RESEARCH ARTICLE

GRAMSCI'S CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE IMPLICIT DIMENSION OF POLITICS
A case study

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ABSTRACT: Civil society actors' reduced ability to take political action and adopt critical positions towards public institutions is often ascribed to the "marketisation" of the local welfare systems in which non-profit and third-sector organizations operate. This reading of the depoliticisation of civil society is correct, but it has a number of shortcomings, including the assumption that civil society actors are passive agents that are overwhelmed by the depoliticisation mechanisms to which they are subjected. Instead, this paper explores how civic organizations – albeit unintentionally – engender depoliticisation dynamics that shrink their critical strength. To do so, it draws on Gramscian arguments regarding civil society and politics and uses them to illuminate a case study of a local governance strategy (*V'Arco Villoresi Green System*), involving both experts and civic groups. The main finding of the research is that civil society sustains what Gramsci called "economism", i.e. a radical rejection of politics, which may be enacted by civil society both when non-critically adhering to governance arenas and when contesting them. The analysis undertaken contributes to our understanding of the depoliticisation of civil society, shedding light, on the one hand, on how this process is not solely due to factors external to civil society and, on the other hand, on what the author calls the *implicit dimension of politics*.

KEYWORDS: Civil Society, Depoliticization, Governance, Gramsci, Participation.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the implicit dimension of politics by analysing the depoliticisation mechanisms involved in a local development governance strategy, which includes a variety of civil society actors (CSAs). The research question here addressed concerns how civil society may engender or sustain its own depoliticisation. Indeed, the reduced ability of CSAs to take political action and adopt critical positions toward public institutions and private funders (D'Albergo and Moini 2017, 401) is increasingly being recognized (Skocpol 2003; Eliasoph 2013; Lederman 2019). Moreover, the current depoliticisation of civil society is generally ascribed to the "marketisation" (Iacovino 2016) of the local welfare systems in which non-profit and third-sector organizations act as service providers and governance partners (Wood et al. 2014; Polizzi 2018). In contexts such the US and the UK (Dunning 2018), it has been ascertained that "the move toward […] competitive grant-making rewarded community 'partners' rather than partisan activists, empowering civic actors and non-profits that eschewed explicitly political agendas" (Lederman 2019, 88). Even if not necessarily intentionally pursued, the diffusion of new forms of "funding for local projects increasingly rests upon the active silencing of explicit forms of adversarial politics" (*ibidem*). This would probably not be denied by even the least critical of scholars, but the depoliticisation of civil society is a much more complex and wider phenomenon than the simple implication of recent non-profit funding strategies (Eliasoph 1996; De Nardis 2017).

Indeed, the silencing of critical voices does not occur solely outside civic groups, when they promote their initiatives or communicate with public authorities and private funders. Instead, the same is also happening inside civic organizations (Busso and Gargiulo 2017), in their everyday group life (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), where there is increasing exposure to tensions (Mikkelsen 2013) and conflicts (Citroni 2018) due to the additional efficiency required to remain competitive, but where the possibility of voicing and openly debating these elements is shrinking (Busso and Gargiulo 2017). This apparent contradiction cannot be ascribed to the argument whereby the current depoliticisation of civil society derives from changes in governance arrangements and funding opportunities. However, the contradiction must be taken seriously, as it indicates two aspects that are beyond the reach of the current debates on the depoliticisation of civil society.

The first is the idea that the depoliticisation of civil society also concerns what the author here calls the implicit dimension of politics, that is the form of political actions (Romano 2017), not simply their explicit contents, considered both in the ways they present themselves publicly (e.g. through which narratives or discursive frames they

develop) and how they take shape on an everyday basis (e.g. what type of collaborations and group styles sustain them). It is the seemingly volatile and tiny aspects that reveal how CSAs work and act – and not merely what they are and do – that give rise to the formation of "neoliberal depoliticisation" (Romano 2017), "postpolitics" (Mouffe 2005) or the "disappearance" of politics (Arendt 1995). However general, these political theory terms correspond to tangible aspects of the everyday group life and the public initiatives set up by third-sector organizations and civic associations, but they are generally ignored in the current debate on the depoliticisation of civil society.

The second aspect – closely related to the first one – is the idea that the depoliticisation of civil society derives from changes in the relationship between CSAs and public authorities or private funders: this is a behaviorist argument, as it assumes that a stimulus directly impacts on CSAs, thereby depoliticising them. This view assumes CSAs to be non-autonomous and passive agents that are subjected to depoliticisation mechanisms external to their everyday practices and that impact them from above. The proactive attitude of civil society is considered only in opportunistic and strategic terms, with non-profit and third-sector organizations adapting to new funding and market opportunities. While civil society has been recurrently praised as a viable alternative to both the state and the market (Alexander 2006), its autonomy in current debates on its depoliticisation is reserved solely to those CSAs involved in the opposite emerging trend of repoliticisation (Jessop 2013). Instead, this paper assumes the depoliticisation of civil society to be a social process in which its actors are engaged in a different way: they are engaged with the form of their initiatives rather than simply their contents, and this form – whether framed as, for example, scene styles (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014), regimes of engagement (Thévenot 2007) or in other categories (Cefai and Lichterman 2006) – sustains and reproduces depoliticisation or instead opposes and obstructs it.

