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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# SQUAT TO WORK. SQUATTED WORKSPACES, THE COMMONS AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMIES IN EUROPE

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**ABSTRACT:** Inspired by recuperated enterprises in Latin America, squatted workspaces have emerged across Southern Europe in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. Using the literature on European squatting, the concept of the commons and an action research in a squatted workspace in Milan, Italy, the paper explores the re-emergence of this type of squatting and its relation to solidarity economies in contemporary Europe. The paper examines how precarious workers have used squatting to establish self-managed workspaces to access income and to reinvent work and economic relations beyond capitalism. The paper also investigates the ambivalent role of squatting in supporting the establishment of solidarity economies.

**KEYWORDS:** Commons, recuperated enterprises, self-management, social and solidarity economies, squatted workspaces

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## 1. Introduction

In the mainstream European imaginary, squatting is associated with counter-cultural activities and radical political organising. However, squatting has always been used also to access resources critical for sustenance such as housing and agricultural land, therefore accomplishing an economic function<sup>1</sup>.

In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, a number of squatting actions targeting workspaces of different kinds have taken place across Europe. These squats took inspiration from recuperated enterprises in Latin America

<sup>1</sup> Economy throughout the text is intended in the substantive sense as a process devoted to secure one's livelihood (Jo, 2016; Karl Polanyi, 1944; Karl Polanyi, 1977).

and tried to establish economic activities in order to provide an income for their members while experimenting with democratic and solidarity economies.

The paper explores this wave of squatting combining the literature on European squatting, a theoretical discussion of the commons and an empirical analysis of a self-managed workspace established through squatting in Milan (Italy). The objectives of the paper are a) to situate this wave of workspace squatting against other types of squatting in contemporary Europe, b) to conceptualise the economic projects and governance of squatted workspaces and c) to investigate the opportunities and challenges of squatting as a mean to establish solidarity economies.

The paper is divided in four sections. In Section 1, I will discuss the literature on squatting in Europe and introduce the notion of workspace squatting. In Section 2, I use the notion of the commons and that of solidarity economy to interpret the squatted workspaces which emerged in Europe in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. In Section 3, I discuss my positionality and methodological choices regarding the case study I have conducted. In Section 4, I focus on the history, governance, social composition and economy of RiMaflow, a self-managed workspace located in a former industrial facility in Milan. And lastly, in Section 5, I discuss the relation between squatting and solidarity economies, drawing on the case of RiMaflow.

The main argument is that workspace squatting has emerged in Europe in the current context of economic insecurity as a mean to reclaim the means of production, access income and experiment with new economies beyond capitalism. I argue that the governance of squatted workspaces strongly differs from the top-down governance of traditional workspaces, transforming the workspace into a common which workers and community can benefit from, enabling the development of solidarity economies. I discuss how squatted workspaces can start up and sustain solidarity economies, yet the illegal status of a squat can limit the development of larger projects when they relate to mainstream economy and society.

## **2. Workspace squatting in contemporary Europe: A new game in town?**

In a context of perceived social injustices, squatting can be a very powerful way to contest authority, express dissent and reclaim a space of political agency. Yet beyond political contestation, people squat also to realise projects which would be difficult to do – or they would not like to do – within the constraints of mainstream society. Squatting enables people to access spatially fixed resources – land, buildings, public spaces – that would be otherwise hard to access. As the history of squatting shows, people have used squats to realise a great variety of projects, including setting up farms, organising parties and finding a place to live.

Today in Europe the general public tends to associate squatting to political collectives, punk concerts and raves. Yet, long before squatting was used for political empowerment and cultural expression, people squatted also to satisfy basic needs such as food and shelter, and this goes back to the birth of capitalism.

The formation of capitalism came with massive enclosures depriving thousands of people from the land and the professions that their livelihood was based on (Fairlie 2009; Federici 2004; Linebaugh 2014; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000). This created protests and conflicts, which took also the form of squatting actions targeting farmland, pastures and forests. For these proto-squatters, squatting exerted an economic function alongside a political one; it was a way to access spaces of sustenance as well as contesting authority.

Dispossessed farmers continued to squat lands and woods well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in rural Russia (Badcock 2017). Meanwhile influenced by anarchism and communism, workers across Europe and Russia used squatting to gain control over factories and farms establishing workers-led enterprises. The most consistent and sizable cases of squatting leading to workers' self-management took place during the early phase of the Russian Revolution (Brinton 2013; Keiser 1987; Mikhailov 2020) and during the Anarchist Revolution in Spain (Dolgoff 1990; Ealham 2010; Evans 2018; Mintz 2013). Still, after World War 2

peasants in Italy squatted farmland and forests with the objective of starting farms under workers' control, a practice known as 'sciopero al rovescio' (Cantarano 1989), which could be roughly translated as 'inside-out strike'

The consolidation of national welfare systems (Foundational Economy Collective 2018) during the 1950s and 1960s across European countries spread access to employment and increased living standards throughout most of the population. As the occupation of factories in the late 1960s and through the 1970s show, squatting remained a central instrument in the struggle for work and employment in Europe, while for the poorer segments of the working classes it also functioned as a means to access housing (Pruijt 2013; Watson 2016). Furthermore, countercultures and radical social movements appropriated squatting as tool to create spaces of political, cultural and social expression.

