta, Thomas Scheff (1966), riflettendo sul livello di esplicitazione e di cogenza dei frames normativi di una società, si sofferma su una regione di norme, dai contorni sfocati, che chiama “residue”, cioè moderatamente trasgressive ma non formalmente prescritte (*ought rules*), o la cui trasgressione non prevede esplicite sanzioni sociali, e che in certi tempi e contesti possono essere accettate e in altri ostracizzate. Goffman (1964) faceva gli esempi dell'indolenza e dell'esser «fuori posto».

Credo che oggi l'incoerenza sia entrata a pieno titolo nell'area delle trasgressioni a norme residue. Strana parabola, quella del valore della coerenza nel carattere dei boomer: dapprima centrale (addirittura fondativo, si è visto, in alcuni rivoli di radicalità dei primi Settanta) poi messo alla prova della perturbazione dei Settanta, infine esposto a paradossali inversioni di marcia quando ai boomer già cominciavano a spuntare i primi capelli bianchi. Questo slittamento degli elementari principi di logica sposta (o deporta) l'incoerenza dalla regione delle trasgressioni esplicitamente condannate a quella delle norme residue, sensibili a ogni cambio del vento, fino a farla scivolare nella regione di quel che è normale, quasi prescritto, un must per chi non vuole passar per stupido.

Questa parabola osservata negli ultimi decenni del Novecento riguarda una quota di sfera pubblica molto più ampia di quanto potremmo pensare. Altrimenti non capiremmo l'invito di Bertolt Brecht: «Voi, che sarete emersi dai gorghi / dove fummo travolti (...) pensate a noi / con indulgenza». Comprenderlo è doveroso, sì. Arrendersi, a questo fragoroso smottamento, preferirei di no.

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## Turnover tra generazioni nel settore agrario: il caso della mancata applicazione della misura PACSRG004 “Cooperazione per il ricambio generazionale”

PIPPO RUSSO

**Abstract.** The issue of agricultural turnover is high on the policy agenda of the European Community and political and social scientists. A structural feature of the European agricultural system, for which no solution has yet been found, is the difficult access of persons under 40 to positions of ownership and control of agricultural holdings. Although methodological simplifications tend to underestimate the real generational change in farming, the problem remains unresolved and requires appropriate responses that will encourage the fight against aging of agricultural sector. An attempt has been made to move in this direction with the CAP measure SRG004, entitled “Cooperation for generational renewal”. It provides a mechanism for the possibility of establishing cooperation between a farmer over 65 and a newcomer. A check on the implementation of SRG004 in Italy revealed: None of the Italian regions had adopted the measure. Based on this information, qualitative research was organized. The aim was to find out the reasons for this generalization. The research highlighted some of the mechanisms of implementation of multi-level agricultural policies in Europe, in addition to trying to answer the initial question.

**Keywords:** generational turnover, young farmers, new entrants, Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), multilevel policies.

### 1. PREMESSA

La questione del ricambio generazionale in agricoltura mostra un profilo da problema complesso, nel caso italiano come altrove. Segna un forte squilibrio fra pressione in entrata (giovani che aspirano a entrare nel mondo dell'economia agraria) e effettiva capacità di assorbimento del settore.

Lo scarto che si crea è determinato da una molteplicità di fattori, il cui effetto di sommatoria è la presenza di elevate barriere per gli *outsider*. Un aspetto non trascurabile viene dal complesso menu delle politiche di settore, soggetto a continua riformulazione in conseguenza del mutare di indirizzi della Politica Agricola Comune (PAC) dell'Unione Europea. Da quest'ultimo elemento, e dal particolare riferimento che la programmazione PAC fa all'obiettivo del ricambio generazionale (uno dei dieci obiettivi della pro-

grammazione 2023-27), trae spunto la ricerca di cui qui vengono presentati gli esiti. In particolare, la domanda di ricerca da cui si è partiti riguarda i motivi per i quali una misura, specificamente indicata dalla nuova PAC per favorire il ricambio generazionale (la SRG004), non è stata attivata da alcuna regione italiana. A partire da questa informazione è stata impostata una breve ricerca di taglio qualitativo, strutturata su interviste con soggetti afferenti ai due poli della macchina di policy delle regioni e delle province autonome italiane in materia di agricoltura: il polo politico, individuato nella figura apicale dell'assessore competente; e il polo tecnico-amministrativo, individuato nella figura dirigenziale apicale del comparto regionale delle politiche agricole. La domanda di ricerca ha riguardato i motivi che hanno determinato questa unanime non attivazione della misura da parte delle Regioni.

L'articolo si sviluppa secondo il seguente schema. Il primo paragrafo è dedicato all'inquadramento teorico del tema. Il secondo paragrafo si concentra sugli aspetti metodologici della ricerca. Nel terzo paragrafo vengono discusse le indicazioni emerse dalla raccolta delle interviste. Le conclusioni si concentreranno sulla valutazione dei dati emersi e sulle indicazioni riguardo a possibili sviluppi di policy.

## 2. LA SITUAZIONE DI SFONDO E IL QUADRO TEORICO

Il tema del ricambio generazionale in agricoltura occupa da tempo una posizione importante nel vasto campo di studi delle scienze sociali, in ambito sia nazionale che europeo. I dati più aggiornati relativi all'Europa comunitaria tratteggiano un quadro in cui il meccanismo del turnover è frenato da diversi fattori concomitanti. Le elaborazioni sui dati Eurostat del 2020, resi noti nel 2022, riferiscono che nei 27 paesi UE soltanto l'11,9% delle aziende agricole è guidato da soggetti di età compresa entro i 40 anni (Eurostat 2022). Nel complesso dell'area comunitaria l'agricoltura assorbe 8,7 milioni di persone nel 2020, una cifra che corrisponde al 4,2% della forza lavoro complessiva, ma con ampie differenze fra un paese all'altro.

Gli stessi dati Eurostat riferiscono che la presenza di giovani nei ruoli di guida delle aziende agrarie mostra una situazione in chiaroscuro: soltanto il 6,5% di soggetti di età sotto i 35 anni è a capo di un'impresa agricola, il che costituisce una percentuale in calo rispetto alla misura registrata nel 2005 (7,3%), ma anche un netto rialzo rispetto al 5,9% che era stato registrato nel 2016.