This paper explores how civil society may implicitly sustain its own depoliticisation through a theory-driven analysis of the case study of *V'Arco Villoresi Green System*: a complex governance strategy, including a variety of CSAs and promoted by the Lombardy Region for managing and developing a large suburban area, situated north of Milan. The relevance of the selected case study is twofold: on the one hand, it includes the proactive involvement of different types of CSAs, and this allows us to apply the proposed perspective to heterogeneous civil society subjects in terms of their organizing structure, legal status, political culture and domains of action. On the other hand, the selected case study illustrates how, in a typical example of collaborative governance, it is possible to explore implicit aspects and mechanisms that may trigger and sustain depoliticisation processes. Indeed, the proposed exploration focuses on the

implicit dimension of politics, which will be detailed thanks to the Gramscian reflections on civil society and politics introduced in the next section. Famously, these reflections address civil society as the battlefield for hegemony, which is to be conceived as largely implicit, given that it concerns the taken for granted, shared meanings that define what is to be publicly accepted and expected in different circumstances. The Gramscian reflections will be then applied to two broad contextual conditions that were absent when Gramsci developed his reflections, but which are fundamental in the shaping of the selected case study and thus need to be unpacked for the proposed analysis of the depoliticisation of civil society. Having introduced the research strategy and methodology adopted, six empirical findings will show how the studied CSAs involved in V'Arco Villoresi Green System sustained what Gramsci (1997, 208) called "economism", and thus proactively enacted the depoliticisation of civil society, albeit unintentionally. The final section is devoted to discussing how analysing the implicit dimension of politics enriches current debates on depoliticisation processes and civil society.

2. Civil Society and Politics in Gramsci

Today often deemed an alternative to Tocqueville (Busso and Gargiulo 2017), Gramsci is appreciated for his critical position towards civil society, too often lacking in neo-Tocquevillian studies (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) and in analysis of non-profit or third-sector organizations when similar categories are assumed to be neutral, devoid of any political implications (Moro 2014). Instead, Gramsci openly considers the danger of depoliticising civil society through the interpretative lens adopted and, in order to avoid such a risk, he jettisons the "conceptual separation between civil society and political society" (Montanari 1997, 199). This constitutes a major innovation in the history of social and political thought, as the very notion of civil society, soon after its creation, came to be seen as being opposed to that of political society (Bobbio 1990, 47). In so doing, Gramsci widens the meaning of civil society to an unprecedented degree, including within it movements, union organizations, parties, associations and especially any other type of social grouping engaged in the battle among ideologies (*ibidem*). According to Gramsci, these different organizations have in common the fact that they are fighting each other for cultural hegemony, struggling to get their own worldviews accepted and taken for granted. Hegemony, not ownership of the means of production or the use of violence, is what sustains the ruling social group, and the battle for hegemony is what Gramsci refers to when he speaks of civil society, with a significant dis-

tance from current definitions of civil society (Cohen and Arato 1992) and the civil sphere (Alexander 2006).

The first argument this paper borrows from Gramsci's reflections therefore concerns the adopted definition of civil society, which stands out as a perspective rather than the demarcation of a field of empirical phenomena (Salamon, Sokolowski and List 2003). But there is a second type of argument that this paper borrows from Gramsci's reflections. This is his emphasis on the problematisation of the "natural", i.e. the unchallenged, everyday world, which makes Gramsci a scholar of the implicit dimension of politics. By assuming civil society to be the battlefield for cultural hegemony, Gramsci suggests that civil society politicises in a different manner to the "logocentric" (Berger 2009) way inevitably assumed by social scientists that problematize their subjects. The politicisation is carried out by civil society implicitly, for example through the "tendentially universal character to the group ethic, which has to be conceived as capable of becoming a norm of conduct for humanity as a whole" (Gramsci 2000, 381).

In a similar vein, civil society depoliticises implicitly, especially when its public actions or the solidarity that sustain them are informed by the principle of "economism": a radical "rejection of politics" that assumes "many more forms than that of pure liberalism" and takes shape every time the "ethical-political moment" (Gramsci 1997, 208) is devalued or neglected to the advantage of the "corporate-economic" moment (*ivi*, 199). Indeed, the two moments combine in modern politics (Montanari 1997, 34), the latter being "the idea of freedom" and the former "the awareness of one's own living in relation" (*ibidem*) to other human beings. Gramsci assigns primacy to the "ethics of responsibility" with respect to the idea of "subjective freedom" (*Ivi*, XXXIV), consistently with Croce's reflections (Bobbio 1990) on the "ethical-political moment" that transcends the particularism of the economic-corporate dimension through the maturation of a sense of collective responsibility. Interpreting social processes as simply "economic-corporative" aggregations, devoid of any form of collective responsibility in themselves – different from the responsibility associated to the parts that make up these aggregations –, means denying the political dimension of social life. This is the "economism" Gramsci fights "especially in the theory and practice of politics. In this field, the struggle can and must be carried on by developing the concept of hegemony" (Gramsci 2000, 216). This is done directly by Gramsci himself, for example with respect to his critique of the "theoretical syndicalism" (Gramsci 1997) and its unique focus on economic and material factors in the fight against the ruling class: this is a form of economism that sustains, instead of challenging, the status quo it claims to fight.

Similar critical reflections are particularly important for the proposed analysis of the depoliticisation of civil society. Today, civil society's capacity to promote political action

is still generally linked to carrying out direct political actions (Jessop 2013) through the classic repertoire of protest and lobbying (De Nardis 2017), generally for the most disadvantaged groups (Biorcio and Vitale 2016). CSAs that collect signatures, critically analyse government actions, organize demonstrations or informally influence politicians are considered openly politically oriented: indeed, they politicise through their actions, as they remove specific issues or needs from the private sphere and bring them first to the arena of public debate and then incorporate them into policies (Jessopp 2013; Pelizzoni 2011, 25). The most recurrent arguments on the depoliticisation of CSAs refer to the decline of the abovementioned activities, the waning of protest and lobbying corresponding to the increase in their role in public services or as partners in complex governance arrangements.

