

1. Introduction.

In this article, the results of an ongoing research on ‘Squatted and/or Self-Managed Social Centres’ in Italy are presented, with particular focus on the Social Centres’ practices and conceptions of politics and democracy, regarding both their internal decision-making and their external interactions with other Social Movement Organizations (SMOs), within broader decisional arenas.

The Social Centres – about 250 have been active in Italy over the past 25 years, especially in urban areas – have been defined as autonomous groups set up by left-wing radical activists (mainly students and unemployed youth), who occupy and/or self-manage unused buildings in the cities (based upon a conception of free spaces), where they organize political campaigns, social and countercultural activities; territorially rooted, they contest the moderation and bureaucratization of environmental associations and political parties, proposing radical forms of action and participatory organizational models (della Porta and Piazza 2008: 43; see also della Porta 2004: 14). Regarding this feature, the organizational modes of Social Centres have been defined as “examples of successful direct democracy in non-hierarchical structure and may provide alternative options to the bureaucratic organization of so many aspects of social and political life” (Mudu 2004: 917). If squatting and self-managing vacant buildings represent the identity traits of the Social Centres, their repertoire of actions includes other unconventional forms as symbolic protests, pickets, road and railway blockades, raids in institutional offices, unauthorized demonstrations, sometimes ending in clashes with police, etc.

Between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, a new generation of scholars has begun to study the social centres (Dines 1999; Berzano and Gallini 2000; Ruggiero 2000; Becucci 2003; Mudu 2004; Membretti 2003, 2007; Montagna 2006, 2007), notwithstanding the phenomenon is quite older, as will be explained in the following pages. Until this period, the social centres had only been object of a pioneering study in the Milan area (Grazioli and Lodi 1984), journalistic enquiries (Adinolfi *et al.* 1994) and some attempt of “self-research” (*conricerca*) carried out by the same activists (Consorzio Aaster *et al.* 1996).

The area of the social centres has also been studied within the recent researches on the Global Justice Movement (Andretta *et al.* 2002; della Porta *et al.* 2006), and it could be considered the most important radical sector of the movement in Italy – quantitatively and qualitatively – for its effective

contribution towards mobilizing thousands of people in demonstrations and meetings against neo-liberal globalization, especially in protest against the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa. These studies have pointed out as the social centres “are also very heterogeneous in cultural background, objectives and forms of action” (della Porta *et al.* 2006: 41), dividing the area in a more moderate sector linked to the Disobedients’ movement, and in a more radical sector joined in the Network for Global Rights (*ibid.*: 42; see also Berzano and Gallini 2000).

Nevertheless, some researches mentioned before have highlighted that the growing heterogeneity of the area of social centres has become always more complex and diversified in the last twenty years. If at the beginning of the 1990s “there were two main groups, one of which was close to *Autonomia*... while the other was closer to anarchical movements” (Mudu 2004: 934)¹, the social centres’ area is currently and continuously split into several groups and networks, very fluid and unstable. Here I propose a typology of the Italian SCs, which is a reworking of models previously elaborated by other scholars (Dines, 1999; Montagna, 2006), based on their political and ideological orientation, the networks/areas they belong to, the aims pursued and activities carried out (political, social, countercultural), the campaigns and issues faced, the legal status (occupied or assigned), the attitudes towards institutions (hostile, pragmatic, strategic).²

a) the *Anarchists* and *Libertarians* who, although divided among themselves in different networks, ‘refuse any kind of formalisation of their structures and dialogue with state institutions, but also with movements that they judge too moderate’ (Montagna, 2006: 296; Berzano *et al.* 2002); these social centres are always illegally occupied and political/countercultural activities are carried out.

b) The *ex-Disobedients*, who adopt Negri’s theorizations on the “multitude”; they entertained fairly relations with local institutions and were particularly close to PRC³ until 2004 (Mudu, 2004: 934), when they broke

¹ It is necessary to precise that already in that period there were different political positions within the area of the *Autonomia Operaia* (Worker’s Autonomy) between the social centres that refused any relationship with state institutions and those that accepted it.

² The typology is a work in progress, because of lack of information about some social centres and the networks are very fluid and loose - they are formed and dissolve very quickly - linking also other type of grassroots actors (committees, collectives, groups, rank-and-file unions, etc.).