Spostando il focus dall'Europa allo specifico del caso italiano, i dati di tendenza vengono confermati. Le

### Employment in agriculture (% of total employment, 2005 and 2020)

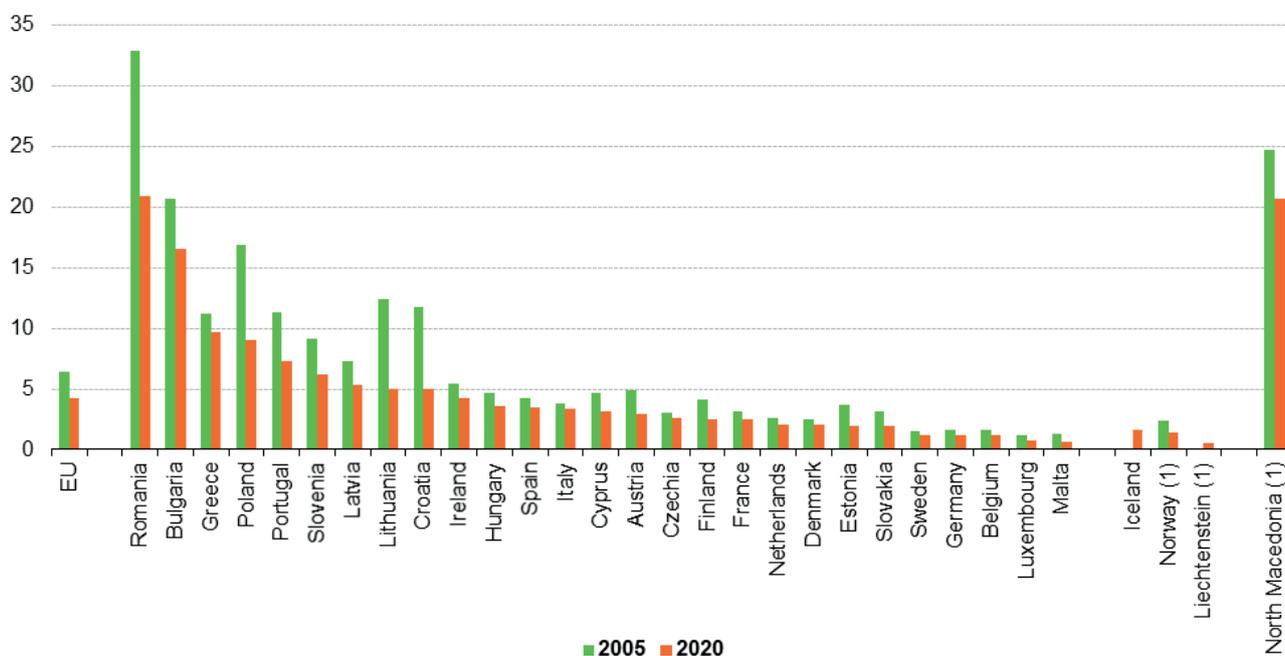


Figura 1. Trend dei livelli occupazionali in agricoltura nei 27 Paesi UE. Fonte: Eurostat 2022.

risultanze del 7° Censimento Istat sull'agricoltura presentati nel 2022 e riferiti al 2020 distinguono due classi anagrafiche, separate da uno scarto ridotto: da una parte gli imprenditori under 35, dall'altra i giovani imprenditori (soggetti di età entro i 40 anni). Rispetto al 2010, nel 2020 le aziende agricole guidate da under 35 risultano diminuite di circa il 20% (da 186.491 a 104.886). Flessione più leggera ma comunque significativa quella fatta registrare dalle aziende la cui guida è tenuta da quarantenni, scese dal 11,5% al 9,3%. L'elemento puramente quantitativo dei dati Istat presenta dunque una tendenza verso la contrazione. Ma le elaborazioni della stessa Istat prendono in considerazione un'ulteriore linea di tendenza, da cui provengono indicazioni di vitalità.

Risulta infatti che le aziende agricole guidate da giovani imprenditori e imprenditrici hanno dimensioni più grandi della media (ciò che in parte va a bilanciare la contrazione del numero di aziende che si è registrata fra il 2010 e il 2020), che hanno almeno un'attività connessa oltre a quella meramente agricola, e che rispetto alle aziende condotte da soggetti più anziani mostrano una propensione marcatamente superiore sia verso la digitalizzazione (33,6% contro 14,0%) che verso l'innovazione (24,4% contro 9,7%). Altri aspetti che infine meritano di essere estratti dal 7° censimento Istat sull'agricoltura riguardano altre caratteristiche distintive dell'imprenditoria giovanile: il possesso di titoli di studio al di sopra della media delle altre fasce di età, una certa propensione verso il metodo biologico di produzione e, soprattutto, le aziende da loro gestite operano per buona parte su terreni in affitto anziché di proprietà (Istat 2022).

I dati ricavati dal contesto europeo e dallo specifico caso italiano permettono di ricavare una panoramica nella quale, alla contrazione in termini numerici dell'imprenditoria agricola giovanile corrisponde una propensione a investire e innovare, con effetti benefici per il settore. Tali inferenze necessitano di essere calate in un quadro teorico che sul tema è molto ricco e ha il pregio di fare emergere tutta la complessità della questione.

Un primo elemento da rilevare è l'ampia letteratura esistente sul tema dell'invecchiamento della struttura demografica agraria, con particolare riferimento alla proprietà e/o gestione delle aziende agricole. L'elevarsi dell'età media in agricoltura viene segnalato come una criticità dalla letteratura scientifica sia in ambito europeo (Fischer e Burton 2014, Kontogeorgos, Michailidis, Chatzitheodoridis e Loizou 2014, Karkagi e Katona 2015, Zagata, Hádková e Mikovcová 2015, Duesberg, Bogue e Renwick 2017, Balmann *et al.* 2022) che in ambito extraeuropeo (Morais *et al.* 2018, Seok *et al.*

2018, Jansuwan e Zander 2021, Liu *et al.* 2023, Mohanty e Lenka 2023). Ovvio che sul tema non manchi una corposa letteratura scientifica italiana (Carbone e Subioli 2008, Carbone e Corsi 2014, Carillo *et al.* 2017, Cavicchioli *et al.* 2018, Licciardo *et al.* 2023).