Gramsci indicates another, more specific sense of depoliticisation of civil society, which provides a useful starting point when investigating what role, if any, is played by the actors and minor practices of civil society in supporting and nurturing its own depoliticisation. In Gramsci the political dimension of civil society is not just explicit direct political action, such as that associated with the traditional repertoire of protest; instead it is implicit, as it takes shape both through the tangible activities carried out – which reproduce certain visions of the world – and in the sense of responsibility that nurtures these activities (Gramsci 1997, 285). Cultural hegemony refers to the implicit, taken for granted, shared meanings that define the boundaries of what is to be accepted (Boltanski and Esquerre 2017) in a given context. Adopting this perspective, when not opposed, the economism that denies politics is somehow sustained and reproduced.

This study adopts Gramsci's concept of civil society, investigating how civil society acts politically in the struggle for hegemony, influencing shared meanings subtly and indirectly, whether through direct political action or taking part in complex governance arenas.

3. Disintermediation and the Outsourcing of Government

Attempting to use general theory to carry out empirical research requires specific attention to be paid to contextual factors, since they affect "the analyst's understanding, the data he can collect for empirical examination, and the processes studied themselves" (Goodin and Tilly 2006, 27). In particular, it is useful to specify two contextual conditions that create significant differences between today's relationship between the state and civil society and the historical reality Gramsci had in mind. The first is wide-

spread disintermediation, i.e. the decline in importance of intermediate bodies typical of civil society like parties, trade unions and trade associations in mediating the relationship between individual citizens and the state or its local representatives. In Italy, studies on the third sector see the recent origins of this phenomenon in the second half of the 1970s, concomitantly with the decline of the previous model of public non-profit relationships, known as "collateralism" (Polizzi 2018). However, in the early 1990s, the emergence of a new global political landscape and local systematic episodes of political corruption and bribery contributed to Italian civil society enjoying unprecedented cultural centrality. More recently, while the non-profit sector has grown in quantitative terms and in economic importance, the delegitimisation of intermediate bodies has continued, supported by new communication technologies. Nowadays, most observers of society and politics in Italy claim that the disintermediation is so advanced that it has reconfigured the relations between institutional politics and citizens in the direction – commonly known as populist – of questioning the institutional framework within which these relations have developed so far (Ruzza 2014).

While disintermediation corresponds to a general loss of importance of civil society, the second contextual condition to be mentioned here points in the opposite direction. Indeed, it refers to the increased role of the third sector in local welfare arrangements and governance processes, both through the outsourcing of state functions to CSAs that provide public services and their inclusion in public decision-making processes, for example designing and implementing social policies. One of the most emblematic and well-studied cases in Italy is the Zone Plans (Polizzi 2018), a policy measure in which – despite the multiplicity of phenomenologies with which they manifest themselves – it is evident that the roles of public service providers and decision-makers do not simply coexist, but often overlap for the same CSAs.

Being both executors and co-protagonists of public decision-making leads to tensions and conflicts of interests that are seen to give rise to a number of negative implications. As mentioned above, the insertion of the third sector into the provision of local social services exacerbates pre-existing ambiguities with respect to citizens' right to social citizenship (Busso and Gargiulo 2017); meanwhile, the co-optation of CSAs in the governance arena and public decision-making processes is considered a reduction in the discursive horizons (Pelizzoni 2011) for articulating new solutions (Busso and Gargiulo 2017), and therefore drives the depoliticisation of civil society. The Zone Plans are just one of a wider range of state outsourcing (Lederman 2019) possibilities in which CSAs are fully entitled to play an institutionally recognised role in the governance processes related to a variety of policy areas.

As the way in which civil society tensions and potential conflicts manifest themselves varies according to the instruments considered (Lascoumes and Le Gales 2009), it is first worth mentioning the sphere to which the tools included in the selected case study refer – "negotiated planning" (law n.662/1996). This notion introduced a set of agreement-based policy measures for local development purposes into Italian law. They differ in fundamental aspects such as their coherence, and in some cases include CSAs as private stakeholders that are asked to contribute to decision-making processes, for example defining local development goals. A number of empirical studies have illustrated how often civil society participation is purely a formality (Moini 2012), or at best marginal (Lederman 2019), as the bargaining power of CSAs vis-à-vis public institutions is derisory (Swyngedouw 2018), especially for smaller civil society organisations. In spite of this, civil society participation helps to legitimise public decisions (Swyngedouw 2011) and present a local consensus that takes shape outside any representative mechanism. Such consensus is not derived from prior civil society participation, but instead retrospectively engenders this participation.