Yet arguably squatting declined during the mid and late 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe as a way to access means of production and set up economic activities, which could provide a livelihood to its members. This is reflected in the recent scholarship on squatting in Europe – for an overview see (Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013) – which mainly focuses on squatting as a political tool in the context of anti-capitalist struggles, as a way to access housing and as mean of counter-cultural expression.

**Table 1 – Percentage of people at risk of poverty in selected European countries 2004-2018**

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Denmark	16.5	16.7	16.3	18.3	17.5	17.9	16.8	17.4
Germany	.	20.2	20.1	19.7	19.6	20.6	19.7	18.7
Greece	30.9	29.3	28.1	27.7	34.6	36	35.6	31.8
Spain	25	24	23.8	26.1	27.2	29.2	27.9	26.1
France	19.8	18.8	18.5	19.2	19.1	18.5	18.2	17.4
Italy	26.2	25.9	25.5	25	29.9	28.3	30	27.3
United Kingdom	.	23.7	23.2	23.2	24.1	24.1	22.2	23.1

**Source: Eurostat**

Since the 2008 crisis, economic inequalities have consolidated across Europe, making a dignified standard of living an everyday problem for the European precariat and a growing concern for the middle classes. As Table 1 shows, over the past decade, the share of people at risk of poverty has stabilised in countries like France, Denmark and Germany at around 17% and over 25% in Italy and Spain, with Greece reaching peaks over 30%.

This context of economic insecurity sets the scene for the re-emergence of squatting as a way to access means of productions and sustenance. During the aftermath of the crisis, a wave of squatting targeting ex-industrial facilities spread across Europe. Inspired by recuperated enterprises in Argentina and Latin America (Sitrin 2006; Vieta 2010; Vieta and Ruggeri, 2009), these squats aimed at accessing workspaces of different kinds and establishing small and medium size economic operations under workers' control, which could generate some sort of income for their members. Cases of this type of squatting have been reported mostly across Southern Europe and Turkey (Ruggeri 2014). Some of these actions were successful and established enterprises and workspaces like Vio.Me in Thessaloniki (Greece), Fra.lib in Marseille (France), Officine Zero in Rome (Italy), RiMaflow in Milan (Italy) and Özgür Kazova in Istanbul (Turkey).

As shown in this brief historical outline, squatting has always been used to access spatially fixed tools and resources which could be employed in production activities, including farmlands, pastures, woods and, since industrialisation, factories. In this sense the recent wave of squatting targeting factories and workspaces is not new to Europe. But since World War 2, arguably few waves of squatting actions in Europe have targeted productive spaces with the main objective of retaining their economic function under workers' self-management as in the post-2008 wave.

The re-emergence of this type of squatting should inform the contemporary literature on squatting. Here I will propose the notions of 'squatted workspace', 'self-managed workspace' and 'workspace squatting' to describe squats and squatting actions that aim at accessing the means of production within a radical democratic frame. I believe these notions can help to conceptually differentiate this type of squatting from other types of squatting – like housing and social centre squatting – which have characterised contemporary Europe so far.

I considered other notions for conceptualising this wave of squatting targeting workspaces, including 'labour squatting', 'occupied factories' and 'recuperated enterprises'. I decided to opt for 'squatted workspaces' because it is wide and inclusive towards the different projects, which have emerged in these spaces.

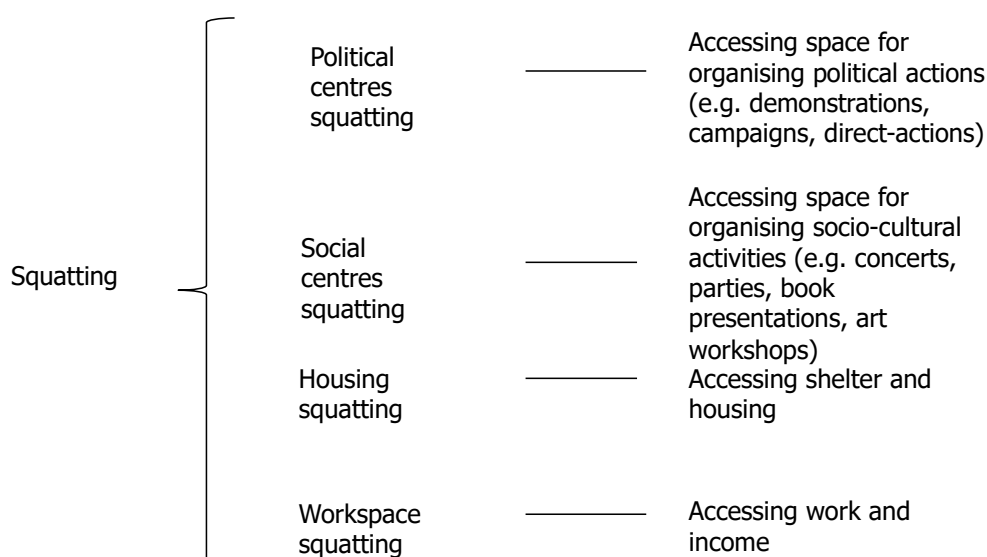
Occupied factory suggests a relation to industrial production, which applies to Vio.Me in Greece for instance but is largely absent from spaces such as Officine Zero in Italy and, as we shall see in Section 5, only partially present in a space like RiMaflow. Recuperated enterprises suggest an organisational form – that of the enterprise – which conveys the idea of a coherent productive unit. This surely describes some of the activities in spaces such as RiMaflow or Fra.lib in France. Yet in the case of RiMaflow and, even more, Officine Zero, it hides the artisans, which use the space for their own projects within the collective frame.