L'altro elemento da chiamare in causa è la complessità del tema, con la conseguente necessità di trattarlo con uso di una serie di filtri analitici che permettano di focalizzarlo correttamente. Una parte della teoria si è soffermata sulla necessità di raffinare il concetto di ricambio generazionale sganciandolo dall'elemento della proprietà aziendale. Ciò vale soprattutto se si guarda alle dinamiche della successione nelle aziende agrarie a gestione familiare. Queste ultime rimangono la formula ampiamente prevalente, come viene confermato ancora una volta dai dati Eurostat (figura 2)

Ancora una volta il quadro della situazione è replicato dai dati del 7° Censimento Istat sull'agricoltura, come si legge nella tabella 3, dove l'incidenza dell'elemento familiare viene messo in relazione col numero delle aziende agricole, con la manodopera impiegata e col numero di giornate lavorative.

Le cifre appena riportate trovano riscontro nella vasta letteratura scientifica che indaga la tensione fra conservazione e innovazione nel mondo delle aziende agricole e connette questa tensione alla questione del ricambio generazionale. Ciò che si manifesta come un dato costante, al di là delle specificità locali e regionali quali possono essere, per esempio, le dinamiche di invecchiamento nei paesi del Sud Europa (Eistrup *et al.* 2019, Unay-Gailhard e Simões 2022, Pliakoura *et al.* 2023), o la diversa propensione all'innovazione che si riscontra fra le differenti generazioni della proprietà agraria nei paesi del nord Europa (Killop *et al.* 2018, Grubbström e Joosse 2021), o la transizione dalle forme di collettivizzazione gestite dallo stato alla privatizzazione nei paesi dell'est Europa (Dudek 2016, Zagata *et al.* 2019, Balezentis *et al.* 2020).

Ma vanno rilevati altri profili di complessità, la cui mancata presa in considerazione penalizzerebbe la possibilità di interpretare i processi in corso. La prima complessità riguarda l'interpretazione dei dati Eurostat, che sotto la superficie dell'evidenza numerica celano una realtà molto composita (Zagata e Sutherland 2015; Zagata *et al.* 2017, Sutherland 2023). In particolare, si rileva la necessità di decostruire la tesi sull'esistenza di un problema legato all'insufficiente presenza, nel panorama europeo, di giovani che detengono posizioni di proprietà nelle aziende agricole. La tesi è che il metodo e gli indicatori usati da Eurostat siano scarsamente raffinati e dunque mal rappresentano la complessità esistente. Viene messo in evidenza che una lettura fon-

## Farms in the EU, 2020 (by family, non-family type)

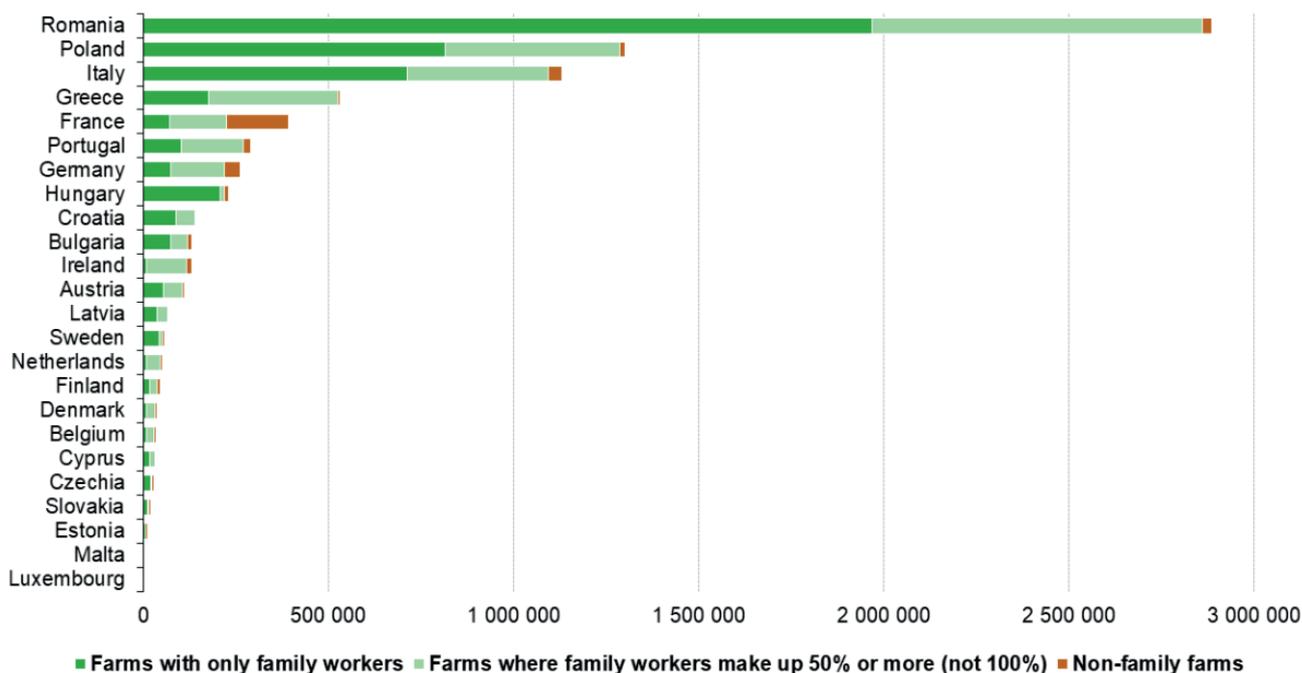


Figura 2. Incidenza del modello di proprietà familiare sul totale delle aziende agricole nei paesi UE. Fonte: Eurostat 2022.

data sull'individuazione della figura proprietaria apicale nella singola azienda sia spesso fuorviante nel tracciare l'effettivo agire del ricambio generazionale. Nelle aziende familiari la struttura proprietaria formale tende a mantenersi stabile anche nelle fasi in cui la dinamica dei rapporti interni registra un mutamento di equilibri e un'apertura al passaggio di leadership a beneficio delle generazioni più giovani.

Altro aspetto di complessità che dai dati Eurostat viene semplificato riguarda la sovrapposizione fra i concetti di "giovani agricoltori" e "new entrants" (Sutherland 2023). Nella realtà concreta i due profili non sempre coincidono (Monllor 2012, Monllor e Fuller 2016, Creaney *et al.* 2023). Inoltre, è proprio l'accesso di *new entrants* il fattore che permette di far coincidere il mero ricambio generazionale con un turnover della proprietà agraria che sia foriero di innovazione.