Detailed case-study analysis shows a variety of phenomena that are difficult to summarise, but civil society's participation as a partner in policy-making processes is a recurring function, irrespective of how "real" such participation is or the "success" of policies in attaining their development goals (Piselli and Ramella 2008). One such function is that of consensus building, and takes shape, for example, through sitting at negotiating tables or taking part in defining non-binding measures such as general guidelines (Pinson 2009). Even when the contents of these processes are contested by CSAs, their presence legitimises that of the institutional actors, thus expanding the consensus towards them. CSAs are often asked to play the role of consensus-building relays. On the one hand, they are the object of public efforts to gain their consensus, for example informing or co-opting them in the public decision-making process. On the other hand, when they proactively and publicly engage in the development of new policy measures, they become the subject of consensus-building efforts directed towards other subjects, be they smaller associations or single citizens. This type of activity does not involve outsourcing the state, like when CSAs provide public services, but instead represents the outsourcing of government (Dunning 2018), and namely its function of consensus building. Consistently with neoliberal ideologies, this function is performed subtly: informing rather than binding, involving without prescribing, inviting to collaborate in the definition of guidelines, and seeking obedience in a non-coercive way.

Given the temporal distance between Gramsci's reflections and the current conditions described above, it is important to note that the consensus-builder function civil society is asked to play when participating in the governance arena corresponds to the

argument that Gramsci advances to qualify what civil society does when struggling in its battle for hegemony. It is as if governance-based policy tools have learned lessons from Gramsci, and try to subtly use what civil society provides "spontaneously" to their own advantage. This suggests an initial connection between the two contextual factors introduced in this section: while disintermediation processes weaken the strength of civil society in "organising consensus" (Gramsci 1997, 277), through their involvement as partners in the policy-making process, public authorities try to organise civil society's consensus building to their direct advantage[1].

But there is also a second connection between the contextual factors discussed above, which refers to the fact that they both seem to weaken the capacity of civil society to directly advance political actions: the disintermediation process makes CSAs increasingly irrelevant, unable to mobilise critical masses of activists or individual citizens. As repeatedly mentioned, CSAs' participation in the management and definition of policy measures makes them increasingly unlikely to adopt openly critical or even antagonistic positions. The fact that direct political action becomes more difficult for civil society makes the study of civil society as a field of hegemony and the implicit dimension of politics not only theoretically but also socially relevant, given that in these circumstances the possibility of indirect political actions acquires weight in place of open and direct political initiatives.

4. Case study – V'Arco Villoresi Green System

The case study chosen for this paper is V'Arco Villoresi Green System (VVGS), the governance strategy promoted by the Lombardy Region for managing and developing a large suburban area – covering 695.80 km^2 and 1,480,401 inhabitants, spread across 3 provinces and 74 municipalities – crossed by the Villoresi canal (86 km in length) north of Milan, between the rivers Ticino and Adda. The Villoresi canal was completed in 1890 in order to bring water to a relatively arid agricultural area, and was funded by the Consorzio Est Ticino Villoresi, a consortium of farmers and landowners, which remains the canal's management body. In the more than 100 years since the construction of the Villoresi canal, the territory through which the canal runs has changed from "agricultural lands dotted with small rural villages" (Ugolini and Galizioli 2013, 237) to the area with Italy's highest population density (*ibidem*), rich in manufacturing and ag-

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[1] This was already conceptualized by Gramsci in his argument on the state ruling through civil society. See Bobbio 1990, 39-47.

ricultural industries and connected by significant transport infrastructure. VVGS is a governance strategy that includes a number of public and private actors in pursuit of the following local development goals: "the promotion of the ecological function of the canal corridor, the use of the canal as a tourist attraction and leisure space, the conservation and enhancement of the natural habitat in the surrounding areas, the regeneration of public spaces and cycle paths that border the canal, and the maintenance of the waterway itself" (*Aa.Vv.* 2015, 6).

The empirical evidence analysed in this article was collected between 2012 and 2015, principally through the author's participation in VVGS as an expert involved in the *feasibilty study*. Indeed, in the selected case study the same expression – VVGS – refers to three different governance tools (Lascoumes and Le Gales 2009), which together form the overall selected governance strategy:

1)   the *Local Development Pact* signed on 14 June 2012 by the Lombardy Region, the publicly owned consortium responsible for maintaining the Villoresi canal, provincial and municipal public administrations and Expo S.p.a. (the public company created to manage Milan Expo 2015); formally, this first tool is a 'Territorial Pact', a policy measure resulting from "negotiated planning" in which public institutions and private stakeholders define a number of local development goals.

2)   the *feasibility study project* funded by Fondazione Cariplo[2] and including a number of detailed analyses on the obstacles and favourable conditions in pursuit of each of the stated goals.

3)   The *masterplan* that conveys the results of the feasibility study through visions, scenarios and detailed urban planning and architecture action plans.

The author's involvement in VVGS comprised carrying out specific expert tasks, such as the scientific coordination of the interviews to a set of stakeholders and their analysis, with the writing of a research report for the feasibility study. The idea that VVGS could be a setting suited to studying the possible role implicitly played by CSAs in sustaining their depoliticisation only arose while conducting these tasks. Indeed, the author's internal position within VVSG offered privileged opportunities to develop such a study: the implicit dimension of politics requires a consistent research strategy, that addresses said dimension not explicitly (e.g. with direct questions) but indirectly, exploring it while CSAs do something else, such as getting involved in a complex governance strategy. As soon as the tasks arranged with Consorzio Villoresi were completed, the author developed the analysis proposed in this paper on how civil society may implicitly sustain the depoliticisation processes that hinder their political initiatives.

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[2] Call for proposals "Promoting sustainability at the local level. Realising the ecological connection".

This analysis involved drawing on the following empirical evidence: the official documents relating to the three aforementioned formal tools of which VVGS consisted; the declarations made in the 18 interviews carried out with CSAs (six with local activist groups, six with services-based third-sector organisations and six farmers' associations); the notes taken while working with the team responsible for the feasibility study and participating in the conference at which the masterplan was presented; and the minutes of the "technical secretariats" established by the Lombardy Region to monitor the progress of the Local Development Pact over time.