In contrast, the wide and open notions of workspace squatting and self-managed workspaces can encompass a variety of productive functions: industrial, artisanal and tertiary. Furthermore, these notions enable to account for the different productive entities that have been established in such spaces, which include enterprises of several employees as well as individual artisans and small businesses. As such, squatted and self-managed workspaces seem to represent a better choice to discuss this articulated and nuanced phenomenon.

With the notion of workspace squatting I do not want to separate forms of economic oriented squatting from politics. All types of squatting are inherently political as they contest authority, the law and ultimately the status quo. But on top of the political layer, people squat to do things in the spaces they gain access to – and these things can vary significantly. Clarifying such practical aims I think is helpful to understand specific squatting actions and their development as well as the emergence of conflicts and coalitions within a squat. Here, the notion of workspace squatting can be useful in addition to established notions such as housing squatting or social centre squatting.

Below a proposal of classification of different types of squats in Europe accentuating the practical aims which lead people to squat. The classification is to be intended as an open conceptual device, considering that many squatting actions combine different practical aims, activities in squats can change over time and new practical reasons can drive squatting actions.

Figure 1 – Types of squatting in Europe by main practical aim



### 3. Commoning the workspace: How squatted workspaces are different from normal workspaces

Typically embedded in radical social movements, the squatted workspaces established in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis are characterised by peculiar forms of management and agency, contrasting the assumptions and practices of business as usual (Ruggeri 2014). They have often assumed the legal form of cooperatives and tried to create – when possible – new types of economic relations, which ultimately try to transcend capitalism.

These have been called social and solidarity economies, or solidarity economies for short. In its radical formulations (Bekridaki and Broumas 2017; Papadaki and Kalogeraki 2019) the notion of solidarity economy refers to economic organisation, which puts fairness, ecological sustainability, democratic control and cooperation at the centre of economic activities.

While they can be compatible with markets, solidarity economies strongly differ from capitalist markets as they try to overcome the power structures present in these types of markets. Solidarity economies share with public economies the focus on collective welfare rather than private gains, although are critical of the centralisation of state institutions and prefer more distributed structures.

The notion of solidarity economy has been applied to discuss the projects that emerged in squatted factories and workspaces. It is indeed very useful to capture the broader aims and the systemic implication of these projects and to articulate their transformative potential. But it falls somehow short when it comes to articulate how squatted workspaces are different from normal workspaces at a lower, organisational level.

Here the notion of the commons can help. Earlier interpretation of the commons (Coase 1960; Hardin 1968; Olson 1965) tended to conceive the commons as a set of specific resources – water basins, fishing grounds, woodlands – which have intrinsic features that make them prone to be managed beyond states and

markets. However, a newer scholarship (Bollier and Helfrich 2012; Federici 2004, 2019; Linebaugh 2014; Ostrom 1990; Ricoveri 2014) has emphasised that the commons are rather an organisational framework, which can be applied to resources of all kinds.

What characterises a common as an organisational framework are two crucial elements: a) in terms of governance, self-management of the resource by a community with a stake in it and b) in terms of outcome, collective welfare rather than individual advantages. I think the notion of the commons is interesting as it connects the nature of the decision-making process, that is self-management, with the outcome it should achieve, that is providing community welfare.

The modern opposition between state and markets has obscured the historic relevance of the commons as an organisational framework. But as historical accounts such as that of Ostrom (1990) have shown, the commons have played a key role in the livelihood of communities across the world, showing a remarkable resilience even when confronted with markets and states.

Bringing together various sources, Ostrom explores how commons existed along state and markets in various mountainous, rural and maritime communities in places as different as Central and Southern Europe, Japan and Turkey. The commons proved to be comparatively very efficient in ensuring equal access to resources without compromising their long-term sustainability. As a result, these communities preferred the commons over state and markets for managing the strategic resources – fishing grounds, irrigation systems and forestland – on which their local economy and livelihood was based.

The notion of the commons offers a helpful tool to envisage what is different in the self-managed workspaces established during the post-2008 wave of squatting in Europe. Despite often relating to the mainstream economy, these workspaces rely on a peculiar governance, which set them aside from traditional workspaces.

Traditional workspaces are typically organised within the hierarchical structures of a private enterprise, whereby management is top-down, assets are owned by a minority, shareholders profit is the objective while workers and community come second. In contrast, squatted workspaces are typically characterized by common ownership of assets, self-management through assemblies, similar or equal pays and a tendency to focus on community gains rather than private profit (Ruggeri 2014).