### 3. LA DOMANDA DI RICERCA E LA METODOLOGIA

#### 3.1 La domanda di ricerca e la metodologia

La ricerca di cui vengono qui esposte le risultanze nasce per caso. Si concentra su una misura della nuova

PAC, la SRG004 che porta come titolo "Cooperazione per il ricambio generazionale".

L'obiettivo iscritto nella misura è la promozione di un ringiovanimento della proprietà agraria che avvenga anche al di fuori delle linee di trasmissione familiare. Dunque, mutuando il vocabolario ricavato dalla rassegna teorica del paragrafo precedente, l'obiettivo della misura è stimolare una leva di *new entrants* nel sistema economico agrario. Rispetto a questo obiettivo la misura SRG004 prevede lo strumento dell'affiancamento del giovane agricoltore con un agricoltore over 65. La misura riprende la filosofia del contratto di affiancamento previsto dalla legge 205 del 2017 (legge di bilancio per l'anno 2018), che fra le altre cose pone una regolamentazione dei distretti del cibo e dà un forte impulso all'adozione del metodo biologico nella produzione agricola (Russo 2024).

La misura SRG004 è risultata inapplicata da tutte le regioni e province autonome italiane. Dalla necessità di comprendere il motivo di tale mancata attivazione è nata la ricerca. Che ha adottato un metodo qualitativo.

È stato pianificato un programma di interviste semi-strutturate con gli assessori regionali titolari della delega all'agricoltura e coi dirigenti regionali apicali del settore agricoltura. Il campione è dunque costituito da 19 assessori regionali e 2 di province autonome (totale 21),

Categoria di manodopera	Aziende agricole					Persone					Giornate di lavoro standard				
	Numero (migliaia)		Incidenze % (1)		Var.% 2020/2010	Numero (migliaia)		Composizioni %		Var.% 2020/2010	Numero (migliaia)		Composizioni %		Var.% 2020/2010
	2020	2010	2020	2010		2020	2010	2020	2010		2020	2010	2020	2010	
Manodopera familiare	1.114	1.604	98,3	98,9	-30,5	1.460	2.933	53,0	75,8	-50,2	145.506	200.905	68,0	80,1	-27,6
Manodopera non familiare	187	222	16,5	13,7	-15,4	1.296	938	47,0	24,2	38,1	68.621	49.901	32,0	19,9	37,5
<b>Totale</b>	<b>1.133</b>	<b>1.621</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-30,1</b>	<b>2.755</b>	<b>3.871</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>-28,8</b>	<b>214.128</b>	<b>250.806</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>-14,6</b>

(1) Sul totale delle aziende agricole.

Figura 3. Incidenza della dimensione familiare sulla struttura e sulla produzione nell'agricoltura italiana. Fonte: Istat, 7° Censimento generale dell'agricoltura, 2022.

Tabella 1. Esiti delle richieste di intervista inoltrate agli assessorati regionali con delega all'Agricoltura.

Tipo di risposta	Intervista concessa (n. 1)	Intervista rigettata (n. 2)	Delega al dirigente di settore o a addetto segreteria dell'assessore (n. 2)	Disponibilità senza seguito (n. 3)	Nessuna risposta (n. 13)
Regione	Lombardia	Lazio, Provincia Autonoma di Trento	Toscana, Veneto	Calabria, Sicilia, Umbria	Abruzzo, Basilicata, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Liguria, Marche, Molise, Piemonte, Puglia, Sardegna, Valle d'Aosta, Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano

più altrettanti dirigenti dei dipartimenti Agricoltura, per una somma di 42 potenziali intervistati. Il tasso di risposta è stato buono per ciò che riguarda i dirigenti regionali, ma francamente deludente da parte degli assessori. Il quadro delle risposte giunte dagli assessorati regionali è riportato nella tabella 1.

L'esito delle richieste di intervista è stato nettamente più positivo sul versante dei dirigenti regionali responsabili per i dipartimenti dell'Agricoltura. Le risposte utili alle richieste di intervista avanzate in questo segmento del campione sono state 13 su 21 (61,9% del campione). Vanno tuttavia fatte alcune precisazioni. In primo luogo, alcuni dirigenti regionali hanno preferito delegare il compito di rispondere a funzionari maggiormente addentro alla materia specifica. In secondo luogo, alcuni dei rispondenti hanno preferito rispondere per iscritto (le interviste realizzate a voce o via Google Meet sono state 8 su 13). Va aggiunto che in due casi le interviste hanno coinvolto due persone per volta anziché una, ciò che fa salire da 13 a 15 il numero dei tecnici intervistati, e che su 15 rispondenti gli uomini sono stati 11 e le donne 4.

Il materiale di interviste raccolto è stato elaborato e sistematizzato. Le interviste registrate sono state anonimizzate tramite procedimento di numerazione progressiva che ha seguito l'ordine cronologico della loro raccolta. Per trattare il materiale ricavato dalla sbobinatura ci si è dapprima confrontati con l'uso dello strumento dell'intervista (Gianturco 2004, Rubin e Rubin 2004, Della Porta 2010, Cardano 2011, Losito 2015). Si è quindi optato per l'analisi tematica. Si tratta di un metodo di ricerca qualitativa che consiste nell'isolare i temi principali emersi dalla raccolta e ricognizione dei dati (Guest et al. 2012; Braun e Clarke 2019; Herzog et al. 2019; Wæraas 2022).

L'approccio si presenta adeguato a fare emergere gli orientamenti sottesi a una scelta di politica pubblica multilivello che coinvolge nell'ordine: un input che proviene dal livello comunitario attraverso il quadro di politica generale della PAC e gli aggiornamenti cui viene sottoposta; il filtro che proviene dal livello dello stato centrale, che in questa fase presenta una novità cruciale data dal fatto che ciascuno stato membro UE si dota di un piano strategico nazionale (Piano Strategico

**Tabella 2.** Esiti delle richieste di intervista inoltrate ai dirigenti responsabili delle direzioni regionali Agricoltura.