It is worth specifying that almost none of the interventions planned by VVGS have actually been carried out, due to the lack of funds devoted to the implementation phase[3]. Indeed, none of the three aforementioned instruments included specific funds for this phase. However, what is important in the proposed analysis of VVGS is the process through which it has developed, rather than its outcomes.
Indeed, VVGS implied the proactive participation of a variety of both expert figures and local stakeholders. The experts involved were the planners and architects who developed the bid for funding from Fondazione Cariplo and drew up the masterplan, as well as the biologists, naturalists and sociologists involved as consultants on different aspects of the feasibility study project and masterplan. These professionals defined the general local development goals and thus determined the project's boundaries and underlying framework, regarding which CSAs were invited to participate. Indeed, such participation did not take place at the Local Development Pact level, which was an agreement that only involved public administrations and publicly owned companies. Instead, civil society subjects were asked to participate in developing both the feasibility study and the masterplan presenting its main results.

The experts in charge of these tools put this participation into practice as follows: first, they identified three types of CSAs as relevant stakeholders – environmental associations, local committees and farmers' associations. Second, they focused uniquely on the involvement of these types of subjects in three out of the five "transects" (Duany *et al*. 2000) into which the V'Arco Villoresi area of intervention was divided. Third, they decided that in each of the three transects, the participation would involve interviews with two examples of each of the three selected types of CSA. Carrying out these 18 interviews was delegated to a team of sociologists, coordinated by the author[4]. In line with the overall purpose of the feasibility study, the official goal of these

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[3] Only two interventions actually took place, both in Monza, thanks to this municipality's capacity to access further state funds.
[4] The author coordinated the work of researchers Sonia Auzzani and Igor Costarelli.

interviews was to ascertain how doable the interventions detailed in the masterplan were by exploring consensus in civil society towards them, namely their willingness to play an active role in their implementation. If such willingness existed, it would constitute a favourable condition for the actual implementation of the planned interventions, both for fundraising purposes and to maintain the intervention over time once put in place.

Following initial mapping, the selection of subjects for interview did not take place on the basis of verifying the existence of previous knowledge of the interventions on which they were called to express an opinion, as the team of sociologists had openly suggested. This was interesting, as it contrasted with the interviews' official goal: how could CSAs express their opinions and willingness to contribute to something they were not even aware of, or which they had just heard about for the first time during the interview?

However, this was only superficially contradictory, as rather than merely inquiring as to whether CSAs were willing to participate in the implementation of VVGS in the future, the interviews were valuable participatory occasions in themselves, an opportunity to inform the interviewees of the planned interventions and propose that CSAs participated in them, and thus to create consensus towards them. The interviews provided an opportunity to build the consensus they formally aimed to explore and to make CSAs extend the consensus to further actors, such as the citizens associated to the interviewed organizations. It is no coincidence that, at the explicit request of those responsible for the masterplan and feasibility study, all the interviews were expected to end with an appeal to indicate further individuals or associated subjects that the interviewee could inform about VVGS. With regard to these latter subjects, the interviewee was called upon to play the role of relaying consensus, in other words involving, informing and soliciting further participation. Consistent with the non-prescriptive nature of the masterplan, the building of consensus was to occur in the absence of any formal constraints or binding agreements relating, for example, to content or modes of participation; this is a subtle power strategy that acts by directing (and not prescribing) behaviour and inviting people to share (rather than simply join) interventions like those detailed in the masterplan.

5. Building Consensus and the Adopted Research Strategy

Beyond that already outlined in the introduction section above, the selected case study offers at least two reasons of interest to explore how CSAs may contribute to their own depoliticisation, and thus to the general understanding of this process. First of all, it represents a typical example of the processes of contemporary governance, which include public institutions and representatives of civil society, which are formally called upon to play an active role in these processes but in fact are only involved downstream of the decision-making process with the function of legitimising it and creating consensus around the planned interventions (Swyngedouw 2018). The co-optation of civil society within these processes is one of the most frequently discussed forms of depoliticisation of associationism (Busso and Gargiulo 2017), in relation to the tensions and dilemmas typical of this position towards the public authorities. On the one hand, it promises greater incisiveness because of its position within the decision-making processes, but on the other hand the subordinate position given to civil society, as well as their possible market interests (e.g. in the management of services), weakens the political capacity of the associationism. Exploring the way in which civil society concretely manages these tensions and negotiates its insertion into complex processes of governance, such as the one seen here, allows us to investigate whether, and to what extent, it collaborates in creating and/or fighting the depoliticisation process in which its action is implicated.