These practices ultimately transform the workspace into a common, turning the way economic units are supposed to work under capitalism upside down. They shift the locus of power of the economic unit from manager(s) and owner(s) to the workers. Furthermore, they shift the objective of the economic unit from private profit to the satisfaction of broader community needs around employment, livelihood, security and leisure. As such, they embody a modern and urban version of the rural commons described by Ostrom and others and show that this organisational framework can still be relevant to contemporary societies.

#### **4. How does squatting support the creation of solidarity economies? Research questions, positionality and methodology**

Squatted and self-managed workspaces are complex organisations, which can be studied from different entry-points and focusing on different aspects. A comprehensive study of squatted workspaces should address at least a) the decision-making process of the workspace, b) the struggles and tactics used to establish it, c) the legalization process and d) the power structures in the workspace and e) the relation to social movements and solidarity economy networks and f) the development of the activities established in it.

Unfortunately such comprehensive treatment of the subject could not be conducted given the resources available for this research. While touching the above-mentioned subjects, I have hence decided to focus primarily on one aspect of squatted workspaces, that is their capacity to support the development of solidarity

economies. I am aware of the partial nature of this research question and in the conclusions the reader will find a discussion on how the research could be further developed.

Solidarity economies can also be established through legal means. For instance, the work of the Commons Transition Network (Bauwens and Vaisilis 2017) has shown the existence of a number of solidarity economy projects established over the past decade in Europe, North America and New Zealand within the boundaries of the law. But why do some people decide to squat to achieve similar objectives? What are the benefits and what are the disadvantages?

More precisely the issue I want to explore in the following section is how squatting specifically contributes to the creation of solidarity economies in the European context. Does squatting broaden, accelerate and deepen this process? Or is squatting fundamentally incompatible with an activity that aims at establishing an economic enterprise – even if of an alternative kind?

The reader may contend why I have given primacy to these research questions *vis a vis* the other relevant research questions outlined at the beginning. The reason relates to my case study and the method of inquiry.

The case study that the empirical part of this research is based on focuses on RiMaflow, a self-managed workspace located in a suburb south of Milan established through squatting in 2013. As I will discuss more in depth in the following paragraphs, I choosed action research as the empirical method of inquiry. The nature of this methodology led me to give primacy in the research to what was relevant to the community of workers of RiMaflow. At the time of the empirical research, the key issue for RiMaflow was how to develop and stabilize the project given the fact that they were still based in a squat and their legalization attempts so far had failed.

When I asked how I could use my skills as a social researcher to support RiMaflow, the workers asked me to help with tasks such as a) designing the overall development strategy of RiMaflow, b) making presentations at meetings with funders and contractors, c) developing and organising areas of RiMaflow (e.g. the maker space) and d) hiring high-skilled staff (e.g. an engineer) to address the technical problems of one of the production lines.

In these tasks I was continuously exposed to the question of how to consolidate and develop RiMaflow and its economic projects. Furthermore, I was also regularly confronted with the question of illegality, experiencing first-hand how the illegal condition of the workspace could work both as a constraining and empowering device.

As a result, the questions of a) the development of the economic projects established in the self-managed workspace and b) the role of the squatted status in the development of such projects became the areas where I could collect the most information and become most knowledgeable. This is why the empirical part of this paper focuses on these questions.

Having introduced the research questions, my positionality in relation to RiMaflow and, more broadly, self-managed projects and squats needs to be explicated to put into perspective this research and understand the methodological choices and data on which my arguments are based. Besides being a professional social researcher, I have been engaged as an activist in self-managed social centres for over 10 years. This experience made me realize how much time and work are required to self-managed social centres and squats going. Volunteers make these projects possible by dedicating their free time, risking fines and even prison. Self-managed spaces are fragile and unless fully legalized, evictions can always happen. This requires constant work to defend and legitimize the space.

I think is important that researchers studying self-managed social centres, housing squats and recuperated enterprises recognise (a) the fragile nature of these spaces and (b) the fact that by interviewing members, valuable time is taken from running the space. Consequently, I believe researchers should avoid research

strategies that burden self-managed projects and think about how they can compensate or support these projects through their research process.

These considerations led me to choose action research (Reason and Bradbury 2008) as a methodology to study and support RiMaflow. I am not suggesting that action research is the only legitimate way for researchers to productively interact with squatting communities, but this method has a few strengths that I would like to explicit.

Cutting through different definitions and understandings, action research is, at its core, about researchers using their skills and time to support a community to solve its problems. The methodological and political strength of action research is that it compounds scientific knowledge production with active solidarity in a mutual exchange. On the one hand, action research produces insider knowledge on the phenomenon of interest; on the other hand, it supports community development.

In the spring of 2017 I got involved in RiMaflow as an action researcher supporting the workspace on a weekly basis with a set of tasks for roughly six months. I could not do more at that time – and I could not do more after – because of financial and resource constrains. However, during that six month period, I closely worked with RiMaflow’s management committee on strategic visioning, businesses development, fund-raising and legalization.

Following action research, instead of conducting interviews and observing what RiMaflow’s members were doing, I asked how I could help them to develop RiMaflow. I realized that as social researchers we have a lot of skills – public speaking, strategic-thinking, high-level written communication, management of complex projects, just to mention a few – that can support community development. Because of class inequalities, these skills tend to be scarce in grassroots projects from working-class communities such as RiMaflow. As a result, researchers can be of great support to grassroots projects.