<i>Tipo di risposta</i>	<i>Intervista concessa [registrata o per iscritto] (n. 9)</i>	<i>Risposta scritta (n. 4)</i>	<i>Risposta Senza seguito (n. 1)</i>	<i>rifiuto (n. 0)</i>	<i>Nessuna risposta (n. 4)</i>
<i>Regione</i>	Abruzzo, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardia, Puglia, Sicilia, Toscana, Valle d'Aosta, Provincia Autonoma di Trento	Basilicata, Liguria, Piemonte, Veneto	Sardegna		Calabria, Friuli- Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Marche, Molise, Umbria, Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano

PAC, acronimo PSP) (Giacardi *et al.* 2021), e che inoltre negli anni passati ha approntato una misura di politica pubblica (quella dell'affiancamento); e l'intervento delle Regioni, che danno un contributo fondamentale all'attuazione degli indirizzi e all'implementazione delle politiche sul livello locale.

#### 4. UNA MISURA NON BEN PERCEPITA

I testi delle 14 interviste sono stati filtrati attraverso 5 categorie tematiche.

La prima categoria tematica riguarda la condivisione del processo che ha portato alla generalizzata decisione, da parte delle Regioni, di non attivare la misura SRG004. Questa categoria si concentra sulle risposte date a tre domande dello schema di intervista, attraverso le quali si chiedeva se la misura SRG004 fosse stata discussa in sede di consultazione regionale e quali siano stati i motivi che hanno spinto a non attivarla (domanda numero 1), se sulla medesima misura vi sia stato un confronto fra le Regioni (domanda numero 2) e infine se vi sia stata qualche resistenza particolare verso la sua adozione (domanda numero 4). La sola risposta univoca giunge alla numero 4: non vi è stata alcuna resistenza nei confronti dell'adozione della SRG004, né a livello regionale né a livello di consultazione fra regioni. «Come dicevo prima, resistenza no. È stata solo fatta una valutazione diciamo di opportunità e di minor efficienza rispetto ad altre misure ma non c'è stata, se per resistenza si intende preconcetto, o comunque una non volontà, non c'è stata. È stata fatta solo una valutazione, ripeto, di opportunità. Nessuna resistenza a priori, questo di sicuro» (Intervista n. 11).

Non è invece chiaro se e quanto la misura è stata discussa, sia a livello regionale che in sede di consultazione fra le regioni. Buona parte delle risposte alle prime due domande va in senso affermativo. «Sì, c'è stata una discussione in sede programmatica della misura SRG004. (...) Sì, c'è stato un passaggio di consultazione

tra le regioni al pari delle altre misure» (Intervista n. 2). «Sì, chiaramente in Regione abbiamo valutato se attivarla o meno» (Intervista n. 8). «Sicuramente la discussione c'è stata perché in sede di diciamo formazione del complementamento regionale, come Regione abbiamo appunto ragionato [...]» (Intervista n. 11).

Ma vengono raccolte anche versioni che vanno in direzione opposta e raccontano di una misura PAC non presa in considerazione benché fosse meritevole di attenzione. «Allora, su questa scheda specifica non c'è stato un confronto partenariale, nel senso che il confronto partenariale che noi abbiamo attivato, nell'ambito di un Tavolo specifico che si chiama proprio Tavolo PAC [Regione] 23-27, abbiamo preso in esame l'elenco di tutti i possibili interventi e abbiamo operato una scelta [...]» (Intervista n. 3)

*in realtà non c'è stata una discussione specifica particolare ai tavoli di lavoro che sono stati molto intensi, tra le Regioni e con il Ministero nella fase di definizione del PSP '23-'27. Questo perché dalle Regioni e Province Autonome non è emersa una particolare esigenza legata a questa misura. Quindi non è stata, di fatto, ritenuta prioritaria e di conseguenza non c'è stata nemmeno una particolare discussione di merito, perché nessuna Regione, a mia memoria, ha evidenziato necessità particolari legate a questa misura.* (Intervista n. 9)

*Adesso mi ha sollevato una questione che posso farla approfondire dal valutatore. (...) Questo sarebbe un intervento che va, come dire, a compensare i maggiori costi che sostiene un agricoltore anziano nel perdere tempo, tra virgolette, ad insegnare a un giovane, magari. Io non so nemmeno come è strutturato il premio, che tipo di misura perché non l'ho proprio, come dire, approfondita, però né il partenariato, né le organizzazioni professionali, nessun giovane in (Regione), nessun padre di famiglia, nessun agricoltore mi ha segnalato questo, guardi.* (Intervista n. 3)

L'esistenza di versioni così nettamente divergenti trova una spiegazione nella grande pressione che le burocrazie centrali e regionali hanno dovuto affron-

tare per implementare le direttive della nuova PAC. Una pressione data da tre fattori: il confronto con l'innovazione costituita dal PSP nazionale; la grande mole di lavoro che ne deriva; una severa ristrettezza di tempo per portare a termine il lavoro. In tale quadro di pressioni si verifica dunque, per gli attori territoriali, una complicata condivisione di processo, da cui deriva una non sufficiente messa a fuoco dei contenuti e delle potenzialità della SRG004. Le questioni dell'innovazione di processo e della ristrettezza temporale, visto il peso e il ricorrere che denotano nelle singole interviste, sono a loro convertite in categorie tematiche.

La seconda categoria tematica selezionata è relativa alla visione del problema da risolvere e delle possibili soluzioni. A tale tema sono specificamente dedicate due domande dello schema di intervista: la sesta, con la quale si chiede quali possano essere, secondo il giudizio del soggetto intervistato conclusiva dello schema di intervista, con la quale si chiede ai soggetti intervistati quali possano essere, a loro giudizio, delle misure efficaci per promuovere nell'economia agraria un ricambio generazionale; e l'ottava, che è anche l'ultima dello schema d'intervista, con cui si chiede un'opinione su quali siano le cause che impediscono un ricambio generazionale che non dipenda esclusivamente dalla trasmissione intrafamiliare della proprietà. La panoramica delle risposte ha mostrato una gamma di criticità molto complessa. Se ne ha un primo saggio leggendo il seguente estratto, tratto da una delle due interviste a due voci, che menziona la misura PAC di aiuto al primo insediamento per i giovani agricoltori (SRE01), ma ne valuta anche la "messa a terra" e l'efficacia nel contesto socioculturale regionale:

*Intervistato/a 1 - (...) come può immaginare, [la misura del primo insediamento] fa gola e molto spesso è un pò il faro che tutti inseguono senza avere però dietro magari delle buone basi, solide di impresa o magari delle buone progettualità. Quindi io credo che non passi tutto attraverso l'aiuto e invece l'agricoltore, forse quello [della Regione in questione], tendenzialmente guarda prima all'aiuto e poi pensa a cosa mettere in piedi, ma è un mix. Noi abbiamo un unico istituto tecnico professionale per l'agricoltura e il mix è combinare, rendere ... [si inserisce l'intervistato/a 2: «Conoscenze»] ... le conoscenze, rendere allettante un lavoro in montagna, in agricoltura, la tradizione, il senso di appartenenza, la formazione, la consulenza eccetera. Ovviamente è un mix di misure che cerco di...*

*Si inserisce l'intervistato/a 2 - Competenze imprenditoriali, cioè... [fa eco l'intervistato/a 1: «Esatto»] ... che uno riesca veramente a fare l'imprenditore, non l'agricoltore, che uno si pensa al contadino, con le sue due mucche, l'orto per fare le zucche per l'inverno. Cioè, veramente mettere in campo dei giovani che abbiano competenze imprenditoriali, riescano a creare imprese che sanno stare sul mercato*

*senza per forza dover essere perennemente legate ai sussidi statali (...) (Intervista n. 4).*

Una testimonianza altrettanto ricca di rilievi sulle specificità locali viene dall'intervista realizzata con dirigente apicale della direzione Agricoltura di una Regione fortemente sviluppata sul piano industriale. Nella risposta sugli ostacoli incontrati dai giovani imprenditori agrari che non possono contare sull'eredità familiare, l'intervistato menziona il tema atteso della difficoltà nel reperire la terra agricola ma lo inserisce nello specifico contesto, facendo riferimento al mix che si crea nel rapporto fra industria e agricoltura.

*Un fattore (di) competizione che è sia interno diciamo, al mondo agricolo, cioè quindi su terreni agricoli, che però magari sono appetibili [anche] alle aziende che vanno a fare sia coltura ma anche, magari [altre attività] imprenditoriali, che l'agricoltura la fanno ma non come, diciamo, core business o attività principale: banche, assicurazioni, una serie di realtà industriali di vario tipo che comunque le aziende agricole ce le hanno. Se andiamo ad analizzare le aziende della [menziona una zona agricola di particolare pregio nella Regione], le proprietà di quelle aziende, molte sono di parte industriale. C'è un altro fattore che in questi ultimi anni, secondo me (...) riguarda il mondo agricolo tradizionale, chiamiamolo tradizionale tra virgolette, cioè il mondo dei fanghi. Noi abbiamo soggetti che gestiscono la distribuzione dei fanghi che hanno fatto incetta diciamo di terreni agricoli, abbiamo tutto il mondo delle bioenergie che comunque ha fatto incetta di terreni agricoli (e) riesce ad essere più performante sul recupero della terra con prezzi, sia di acquisto che di affitto, che un'azienda agricola tradizionale, competere con queste realtà, insomma, è in difficoltà. Più il fatto che comunque anche qua in alcune zone la competizione della parte industriale, la competizione del cosiddetto capannone è rilevante (...), chi conosce la [Regione] e ha girato, penso che lo vede. (Intervista n. 11)*

Altra lettura sulla possibile soluzione delle criticità per i *new entrants* ostacolo è quella che prova a individuare settori dell'economia agraria maggiormente alla portata di una nuova imprenditoria giovanile. In particolare, viene fatto riferimento al segmento dell'ospitalità e della convivialità, individuati come approdi meno complicati per un'imprenditoria agraria giovanile:

*Noi però dobbiamo fare un'analisi più di dettaglio, perché vogliamo ragionare di quei comparti più trainanti (,,) il vino, l'accoglienza, la convivialità l'agriturismo, cioè io trovo che siano quelli, poi, i campi in cui un giovane può immaginare di fare un lavoro nel primario, insomma. D'altronde poi i numeri ce lo confermano... comparti in cui c'è una maggiore enfasi. Se tu produci mele, produci mele. Se sei in un sistema di accoglienza, se hai competenze per*

*la convivialità e tutto il resto finisci sui giornali, insomma.*  
(Intervista n. 1)

Fra gli strumenti possibili per consentire ai *new entrants* di ridurre le criticità dell'accesso viene indicata proprio la misura SRG004 che, pur essendo rimasta inoptata dalle Regioni, viene rivalutata da alcuni fra i soggetti intervistati proprio in conseguenza della situazione dell'intervista:

*Credo che il primo insediamento sia una misura interessante sulla quale però stiamo già riflettendo per, come le dicevo, rispondere a tutte le sollecitazioni che abbiamo di semplificarla, per renderla più spedita (...). L'affiancamento potrebbe essere effettivamente un'ottima misura, nella sua complessità, che va però appunto declinata, perché poi c'è tutto l'apparato della contrattualistica con cui il giovane si insedia e si affianca accanto all'anziano, che dovrebbe trovare una compiuta, dovrebbe trovare un maggiore coordinamento con la possibilità di sommare, come dicevo in precedenza, il premio di primo insediamento all'intervento sull'affiancamento.* (Intervista n. 7)

Fra tanta varietà di visioni e soluzioni, filtrate dalla specificità dei contesti locali, emerge comunque un dato comune: il rischio che, nel medio periodo, la misura sul primo insediamento rischi di rimanere inefficace se non accompagnata dalla produzione di capitale umano adeguato a affrontare sfide di tipo nuovo in un contesto di crescente complessità. In questo senso, l'aspetto del trasferimento di competenze fra l'agricoltore anziano e il *new entrant* disegnato dalla SRG004 sarebbe un segmento molto importante per produrre capitale umano. Su questo i soggetti intervistati sono generalmente concordi. Ma rispetto a questo consenso espresso in linea di principio, si affermano i distinguo che si appuntano soprattutto sull'applicabilità della SRG004.