While the first reason for studying the chosen case study is the involvement of civil society in a governance process, the second is the type of involvement the case allows us to examine, closer to the logic of "government outsourcing" (Duning 2018) than to "state outsourcing" (Lederman 2019). Indeed, VVGS does not call for the mechanisms of the delegation of public functions, with the creation, for example, of quasi-markets of social services, nor does it always demand direct involvement in designing social policies. Instead, a more subtle mechanism is active in the case study, less directly evident: the participation appears less extensive compared to the outlined "classic" scenario, as it happens in an improvised and informal way within the interviews, in the context of the implementation of non-binding tools such as the feasibility study and the masterplan. But it is, in fact, a more ambitious form of participation, because it is given the primarily political task of building consensus, in this case with respect to complex interventions and the redefinition of the uses of a vast territory, where various conflicting economic and cultural interests are concentrated (Ugolini and Galizioli 2013). The way in which this task is delegated – that is, not to bind, but rather to direct, informing and

arousing interest – is particularly relevant for the proposed investigation, because the absence of prescriptive mechanisms makes the setting up of direct political action particularly difficult and therefore confers a relatively large degree of importance to the implicit dimension of politics. Such a dimension was analyzed focusing on the evidence that emerged in the interviews, which in the adopted research strategy were subjected to a double coding process: first, to discern if the interviewed CSAs were keen on joining VVGS, rejected such a possibility or did not openly give a view on the matter; and secondly concentrating on how the interviewed CSAs supported their adopted position (no matter its contents), which arguments they made or general principles they invoked. With this second type of coding, it emerged that "economism" (Gramsci 1997, 204) was a recurrent criterion shared by both those willing to be co-opted in VVGS and those critically refusing this option.

6. The outsourcing of government: six research findings

The main results of the study are as follows: 1) CSAs were asked to play a relay role in consensus building; 2) the associations were aware of this request, as well as of the processes of disintermediation in which they were involved; 3) several associations willingly accepted performing the role of consensus builders; 4) the way they performed this role reveals an instrumental attitude linked to the pursuit of particularistic interests, rather than universalist orientations; 5) some associations expressed critical positions towards the proposed involvement in V'Arco; however, the way in which this position was sustained illustrates the same instrumental attitude; 6) surprisingly, some of the experts involved tried to politicise their work and the overall VVGS they were asked to define. These general findings are telling with respect to the initial research question, concerning the proactive role possibly played by CSAs in the decline of their political efficacy, and so they have to be introduced and discussed with greater detail.

The first finding confirms that those responsible for the formal tools through which V'Arco's strategy was implemented expected civil society to play a consensus-building role, rather than simply contributing to developing the planned interventions. In fact, the role that the associations are expected to play according to the promoters of V'Arco is well explained in the opening lines of the final report of the feasibility study, that is the depiction of the future scenario of the Villoresi Canal area in 2030, once this complex intervention is finally complete:

> The inhabitants have discovered a new side to their region and, thanks to the impetus of numerous environmental observers and local associations for the protection of the landscape, have become active citizens, interested in the processes of change and sustainable development (Aa. Vv.a 2015, 34).

This vision clearly expresses the attribution of a political function to civil society – the promotion of citizens' involvement and consensus with respect to VVGS. According to this excerpt, thanks to the mediation of civil society, citizens nurture a sense of responsibility and common belonging towards the V'Arco Villoresi area. A similar vision was expressed to the author during informal conversations with the experts involved in the masterplan's definition, for example when they assumed civil society would build consensus for the development of V'Arco Villoresi. This is what an urban planner told the author during the coffee break at the conference in which the masterplan was presented:

> Proactive citizenship involves making explicit a social demand that exists today but is not expressed, […] interventions like VVGS are now potentially very popular, but this cannot be seen without dirigisme. Consider what happens when you make 5 km of bike path: see how much it's used! And so the question becomes explicit... civic groups and associations do this before the bike path is built, then the public institution will follow…I think citizens are able to organise and mobilise themselves in support of their own interests…

The second finding shows how relevant the aforementioned contextual factors are for the CSAs interviewed and how aware they are of them. In fact, the general tendency towards disintermediation was revealed in the loss of political and social importance of the organisations formally interviewed for VVGS, which repeatedly highlighted the difficulty of developing and even surviving.

> Some years ago, let's say ten, our association comprised hundreds of people, and when we did a public initiative you could see and meet them all. Now it is different, we are just a few old people, and often you can count how many there are of us on one hand...

The actors interviewed are aware of the paradox that the shrinking membership (Skocpol 2003) is occurring at the same time that the institutions are called to play an increased role both as service contractors and as partners of public bodies:

> Many large associations have taken over the management of large parks and green spaces, with all the services attached … we, as a local farmers' association, have signed a framework agreement for territorial development (AQST) and, if we do not starve beforehand, we will work to define the guidelines that are the main results of such an agreement.

Interview respondents are not only aware of the changes in relations with the public authorities, but also of their implications in terms of taking on relatively new tasks compared to traditional ones, be they as service providers or partners of political institutions:

> Our association is already promoting a new mode of action, in which farmers will have to be available in a more proactive way than in the recent past… This is already happening, with actions related to the management and maintenance of abandoned places that we take care of autonomously... we then sign territorial development agreements, but I think it is our proactive position that makes us a point of reference for public bodies… we are more the exception than the rule but we also encourage other associations to do the same.

This interview provides a useful example of a third finding: the adherence of some of the interviewed CSAs to the V'Arco proposal and their willingness to work to broaden the consensus towards it. In particular, at least 11 of the 18 interviewed associations openly expressed such a position, showing a positive attitude toward participating in the tangible development of V'Arco, despite not knowing anything about this governance before the interviews. This finding seems to confirm the depoliticisation of CSAs, as they appear ready to be co-opted into governance processes that just vaguely and hypothetically promise possible future benefits.