This way of working enabled me to get into the heart of how RiMaflow functions, collect information about the people involved in the project and access sensible insider-knowledge such as turnovers and wages. I could acquire a critical knowledge of the nature and development of the projects taking place in the self-managed workspace as well as the development of RiMaflow as a whole. As a consequence of my position as an all-around management consultant at the service of RiMaflow, I could appreciate first-hand how these projects worked – and not worked – as well as see their broader aims and ambitions for over 6 months on a weekly basis. Furthermore, I could experience how RiMaflow interacted with social, political and economic actors of different kind including social movements, third sector organisations, public institutions, enterprises and financial institutions. This shows how action research can give a unique and dynamic perspective into organisations and groups as well as the environment in which they act. I doubt that I could have gained a comparable insider understanding of how RiMaflow works with other types or research methods based on external observations and interviews.

However, given the time and resource constrains I had, action research also had some limitations from an academic perspective that I am aware of. I could not conduct focus groups and interviews in the customary sociological tradition. As a result, I could not produce an organised stream of research notes and record interviews, which would have enriched the illustration of the case study and compounded its empirical base.

Furthermore, choosing action research as the method of inquiry led me to focus on specific aspects of RiMaflow, which were at that particular point in time relevant for RiMaflow workers. As a consequence, I could not fully address other aspects of RiMaflow through the fieldwork – such as the decision-making process or the legalization process – which might have been more relevant from an academic perspective. All in all, this research was an experiment in academia-activism interaction, where I prioritized a) the research questions emerging from the activist community I was working with over b) the research questions emerging from the academic literature. I tried to use my academic skills to support an activist project and produce knowledge in the process. Instead of arranging the research around the idea of RiMaflow and its workers as



the ‘research objects’ and focusing on questions relevant in the academic community, I used my skills to produce knowledge around questions and topics, which were relevant for RiMaflow workers. I then used this knowledge also as a basis to discuss the academic questions posed in this special issue.

In this paper I share the results of this experiment in action research, knowing the intrinsic limits – but also the possibilities – embedded in experimental forms of research. I hope this paper will give readers – both academics and activists – an opportunity to make their own mind about the strength and weaknesses of action research as a way to link research and activism.

I think overall the experiment has produced original knowledge on the possibility and limitations of the development of solidarity economies inside squatted workspaces in contemporary Europe. Furthermore, the action research has actively supported a radical project during a key phase of its development. I think this shows that action research can be a productive research strategy, which can generate valuable knowledge while supporting social change on the ground. However, this method has also left many questions unanswered and I hope that others or myself will address these questions in further research.

The results of this research should be contextualized within Europe. I am aware of the ethnocentrism of Western social science and this is why I emphasize Europe as the geographical and, more over, institutional reference of this work. The empirical case study focuses on Italy and the results of the research can resonate in other European countries. Yet, they might not apply to different geographical and institutional contexts.

This is not to discourage dialogue among social movements and researchers of the ‘global north’ and the ‘global south’. On the contrary, I strongly believe in transnational solidarity and in the exchange of ideas and tactics among social movements and researchers everywhere – provided (culturally sensitive) contextual translation and adaptation of practices. Yet I think is important to be aware of contextual differences to engage in productive dialogues.

## **5. ‘Income, Work, Dignity, Self-management’: Survival, empowerment and economic innovation at RiMaflow**

RiMaflow is a self-managed workspace located in the metropolitan area of Milan, Italy. Together with Officine Zero in Rome, it constitutes the sole recent case of self-managed workspace in Italy established through squatting. Its history starts in 2009, following the corporate restructuring of the firm Maflow, an Italian multinational producing car components based in Trezzano sul Naviglio, a suburb south of Milan.

After decades of stability, poor management led Maflow to bankruptcy in 2009 and the firm was sold to a Polish entrepreneur in 2010. The new management downsized the Milanese factory from 300 to 80 workers and eventually relocated the entire production to Poland in 2012. Later, the Italian bank UniCredit S.p.A – one of the main financial groups in the country – bought the Maflow industrial site.

Maflow’s workers started to organise themselves in 2009. At first, they urged Maflow to share information about its financial plan and then, under the Polish ownership, they demanded an investment and the re-employment of the laid-off workers. As the intention to relocate the firm became evident, a small group of about ten workers began then planning a new enterprise in the recycling sector.

Taking advantage of a skill programme, the workers developed the business plan of the enterprise, which was legally registered in 2013 with the name Cooperativa RiMaflow. In the same year, they squatted the three hectares site of the firm Maflow – which had become vacant in the meantime – with the aim of starting the new operation there. According to Italian law, occupying a private site does not lead to police intervention if the owner does not reclaim it. Public image reasons and the zero profitability of the site led UniCredit S.p.A not to reclaim the facility, enabling the workers to start the project.