Con l'aspetto cui si è appena fatto riferimento, la applicabilità della misura (terza categoria tematica) si misura una delle domande dello schema d'intervista. Ai soggetti intervistati è stato chiesto di esprimere un parere e dire se la SRG004 apparisse loro una misura "utile e realizzabile", o se viceversa fosse "troppo ambiziosa e di difficile applicazione". Emerge che la SRG004 è stata valutata «certamente utile, tuttavia ritengo che la formazione sia più efficace ai fini dell'insediamento dei giovani» (Intervista n. 2). Allo stesso modo è stato espresso l'auspicio che grazie alla cooperazione si riesca a realizzare «delle buone pratiche e uno scambio di esperienze» (Intervista n. 1). Ancora, viene prospettata una difficoltà nell'ipotizzare che un agricoltore anziano si metta a disposizione di un agricoltore giovane estraneo (Intervista n. 3), viene indicata l'inefficacia mostrata in precedenza da misure analoghe (Intervista n. 4), si rileva

la complicatezza di collegare la SRG004 con la misura del primo insediamento (Intervista n. 7), o la "scarsa appetibilità" della nuova misura rispetto alle soluzioni già sperimentate (Intervista n. 11). In uno specifico caso locale è stato messo in evidenza che lo spiccato sviluppo della rete cooperativistica assolve già alla funzione che la misura SRG004 intenderebbe soddisfare (Intervista n. 9). E emerge a più riprese che, dovendo fare delle scelte in un contesto di scarsità delle risorse da distribuire, si è preferito confermare il sostegno alla misura SRE01 sul primo insediamento (Interviste n. 10 e 14).

Alcune risposte vanno particolarmente nel dettaglio e illustrano le condizioni di complessità sistemica in cui la misura avrebbe dovuto andare a integrarsi.

*Secondo me sarebbe molto utile perché spesso e volentieri questi giovani, nonostante debbano avere l'affiancamento di un tecnico per la predisposizione di un piano aziendale, spesso e volentieri partono un pò spaesati, un pò senza sapere dove vanno a parare. Per cui se fosse possibile potrebbe essere utile. Però come le dicevo prima la vedo poco realizzabile. Cioè, questo passaggio di conoscenze, di informazioni, ci può essere intrafamiliare, cioè il padre, il nonno, che spiega al figlio o al nipote come fare, o è una conoscenza che ha acquisito, perché comunque chi ha un'azienda, soprattutto zootecnica, spesso e volentieri qui da noi la famiglia è quasi tutta coinvolta nella gestione, per cui non c'è neanche bisogno, quasi di farlo questo passaggio. Le conoscenze vengono trasmesse quotidianamente a livello di famiglia. Al di fuori di questa linea e forse sarebbe più utile in altri campi che non sia la zootecnia.* (Intervista n. 4)

*Allora, che possa essere utile, sì. Realizzabile e troppo ambiziosa, oggi come oggi, ripeto, secondo noi, non esiste a livello nazionale, quantomeno, anche un quadro legislativo che aiuti, ecco. Adesso, non so se può essere pertinente, ecco, con la collega che da noi, nel mio servizio, si occupa dello IAP [Imprenditore Agricolo Professionale], in generale dell'imprenditore agricolo, abbiamo ragionato in più occasioni, col susseguirsi delle programmazioni, se questa, un affiancamento dei giovani poteva essere fatto per agevolare il passaggio generazionale con gli imprenditori che non hanno eredi, perché effettivamente l'esperienza insegna che molti degli insediamenti che finanziamo con la Misura Giovani sono in ambito familiare, ecco, mentre le indagini indicavano che (nella nostra Regione), anni fa, c'erano diverse migliaia di ettari a disposizione di imprese che non avevano di fatto eredi naturali (...). Quindi in realtà noi questo problema ce l'eravamo posto già prima e siamo andati anche a sentire, in un'occasione, l'esperienza francese. In Francia questa cosa qua pare che riescano a farla e che abbia anche abbastanza successo. Ma probabilmente, anzi sicuramente, hanno una normativa che consente, (invece) nella scheda di misura era assolutamente indefinito il tipo di contratto che avrebbe potuto, dovuto essere gestito, stipulato tra l'anziano e il giovane, perché*

*non poteva essere un dipendente, non poteva essere socio perché se no un giovane si sarebbe già insediato e non avrebbe più avuto modo di avere il premio di primo insediamento. Insomma, si restringeva parecchio il campo.* (Intervista n. 8)

La composizione delle risposte alla specifica domanda, da cui si ricavano prospettive anche molto diverse riguardo ai motivi della sua mancata applicazione, fa emergere elementi di coerenza riguardo ai contenuti della misura SRG004 e al suo inserimento in un sistema di *policy* che interviene nel campo della successione generazionale nel settore agrario. Viene accettato il principio che la misura intende portare, ma la sua complicata applicabilità e la diffusa convinzione che essa non si armonizzi efficacemente con gli strumenti esistenti ha avuto l'effetto di disincentivarne l'adozione.

Una quarta categoria tematica viene dalla pressione temporale. Dalle interviste è emersa una generale indicazione sulla ristrettezza dei tempi entro cui implementare le indicazioni della nuova PAC. Ciò che ha avuto ripercussioni sulla scelta delle misure da adottare.

*(...) dopo le osservazioni avvenute a marzo del 2022, da parte della Commissione cui era stata inviata una primissima bozza, poi diciamo che l'aspetto sostanziale, conclusivo e definitivo si è svolto praticamente tra aprile del 2022 a novembre, ottobre-novembre, quindi non c'è stato nemmeno il tempo tecnico di fare un confronto tra le Regioni. Ci sono state tutta una serie di riunioni [tenute in tempi compressi] con il Ministero anche per capire come lavorare e come fare.* (Intervista n. 3)

Inoltre, le ristrettezze di tempo con cui le Regioni hanno dovuto fare i conti vanno misurate non soltanto in termini assoluti (ossia, il poco tempo messo a disposizione degli attori territoriali per implementare l'adozione della nuova misura), ma anche nei termini della complessità del lavoro richiesto.