However, arguments of this type require caution, as the position of CSAs needs to be understood in more depth by paying detailed attention to *how* they adhere to interventions such as VVGS, in particular trying to grasp which implicit dimension of politics sustains their explicit adherence to the governance strategy under investigation. Empirical evidence allowing implicit dimensions to be inferred did not emerge in all interviews, but when this happened it was clear that the positive attitude toward V'Arco was stimulated more by the pursuit of particularistic interests than by the sharing of the governance goals and underlying values. This is evident, for example, in the following excerpt of an interview with a farmers' association:

> It is important to understand that our job is not basic associationism; we work to sign agreements with public institutions that may benefit our associates, mainly with the Lombardy Region but also with different municipalities … our organisation seeks and promotes new work opportunities, and we are accredited by the Lombardy Region to do so. Our organisation is not a traditional association, but we have become a point of reference for single farmers and other associations and we are strongly supported by the Lombardy Region.

Adhering to agreements or informal collaborations within governance assets is not necessarily sustained by a sharing of values or a sense of collective responsibility, but instead can be backed by the pursuit of particularistic interests such as work opportunities. This is the fourth finding, which points directly to the contradiction inherent in performing a political task, such as consensus building, through the promotion and pursuit of economic interests. Civil society's positive attitude towards participation in the establishment and maintenance of V'Arco Villoresi is not sustained and does not nurture the development of what Gramsci called the "ethical-political moment". Instead, the participation in governance strategies like the one selected here takes shape through "economic-corporate" logic, thus perpetuating a form of "economism" which constitutes a "radical negation of politics" (Montanari 1997, 199).

It is no coincidence that, in spite of the expectations of those promoting V'Arco and the fact that these expectations correspond to the new tasks that associations like the one quoted above perform, V'Arco fails to arouse a sense of collective responsibility towards the transformations proposed and the territory they affect. This, at least, was explicitly acknowledged by one of the experts involved in the conference presentation of the VVGS masterplan, during informal backstage conversations:

> There is a unitary dimension of V'Arco as environmental infrastructure that I do not think has come to pass yet… The Villoresi canal is long, and when you speak to associations each one refers to its own territory and has its own members in mind … we have extraordinary dialogue and positive collaboration with many local civic groups, but it is just the same, they don't understand that we are dealing with the whole picture or they are not just interested in this broad picture… we've seen that this changes if you create some new opportunities, but otherwise everything remains exactly as it was before.

The lack of a truly "ethical-political" moment regarding V'Arco was also confirmed indirectly by some of the interviewed associations, for example when they mentioned past attempts to develop a "civic infrastructure" for the whole V'Arco area:

> We see now that prestigious experts are proposing what we did twenty years ago… there were lots of environmental associations like ours, and we used to see each other regularly, in a sort of civic infrastructure that was sustained by friendly social ties… we even founded the 'Friends of Villoresi' association in 1994! [here the interviewee proudly shows off the membership card of the association], we held some meetings but we soon stopped… we couldn't travel 60 km each way to hold meetings with any funders... […] we asked for financial support from both Lombardy and the Villoresi Consortium, but at the time they were not interested in us at all… now here they are! But times have changed, there are no 'Friends of Villoresi' associations on the horizon, there are just few old people like me that still remain from those times…and the new groups are different, they are not just volunteers, they follow the money!

The fifth finding is that the same negation of the "political-ethical moment" involving those willing to participate in the development of V'Arco Villoresi is also sustained by those who express perplexity or even criticism towards this governance strategy. For example, a representative from a local association of farmers, who did not know about V'Arco before the interview, once informed, expressed his opinion as follows:

> You know, the Lombardy Region and Villoresi Consortium should first do their job, providing farmers with a clean and regular water supply… then we can talk about cycle lanes or landscapes, but here we have problems with receiving water, and now we are asked to join this project!? I invite these people to take their commitments seriously and work to improve the quality of the service.

In other circumstances those interviewed expressed their perplexity more veiledly, especially in relation to the fact that they did not knew enough about the project in which they were called to participate, or to the fact that they needed to consult their associates before expressing any definitive opinion. However, the main point is that while, on the one hand, the presence of critical positions seems to deny the depoliticisation of civil society, on the other hand, the way in which these critical positions are expressed reveals "economic-corporate" more than "ethical-political" moments.

Finally, the sixth finding shows that while generally seen as a source of depoliticisation – or, more specifically, public deresponsibilisation (Jessop 2013) – some of the experts involved in V'Arco openly worked to politicise the governance strategy. This was, for example, evident in what the urban planner in charge of drafting the feasibility study told the author about V'Arco in a coffee break discussion of the masterplan presentation:

> We sell V'Arco as innovative and cool, but we all know this is a political intervention, we know not everyone agrees with it because it affects their revenue… also, consider that not all local administrations adhere to our request, and this is telling – often they just don't care about cycle lanes and tourist visits… they just have another agenda… I think we should say this more openly, we would encounter opponents but also real supporters.

Declarations like this contrast with the official way V'Arco is presented at public occasions, like the conference dedicated to the masterplan. Their political character also contrasts especially with the non-political (Romano 2017) way in which the interviewed CSAs both argued their availability to participate in implementing V'Arco and criticised such an intervention. Overall, the illustrated research results allow us to go back to the initial question and explore the possible role implicitly played by civil society in its depoliticisation as part of a broader investigation into the nature and functioning of this process.