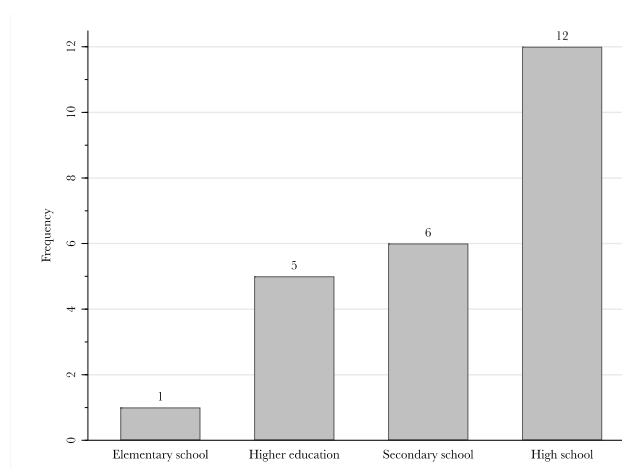
Over the years, RiMaflow's activities changed, growing and shrinking in the typical spontaneous manner of self-managed projects. Today, RiMaflow is an agglomeration of individual artisans, small businesses and a cooperative enterprise – i.e. the above-mentioned Cooperative RiMallow – coordinated in an assembly. The small businesses are mostly individual artisans working in carpentry, product design and blacksmithing and to a minor extent services such as cleaning. The RiMallow Cooperative has been mainly involved in food production, food distribution and recycling.

Following the Argentinian approach of opening recuperated factories to the community (Ruggeri 2014; Vieta 2010), RiMaflow also functions as a social centre, providing space for social and cultural events and activities. Nevertheless, RiMaflow never became mainly a social centre, neither do the workers want to become one in the future. They firmly see RiMaflow primarily as a workspace whose aim is to generate income and provide a livelihood.

RiMaflow workers have occasionally slept at RiMaflow to prevent evictions during phases of conflict with local authorities. Furthermore, short-term hospitality has been given to people in need, such as migrants. However, the RiMaflow assembly never thought of establishing permanent accommodations in the building. This is why, I would call RiMaflow primary a case of squatted and self-managed workspace.

The social composition of RiMaflow differs from the average Italian social centre. From first-hand observations and a survey conducted among RiMallow's artisans in 2017 – which were half of the workforce at that time – clearly emerges that RiMaflow is predominantly male, working class and middle-aged, as roughly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of its workers are men, aged 40 or older and have no University degree. This contrasts the typical Italian social centre, where there is more gender-balance and social mix.

**Figure 2 – Educational profile of the artisans and makers of RiMaflow in 2017**



Rooted in self-management, RiMaflow integrates workers' control, autonomy and division of labour. The project is continuously a work in progress and its governance is not straightforwardly reflected in the legal entities associated with it, which include several self-employed workers, a few registered businesses, a cooperative called RiMaflow Cooperative and voluntary associations.

But what has remained always the same and ultimately characterizes RiMaflow is that the main governance body of the workspace is the workers' assembly. All workers using the space can access the assembly and their votes count as one whether being employed by RiMaflow Cooperative, being self-employed or part of a small business. The assembly elects a management, which takes responsibility for running the workspace to the benefit of all projects. The strategies proposed by the management require

approval from the workers' assembly on a majoritarian basis and the assembly has the power to remove the manager in any moment.

Considering its fluid nature is difficult to pin down how many people work at RiMaflow and how much they earn. Workers employed by the Cooperative RiMaflow receive the same salary, which depended from the yearly turnover of the Cooperative. In 2017 such salary was set around 850 euro net a month for a part-time to guarantee an income to all the workers. Considering living costs in Milan's suburbs, this is a modest income which is barely enough to get by. But RiMaflow workers believe that the project will eventually develop and provide them with a fairer income.

The artisans and businesses working at RiMaflow have their own income streams, which are related to their turnovers. It was not possible to access precise information about the turnovers of the independent artisans and businesses of RiMaflow during the fieldwork, but conversations with the workers suggested such incomes were, considering a one-year period, not much higher than those of the workers employed in the Cooperative RiMaflow.

At the time of my fieldwork in 2017, participation in the workspace was peaking, with a bulk of 50 permanent workers making a living there, with peaks of up to 80-100 workers considering also those more irregularly involved. During the same year, approximately 8 community groups ran their activities regularly on the site while public events were held 2-3 times a month. But in 2018 RiMaflow went through a complex phase of legalization, which led to a halt of the activities for most of the year. The workspace opened its doors again in 2019, although downsized, when the project was fully legalized and moved to a nearby vacant industrial facility.

RiMaflow is the outcome of a trial-and-error process largely arranged by the workers themselves outside main parties and labour organisations. In the horizontal context of the squatted workspace, the workers found new ways to gain sources of income. But they also re-imagined work relations away from the hierarchies of the private enterprise towards a more decentred and democratic model.

Despite few of them having a political background or ever read anything about the commons at the beginning, the workers converged to what can be conceptualized as a commons-based organisation. The cooperative, the artisans and the businesses of RiMaflow all sell goods and services to the market – some of them in traditional markets while other in solidarity economy markets. Yet the key resource on which all the projects are based, the workspace, is not managed through the market mechanism but as a common via the general assembly. As a result, the workspace is not a private asset, but a collective one, managed in the interest of the workers and the wider local community.

The commoning of the workspace has created a very different economic space than that of traditional enterprises. This space is not only very inclusive towards disadvantaged groups, empowering laid-off workers with low education to dream big and start businesses. It has also systematically enabled the emerging of solidarity economy projects and it is here that the broader transformative and post-capitalist element of RiMaflow emerges.

