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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Contemporary Urban Commons. Rebuilding the analytical framework

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**ABSTRACT:** The article contributes to the understanding of contemporary urban commons by developing a renewed analytical framework which approaches them as dynamic configurations. By investigating different types of urban commons in Italy, the article disentangles the notion of urban commons along two axes that take into account their relationship with both local institutions and the surrounding environment. The combination of these two axes produces four possible configurations that allow to grasp the complexity of urban commons, accounting for their multifaceted and at times controversial nature. Moreover, this article identifies three functions that urban commons can perform in the contemporary European cities: as resilient spaces, as reclaimed spaces incorporated into capitalistic models of urban development, or contentious and transformative spaces that combine social reproduction with anti-capitalistic politics. The article is based on qualitative research and participant observation grounded on extensive fieldwork in various urban commons across Italy between 2016 and 2019.

**KEYWORDS:** contemporary cities, contentious politics, institutionalization, urban commons, urban politics.

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## 1. Introduction

This article contributes to the academic debate on urban commons by providing a renewed analytical framework that is useful for understanding the complex role they perform in the contemporary urban scenario. By exploring some of the most relevant urban commons in Italian cities, we argue that a re-appraisal of the theoretical framework is urgently necessary to explore the controversial nature of commoning. We therefore suggest approaching urban commons by accounting simultaneously for two dimensions: their relationship with

<sup>1</sup> The two authors have contributed equally to this article.

the surrounding environment and that with local institutions. The way through which commons deal with these dimensions helps to explain their role, function and impact on the neo-liberal urban scenario.

In literature, urban commons are described as natural or urban resources that are managed collectively by members of a community and which have a horizontal value (Nonini 2007). This notion gained in interest and popularity through the 2010s, sparking debate and mobilization in Western Europe and North America in particular (della Porta 2015). The debate resonated also in Eastern Europe, where it served as a source of inspiration for diverse struggles concerning the right to urban space and public services (Tomašević et al. 2018). In the late 2010s, all over the world urban grassroots groups formed citizens' platforms that often ran for local elections promoting a commons-oriented agenda (Dolenec et al. 2017). Ever since then, the commons framework has been used to address a wide range of alternative urban settings, also with different scopes. The concept of commons has been extensively used also in the legal field. In the Italian context, it opened the door for the institutionalization of self-management practices emerging from below. In particular, it paved the way to the development of specific regulations governing the management of urban commons through common ownership (Bailey et al 2014). Due to the widespread application of the notion of commons to an extensive range of diverse phenomena, nowadays the concept has become a buzzword in urban and sociological studies. Consequently, the term risks becoming an evocative "concept umbrella" holding a weak explanatory potential.

The concept of "commons" has a variety of meanings "which encompass commons lands and resources to common rights and values" (Roussos 2019, p. 276). The term can be applied to processes (Linebaugh 2008) and physical spaces (Federici 2011) to entail "things and resources". It embraces also collective practices and arrangements, processes of self-governance and self-provisioning designed to manage what is produced and lived in common" (ibid). According to different authors, urban commons are explored by looking at their alternative models of social reproduction as examples of prefigurative politics (Breines 1989, Caciagli 2019, Chatterton 2005, Yates 2015), or at their effort to challenge the contemporary forms of capitalism (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006; Hardt and Negri 2009). Few studies so far have explored in depth the mechanisms through which these two aspects intertwine.

The purpose of this article is thus to develop an analytical framework that allows to approach urban commons from a broader and more articulated perspective, which takes into account both the alternative and prefigurative actions that they perform, as well as their attempt to politically challenge and influence the broader urban development model. To that end, we suggest reshaping the framework of analysis by considering two dimensions that are not usually taken into account and problematized together: the relationship of urban commons both with the institutions and the surrounding environment (neighbourhood and city). Our approach aims at improving our understanding of urban commons as dynamic configurations that move along the continuum between prefigurative politics, daily practices and spaces, positioning themselves differently vis-à-vis the neo-liberal model of urban development. This re-appraisal helps to avoid reductionism, inviting instead to approach urban commons as complex and controversial realities. By adopting these new analytical lenses, our empirical research discloses also three possible impacts of urban commons on the urban fabric. They can be resilient spaces that fill the gap left by local policies, without challenging them; they can represent resistant and transformative spaces that challenge the neo-liberal urban development model; or they can be incorporated into the processes of urban transformation, when they are recovered and repurposed, hence becoming functional to the urban development model they initially opposed.

The article is organized as follows. In the next section we illustrate the methods employed in this study, in the following one we outline our new analytical framework and explore the two axes we use to disentangle the notion of urban commons. In the fourth section, we illustrate the four configurations which originate from the intersection of the two axes, while in the fifth section we explore the three possible impacts they have on the urban scenario. In the last section we conclude by providing some final remarks and reflecting upon how this article can pave the way for further research on the topic.