7. The implicit dimension of the depoliticisation of civil society

The depoliticisation of CSAs occurs amidst and resonates with a number of other relevant processes both within civil society – e.g. the decline of traditional forms of engagement (Ion 1997; Skocpol 2003) and the spread of loose connections (Wuthnow 1998) – and beyond the civic sphere, such as the rise of "consensual politics" (Swyngedouw 2011) typical of neoliberal regimes (D'Albergo and Moini 2017). There is plenty of critical analysis that shows the growth of participatory processes in the context of the decreasing relevance of democratic procedures (Swyngedouw 2011) and underlines the connection between these two, seemingly contradictory, processes (Moini 2012). Taken together, the various strands of contemporary research into civil society's participation in public procedures show its intrinsically "ambiguous character … as they may both improve the quality of public decision-making and also work as a tool to manipulate processes of consensus-building" (*ivi,* 29). Focusing in particular on urban transformations (Swyngedouw 2011), similar arguments show that "while neoliberal reforms have insulated various aspects of governance from open debate – for example, by creating new quasi-public bodies immune to democratic control […] – citizens are increasingly exhorted to "join the conversation, provide input, and be an active member of the community" (Lederman 2019, 87). However, this paradox is illusory, not real, given that the "tyranny of participation" (Cooke and Kothari 2001) has developed thanks to "opaque rules and procedures" (Swyngedouw 2011, 372).

It is worth noting that this argument is typical in the way it traces the lack of tensions between widespread participation and its political irrelevance to factors that are external to civil society, such as the opacity of the institutional rules (Moini 2012). The analysis presented above allows us to go in a different direction, instead addressing factors that are *internal* to civil society and that we contend are relevant for its depoliticisation. This research position is based on the assumption that CSAs are not necessarily just victims of consensus-building manipulation, but may also proactively engage in it to pursue specific benefits: for example, "by convening the community to participate, and representing the outcome of such participation to suit particular needs, local non-profits may choose which voices exemplify the collective good" (Lederman 2019, 88).

We consider similar consensus-building tricks to be merely the explicit dimension of a wider phenomenon, the depoliticisation of civil society, which includes an equally relevant *implicit* dimension. Rarely acknowledged, this dimension does not concern the recurrent focus on CSAs' predatory behaviour and their origins in the governance arrangements that bind the distribution of funds to competitive mechanisms. Instead, the implicit dimension of the depoliticisation of civil society emerges through more subtle analysis which addresses the form (Romano 2017, 495), rather than the contents, of the political action carried out by CSAs. Recognising this dimension implies broadening the boundaries of "politics and the political" (Swyngedouw 2011, 373) far beyond its definitions as a relatively autonomous institutional sphere (Rosanvallon 2006) or subtle power practices that develop through exclusionary discourse mechanisms (Foucault 1972). Though not defined as such, the implicit dimension of politics has been explored in recent political and philosophical analysis (Swyngedouw 2011, 372), which have tried to pinpoint what is political and what is not, whether defined as "impolitical" (Esposito 1987), "postdemocratic" (Crouch 2006), "politically perverse" (Arrendt 1995, 6), "apoliticism" (Gramsci 1997, 290) or "postpolitical" (Mouffe 2007). Moreover, social theory and research has made interesting efforts to address the implicit or formal dimension of politics[5], for example referring to "codes of practice"

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[5] The implicit everydays or formal dimension of politics has a rich history of research (Cefai 2007: 528), which includes philosophers such as Arendt (1995: 10) and Gramsci (1997: 201), sociologists like Goffman (1963) and Melucci (1996) and an increasing number of social researchers (Gayet-Viaud 2009; Berger 2015; Luvatakhalo 2012). Their studies address the political relevance of the form of antagonistic actions in a variety of ways. For example, they illustrate how the *narratives* adopted by grassroots movements may sustain, rather than fight, neoliberal depoliticisation, because of the "impolitical" character of those narratives (Romano 2017); civic action studies (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2014; Citroni 2018) show how the spread of *associative styles* such as plug-in volunteering (Lichterman 2005) is undermining the civicness of

(Melucci 1997), civil society styles (Citroni 2015) and narratives (Romano 2017) or the political assumptions that are taken for granted and sustain everyday encounters and practices (Gayet Viaud 2009). Although they differ greatly in their content, these attempts reveal a similar methodological point: that the implicit dimension of politics needs to be addressed indirectly, while looking at other phenomena that may reveal it.

In a similar vein, the primary focus of this study has not been the implicit dimension of politics, but rather the exploration of the possible role played by CSAs in their depoliticisation. The Gramscian categories adopted to conduct this exploration have especially channelled our attention towards the form, rather than the contents, of the relationships engaged – or simply anticipated during interviews – by CSAs with the governance strategy in which they were asked to take part, and thus with the public institutions leading it. The research results showed how CSAs enacted a radical rejection of politics, as they pondered their participation in VVGS exclusively with respect to what Gramsci called the economic-corporate moment, and thus neglected the ethical-political moment. Also, the analysis has showed that this was not necessarily intentional, thus suggesting the relevance of what is implicit and unintentional for the development of what is explicitly and intentionally pursued, whether building consensus towards VVGS or, on the contrary, its critique and political opposition. This is a broad point, the development of which demands extensive further analysis of the functioning of the contemporary depoliticisation of civil society, in particular concerning how the development of this process is sustained by the connections between emerging governance arrangements and implicit, unintentional or formal aspects of yet unexplored political actions.

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new collective actions (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2014) and "diminishing democracy" (Skocpol 2003); the non-profit *repertoire of action* such as participatory events (Citroni 2015) and diversity festivals (Raposova 2018) promises civic renewal (Sampson *et. Al.* 2005) while attempting to regenerate public life through hog roasts (Mathew 2001); and collective actions fail to develop effective local mobilisation (Cefai 2007) or to become social movements (Citroni 2016) because their everyday practices take shape through *regimes of engagement* that are embedded in what is intimate and familiar (Thévenot 2007).

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