RiMaflow is a place where many disadvantaged people get a second chance and some of the projects established in the workspace reflect just that: the need to make a living and survive during a phase of economic downturn where it is not easy for middle-aged workers with low levels of education to find a new job after being laid off. This should not be looked down upon. In a way, it is in itself something transformative from the background of welfare retrenchments and the increasing precarity of the labour market under neoliberal capitalism.

But is remarkable that all the larger projects of the workspace around food, recycling and manufacturing went beyond just survival and all strongly incorporated social and ecological values in one way or another. They tend to make use of recycled and ecological inputs, make consideration about price accessibility and

are embedded in fair trade networks, which support sustainable development in other regions in Italy and beyond.

Here perhaps the best example is what is the most enduring product to come out of RiMaflow, that is the so-called Amaro Partigiano, which broadly translates as the Partisan Bitter. The Partisan Bitter is physically manufactured in a nearby family-owned distillery. The herbs from which the bitter is distilled are collected from the woods of Lunigiana in northern Tuscany by an association that in the process takes over maintenance work in the local forests. RiMaflow takes care of organising and coordinating the supply chain, the storage of the product and the execution of the distribution, which mainly goes into social and cultural centres across Italy at an accessible price. Fair wages are ensured across the whole chains, while half of the profits go to finance a small museum in Lunigiana, focusing on antifascist resistance during World War 2.

A similar project has been developed in relation to a lemon-based liquor, this time in partnership with NGOs and producers from Southern Italy working against migrant labour exploitations. Another key economic project of RiMaflow regards the storage and distribution of the ethical cosmetics of the recuperated enterprises Vio.Me from Greece. Together these economic activities configure RiMaflow not only as space of sustenance for disadvantaged people, but as a solidarity economy hub working within and beyond the mainstream capitalist economy.

## **6. Squatting and solidarity economies: Enabling experimentation, social inclusion and the problem of consolidation**

As shown in the previous section, RiMaflow is a self-managed workspace established through squatting, where a range of solidarity economies activities have been developed over the years. Solidarity economies can be established within, outside and at the margin of the law. RiMaflow represents one which started outside the law, developed at the margin and now operates within the law.

As such, it constitutes a good case to discuss how squatting relates to the creation of solidarity economies, which is what I would like to do in this last section. How does squatting support the creation of solidarity economies? Can it also be an obstacle? After all, larger economic operations need to interact with formally established institutions and bodies, including financial and public institutions.

To explore these questions, the literature on the development of firms is helpful (Churchill and Lewis 1987; Evers 2003). This literature points out that firms go through different stages in their development, which are characterised by different challenges and opportunities. Classification varies, but there is a general consensus that the early development of firms is characterised by two crucial phases a) the start-up phase, which is about developing the business idea and testing it and b) the consolidation, which is about the taking-off and growth of the business.

Looking at the development of RiMaflow from this perspective, I argue that squatted workspaces can be of great help in the start-up phase of solidarity economy projects. When the workers squatted the vacant Maflow site they had neither the financial resources nor the management skills to create any kind of economic operation. Under market constraints, they would have gone bust within few months.

However, the squatted workspace functioned as what in the economic literature is called an ‘incubator’ (Novotny, Rasmussen, Clausen, and Wiklund 2020), that is a protected environment where new ideas can be tried out in sheltered conditions. This enabled workers not only to develop a standard economic project – which would have been a great success in itself, it created the conditions to venture into uncharted territories and develop something as unorthodox as a solidarity economy.

From a social inclusion perspective this is remarkable. Although from different angles, neoliberal discourses on the solidarity economy have presented bottom-up entrepreneurships as a mean to promote

social inclusion and cohesion (Nicholls and Teadsale 2017). These discourses dramatically underestimate that working class communities lack the skills for creating and consolidating solidarity economies.

RiMaflow suggests that squatted workspaces can partially overcome these class differences by empowering motivated people from a working-class background to become self-skilled and start solidarity economy projects. But it also suggests that this process has limits. The incubator-like environment of the squat empowered workers' self-skilling to an impressive extent, turning people involved in repetitive and basic tasks for years into small entrepreneurs capable of running small economic operations. But if this process functioned for basic business and management knowledge, it did not fully work for the higher managerial and technical skills required for consolidating and growing the project. RiMaflow has faced phases of threatening stalemate because of the lack of such skills both before and after legalisation.

Furthermore the case of RiMaflow suggests that squatted workspaces can limit the growth of solidarity economies when they decide to grow and relate to mainstream economy and society. The legal status of the Cooperative RiMaflow and its popularity across local and national NGOs have made it possible to establish a number of economic activities despite being formally based in a squat for some time. However, over the years the fact that the workspace was situated on an illegal site became a limitation for the growth of the project. It hindered access to finance and, more in general, the possibility of partnerships with institutional stakeholders, such as Universities, Foundations, and local authorities.

Pressure to legalize came also from the workers themselves. RiMaflow workers recognized squatting as a legitimate political practice, but they also wanted to legalize the workspace to have a more secure source of income, access the related welfare benefits (pension, unemployment support etc.) and provide for themselves and their families. Hence, it should not come as a surprise that from the beginning RiMaflow struggled to acquire a legal status, which public authorities opposed to avoid legitimizing the practice of squatting.