³ Party of Communist Refoundation. Some of *Disobedients*’ leaders have been elected to the Municipal Councils of Milan, Rome, Venice and to the National Parliament.

with left parties and radicalized their forms of action; their attitudes towards institutions oscillate between strategic and pragmatic, and many social centres are officially assigned.

Table 1. Typology of Social Centres

| Ideological orientation | Network/Area | Aims/Activities | Campaigns/ Issues | Legal status | Attitude towards Institutions |
|-------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Anarchism | Anarchists-Libertarians | Political, countercultural | Antimilitarism, repression, environment, cultural/editorial | Illegally occupied | Hostile, closure |
| Negri's theory (Multitude) | Ex-Disobedients (Noth-East SCs) | Political, social | Citizenship income, no-copyright, precariousness immigration, welfare from below, Lulu, militarization, university | Officially assigned | Strategic, negotiation |
| Marxisms/Leninism | Antagonists (Autonomists, Antimperialists); Leninists; Revolutionary communists; Non-Aligned | Political, social, countercultural | Anti-fascism, internationalism, repression, labour, grassroots unionism, housing, Lulu, university | Illegally occupied; Officially assigned | Hostile, closure; Strategic, negotiation |
| Non-ideological/heterogeneous | Non-Aligned | Political, countercultural | Citizenship income, precariousness, new rights, immigration, anti-fascism, media-communication | Officially assigned | Pragmatic, strategic, negotiation |

c) Then, the areas and networks which base their political analysis on Marxist or Leninist class categories: the *Antagonists*, the Antimperialists, the SCs linked to *Autonomia*; others with *Leninist* leanings (2003-4 “*Eu-ropposizione*”), and the *Revolutionary Communists* who refuse any relationship with state institutions and are considered the most radical SCs; within these areas usually SCs are illegally occupied and have hostile attitudes towards institutions, but some can be officially assigned and keep strategic relations with local administrations; further, social activities addressed to the neighbourhood in which the centres are located are carried out, beyond the political and/or countercultural ones; besides some Marxist SCs are not aligned to any networks.

d) Lastly, there are *non-ideological* SCs or *heterogeneous* ones, in which different ideological leanings coexist; they are *Non-Aligned/Affiliated*, because do not belong to any of the former networks and include SCs both with a more political orientation and a more countercultural one (Montagna, 2006); usually they are more moderate and have pragmatic or

strategic attitudes with institutions in order to obtain the official assignment of the premises.

2. Models of decision-making: the framework.

Considering this political-ideological fragmentation, I wondered if all social centres shared similar types of decision making, notwithstanding their differences. The existing researches have been less focused on this feature, except for those concerning the social centres belonging to the *ex-Disobedient* sector. In particular, as far as the conception and practices of democracy are concerned, the use of the deliberative method in the internal decision-making process of Disobedients emerged, as Becucci stated: “The deliberative method... within the Assembly... does not use the system of the count of ayes and contraries, but is based on the search for consensus and tendential unanimity... the Disobedients’ movement prefers the search for consensus. In the case there be positions that do not give shared solutions, the under discussion problems are momentarily suspended to be afterwards faced” (2003: 90).

But, what about the other social centres? Are their political conceptions and practices inspired to deliberative democracy too, or they follow other models? Which are their methods adopted, both in internal decision-making and in the external decisional processes through the interactions with the other SMOs within broader movement decisional settings? Which are the dynamics and mechanisms characterizing their decisional processes?

In order to answer these questions, first I have considered the practice of deliberative democracy that, according to the scholars who are studying this issue, “refers to decisional processes in which under conditions of equality, inclusiveness and transparency, and a communicative process based on reason (the strength of a good argument) are able to transform individual preferences, leading to decisions oriented to the public good.” (della Porta 2006, 2; della Porta and Diani 2006, 241).

Nevertheless, because deliberative democracy is not the sole practice adopted by global movement organizations, I have checked if the decision-making, both internally and externally, of the social centres investigated, corresponded to other types or models of democracy. The typology elaborated by the *Demos Project* group on democracy within the GJM, coordinated by della Porta (2009), in fact regards the different models of decisional process adopted by diverse groups and organizations belonging to