*Per quanto riguarda [i motivi che hanno portato le Regioni a non richiedere l'attivazione della misura] è che fu deciso di concentrare l'attenzione su altri interventi, che riguardavano l'insediamento di giovani agricoltori, anche per ridurre la frammentazione delle opportunità che concedevamo, in considerazione del fatto che i meccanismi previsti dalle altre opportunità erano molto macchinosi e di difficile attuazione. Questo, me lo ricordo bene, non significa che noi in assoluto, non consideriamo attivabile in futuro, ad esempio, anche la misura di cui siamo a parlare adesso, nello specifico la misura SRG004, perché oggettivamente è una misura che ha bisogno di una contestualizzazione e di uno studio molto approfonditi.* (Intervista n. 7)

Infine, c'è una quinta categoria tematica, in parte connessa con la precedente. Essa riguarda la dialettica fra innovazione e conservazione. Si concentra sulla tendenza, manifestata dagli attori del governo locale e delle burocrazie territoriale, a muoversi fra la propensione a confermare gli schemi di pianificazione e attuazione che fin lì hanno funzionato e lo stimolo a sperimentare soluzioni innovative, ma dall'incerto esito. Rispetto a questa dialettica, e a una certa tendenza verso ciò che si può etichettare come “usato sicuro”, la pressione data dalla scarsità di tempo incide per una parte nella scelta di non azionare la misura SRG004. Ma per altra parte c'è il peso determinante esercitato dalla soluzione conosciuta, che magari non offre lo scatto innovativo auspicato ma comunque garantisce funzionamento e rendimento. A questa categoria tematica si allineano risposte anche molto immaginifiche. Come quella che è stata data alla domanda sull'eventualità che vi siano state resistenze all'attuazione della misura non attivata:

*No, nessuna. Secondo me nessuno ha compreso la portata, chiamiamola, rivoluzionaria e innovativa di questa misura. Hai presente quando arrivi a un self-service, trovi cento portate, prendi le cose che conosci, poi magari vedi un piatto esotico, passi avanti perché pensi che non appartenga alla tua cultura? Quel self-service delle misure era veramente talmente ampio, noi nella vecchia programmazione '14-'22 abbiamo fatto ad esempio l'errore di metterne tantissime e stavolta la spinta di tutti, delle organizzazioni, dei liberi professionisti è stata invece di ridurre il numero delle misure. Quindi ne abbiamo tolte tante, nessuno pensava di prenderne una nuova.* (Intervista n. 5)

Un altro aspetto legato alla dialettica fra conservazione (o stato delle cose pregresse) e innovazione si concentra su una disomogeneità della SRG004 rispetto agli strumenti esistenti e sperimentati:

*Nella costruzione del piano strategico nazionale, le regioni e le province autonome, insieme al Ministero competente, hanno ritenuto che l'intervento SRG04 avrebbe aggiunto un livello di complessità agli interventi già ampiamente previsti, senza apportare un valore aggiunto almeno pari ai maggiori costi necessari per attivare, progettare, valutare e gestire le azioni di cooperazione.* (Intervista n. 13)

Il giudizio di scarsa armonizzabilità della misura inoptata viene superato da altri pareri, che la giudicano addirittura contraddittoria rispetto a misure delle precedenti PAC, come emerge da una delle interviste a due voci:

*[Intervistato/a 1] Faccio solo una considerazione su questo. Noi usciamo da una programmazione che prevede la misura prepensionamento. Il prepensionamento è stato fino a*

due programmazioni fa... [si inserisce Intervistato/a 2 per dire "2013"] ... esatto, fino alla programmazione '07-'13 è stata una misura che incentivava la fuoriuscita di agricoltori con oltre 65 anni in, diciamo così, in connessione con l'insediamento di un giovane che rileva la sua azienda, no?, e effettivamente infatti il pensiero è, sembrano quasi due misure, non dico opposte, perché dall'altra parte tu devi trovare un agricoltore ultra-sessantacinquenne che dà la disponibilità per fare un percorso di accompagnamento, diciamo così (...) non è che contrastino fra di loro, però effettivamente hanno quasi due logiche diverse. Io fino a adesso ho incentivato un sessantacinquenne ad andarsene per lasciare lo spazio, adesso mi si chiede di tenere, cioè (...) noi adesso stiamo chiudendo, in questa programmazione '14-'22 il prepensionamento è andato in trascinamento, nel senso che è una misura che l'Unione Europea non ha più accettato, non ha più inserito come misura attivabile, ma visto che noi qua avevamo delle domande in corso abbiamo dovuto chiuderne il finanziamento, ne abbiamo ancora uno da chiudere. Però effettivamente sarebbe stato un cambio di pensiero abbastanza importante, cioè usciamo da una stagione dove abbiamo incentivato la sostituzione... (Intervista n. 4)

In un altro caso la misura è stata giudicata di nessuna innovazione rispetto agli strumenti esistenti:

Infine, va evidenziato che, per quanto riguarda la (Regione), uno degli obiettivi fondanti dell'intervento SRG004, ossia il ricambio generazionale, è stato perseguito e conseguito già mediante le misure del cosiddetto primo insediamento - intervento SRE001 nella programmazione 2023-2027 - attivate nei periodi di programmazione passati, definendo specifici criteri di priorità tesi a favorire proprio il ricambio generazionale in sede di bando. Tale scelta ha offerto buoni riscontri in termini di un equilibrio fra l'inserimento di giovani che per la prima volta si insediano in aziende agricole e l'avvio di giovani a seguito di un trasferimento di azienda preesistente (passaggio generazionale). (Intervista n. 12)

## 5. CONCLUSIONI

La ricerca sulla mancata attivazione della misura PAC SRG004 "Cooperazione per il ricambio generazionale", avviata per trovare risposta sui motivi che hanno determinato la sua non attivazione, ha permesso di aprire uno squarcio sui complicati meccanismi di composizione delle politiche multilivello in un settore cruciale per i sistemi economici nazionali e comunitario qual è quello dell'agricoltura. La semplicità della domanda di ricerca dalla quale si è partiti ha fatto da chiave di volta per la scoperta di un panorama complesso relativamente a quattro aspetti: implementazione delle politiche multilivello; impatto che l'innovazione delle politiche determina sugli

schemi collaudati di applicazione degli indirizzi; differenze locali nella risposta a un medesimo input di policy; e grande complessità della questione del ricambio generazionale (segnatamente, quel ricambio che non è connesso coi meccanismi della successione familiare), per la cui soluzione si continua a sperimentare misure innovative che però non raggiungono ancora risultati esaustivi.

La misura SRG004 viene inserita in un contesto così composito e, probabilmente, entra nel menu delle opzioni senza che ne sia stata fatta un'adeguata valutazione di integrabilità. Tutto ciò fa sì che la misura rimanga inopertata da tutte le regioni e province autonome italiane. Ma le informazioni ricavate dalle interviste fanno intravedere la possibilità di una rivalutazione della misura. Tale rivalutazione, peraltro, è stata stimolata dalla situazione stessa delle interviste, che ha permesso di prendere in considerazione la filosofia e il possibile benefico impatto sociale della SRG004.

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