Thinking about these dynamics, the case of RiMaflow suggests that squatting has a mixed impact on the creation of solidarity economies, which largely depends on the nature and scale of the project. Squats create an incubator-like environment which lowers costs, shelters from competitions and enables experimentation. In this way they can greatly support the creation of solidarity economies, especially for disadvantage groups with low financial and social capital.

Furthermore, the case of RiMaflow also suggests that small-scale projects can grow in a squat if they minimize relation to mainstream institutions and are part of a network which appreciates their social value. But RiMaflow also shows that sizeable solidarity economy projects are difficult to run from a squatted workspace in Europe. The illegal status of the workspace can hinder access to finance and limit partnership with supportive stakeholders.

RiMaflow and other self-managed workspaces across Europe are examples of solidarity economies which at some point chose to interact with public authorities and financial institutions. But as eco-squats oriented towards self-sufficiency suggest (Cattaneo 2013: 139-160), alternative livelihoods at the margin and/or outside the law can exist in a European context as well. Here an illegal status might not hinder the development of the project.

## **7. Conclusions**

At RiMaflow a group of laid-off workers used squatting to access a vacant workspace and start solidarity economy projects based on mutual aid, common ownership and self-management. Despite being rather small, RiMaflow is a living example of a 'commoned' workspace embedded in a solidarity economy in a major European city. RiMaflow is not an isolated case, but part of a global movement of recuperated

enterprises that have used squatting to reclaim access to the means of production in phases of economic downturn and experiment with post-capitalist economies.

Squatted and self-managed workspaces like RiMaflow pose a number of sociological and, more broadly, political questions about the relation between economic decline, post-capitalist livelihoods and squatting as a mean to create them. This paper has started to explore some of these questions looking at the recent literature on squatting in Europe, using the notions of solidarity economy and that of the commons as an interpretation framework and analysing in-depth a self-managed workspace established through squatting in Milan, Italy. The main findings emerging from this exploration are the following.

1. In the context of economic insecurity created by the 2008 crisis, squatting has re-emerged in Europe as a tactic employed by laid-off workers and other marginalised groups to access means of production and make a living.

2. In contrast to traditional workspaces, squatted workspaces tend to be managed as commons, whereby the workspace is turned into a collective asset managed by and for the community of workers. This links to the long history of workers' self-management.

3. Squatting has a mixed impact on the establishment of solidarity economies, which depends from the nature and scale of these projects. Creating a sheltered environment where the constraints of the capitalist economy are attenuated, squats can support their establishment and development. Yet the illegality of a squat can get in the way when these projects grow and require more regular interactions with banks, suppliers and public institutions.

Readers will draw their own conclusions, but let me point out three implications, which I think are relevant. The first one regards the relation between squatting and the current economic settlement. Arguably, the presence of squatting in a society shows the limits of its social settlement to accommodate the need for change. Housing squatting, social centres squatting and temporary autonomous zones (TAZs) have shown the limits of post-war societies to accommodate the needs and desires of people to live, party and do politics differently. It is unclear whether workspace squatting will be a persistent feature of modern European societies in the same way that housing and social centres squatting have been over the past 50 years. But it is arguably another sign that the current economic settlement does not function for all if it pushes people to squat and risk jail in order to work.

The second implication of these findings regards the role of squatting in the establishment of self-managed workspaces. At RiMaflow squatting has been used both instrumentally and politically: on the one hand, squatting has been used to reclaim legal employment and access the broader benefits, which in a work-centred welfare system such as that of Italy are associated to formal employment. But at the same time, workers used squatting to create autonomous economic spaces where they could rethink the economy in a horizontal context according to their needs and desires. Against liberal views of the economy as a self-regulating almost natural system – they reminded us how the economy is a social sphere, which people can and should change through politics when it does not work for their welfare.

A third implication of the findings of this research regards the commons. The recent wave of workspace squatting has shown that the commons are not a medieval residue and can be a working alternative for managing relevant resources. This deserves attention against the background of the global social, economic and environmental crisis. Rise in global inequalities (Hickel 2017) and environmental degradation (Kallis, Kostakis, Lange, Muraca, Paulson, and Schmelzer 2018) urge us to rethink economic development locally and globally. The commons – with their emphasis on democracy, community control, redistribution and long-term sustainability – offer a valuable perspective for imagining new economies, which can better accommodate people and planet beyond current forms of extractive capitalism.

This paper has started to uncover some aspects of the relation between squatting, work and socio-economic change in contemporary European societies, but more research is needed to understand this

phenomenon and its implications. In this regard, let me finish by suggesting an area of further research, which has emerged from this work.

This is the sustainability after legalization of the solidarity economies emerged in squatted workspaces. Squatting and the associated illegal status enable to substantially lower the costs of running every kind of operations, including businesses. Legalization implies a substantial increase in costs and this can make not economically feasible projects which were viable under illegal conditions. Understanding insofar the solidarity economies established in squatted workspaces are sustainable after legalization is important to appreciate the transformative possibilities of these prefigurative projects.

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