## 2. Methodological notes

Our research relies on three main sources for gathering data. First, it is based on in-depth, qualitative interviews with activists, key-informants and spokespersons of collective and groups engaged in urban commons across Italy, as well as with actors involved in alternative forms of commoning. Specifically, we conducted twenty interviews in the cities of Milan, Florence, Rome, Catania and Naples on different trips between 2016 and 2019. Excerpts of six of them are present in this article. The urban commons were selected in large metropolitan areas (Milan, Rome and Naples) and medium-size cities (Florence, Catania) across the country. Our respondents were chosen amongst representatives of these selected urban commons, local activists involved in the management of the spaces and who played an active role in their development. They thus hold a long history of activism and militancy that proved useful in clarifying the past of these spaces. The key informants include volunteers and militants actively involved in the self-management of the urban commons under study. Questions in the interviews explored the internal organizational dynamics of these spaces, their relationship with neighbors, institutions and local authorities, as well as their visions and political practice they put forward. The interviews were carried out in Italian, recorded and transcribed. To preserve anonymity, we have concealed the name of interviewees.

Secondly, our research is based on participant observation of the two authors in some of the spaces under study. Our active involvement in the self-management of urban commons (such as *CPA Firenze Sud* and in the housing squats in Rome), which included protests and recreational events, activities and open assemblies, forms an integral part of our research, which allowed us to experience firsthand the dynamics under examination and to understand contradictions, objectives and expectations that would otherwise have been impossible to grasp (Balsiger and Lambelet 2014, p. 146). Thirdly, we have also drawn on document analysis of a large amount of printed and digital documentary material, such as pamphlets, flyers, websites and social media contributions produced by the activists.

### **3. The two axes for the analysis of urban commons: theoretical perspectives**

Before being conceptualized by scholars, the notion of urban commons had been elaborated by activists and collective subjects worldwide. Therefore, the existing analytical framework has been mainly constructed from the grassroots. Previous studies have tried to define and classify a specific type of urban commons on the basis of the existing experience. Different aspects have been pointed out. Urban studies and social movement scholars have described the alternative experiments of self-management and self-governance in post-industrial cities. These experiments strove to create spaces governed outside market and consumption logics, while at the same time opposing the privatization of public services (Huron 2015). According to this perspective, urban commons came to indicate an approach to the management of resources that go beyond profit dynamics and capitalistic logic. Although this definition forces the attention on the anti-capitalistic purpose of urban commons (Hardt and Negri 2009), urban commons call into account also different forms of social reproduction based on mutual aid and solidarity ties (Blomley 2008, Linebaugh and Rediker 2000). As some authors already pointed out (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015), the rich empirical knowledge produced on urban commons seems to approach the topic from two mutually exclusive perspectives.

Shedding light on one aspect or the other, researches accounted for housing squats (Mudu and Aureli 2016) and social centers (Martínez Lopez and Cattaneo 2014; Martínez 2018; Mudu 2012, 2004; Pruijt 2013), tracing their historical evolution over time (Grazioli and Caciagli 2018; Montagna 2006; Piazza 2018) in relation to changes in the urban fabric. The extensive literature on spatial relations pointed to a rescaling of state regulatory mechanisms occurring during neo-liberalism (Jessop 2008), according to which the local scale emerged as the privileged place where contemporary capitalism reproduces itself on a daily basis (Brenner and Theodore 2002). Considering different types of “free spaces” (Polletta 1999), the relationship with the surrounding neighborhood and its inhabitants started to be seen as pivotal in the elaboration of urban commons. Indeed, these spaces do not just aim at having an impact at the local level, but also to influence the capitalistic mode

of production they want to oppose. This occurred in particular following the dynamics of labour precarization and the loss of the workplace as the main milieu where politics develop from below. Urban spaces evolved thus to interplay with many forms of oppression and exploitation, as they provided the opportunity for atomised subjects to connect and trigger collective contentious actions. The social proximity that space facilitates helped to nurture community ties and, in turn, foster political elaboration (Coleman 1990; Nicholls 2009).

While analyzing autonomous spaces, we cannot disregard the complex relationship they have with the contemporary features of local environment (Coppola and Vanolo 2015). Urban commons develop in a specific historical and geographical context, which is the post-industrial city characterised by the privatization of collective resources and space. The urban commons approach emerges in those urban landscapes characterised by an increasingly restrictive access to urban resources. In contemporary geographies shaped by dynamics of space predation (Harvey 2012, 1978), urban commons become thus the expression of a “self-made” approach towards space management. Given this complex relationship with the space, the spatial dimension of urban commons and their relationship with the surrounding environment deserve special attention. We thus suggest focusing on the controversial role these spaces can perform in the post-welfare cities characterized by privatized urban spaces (Caciagli 2020, Annunziata and Lees 2017).

Moreover, urban commons came to identify also less conflictual and more collaborative urban practices that were not necessarily focused on challenging the inequalities of the neo-liberal model of urban development, but rather involved in filling the gaps left open by the institutions. This occurred for instance by means of direct social action, a type of action spreading in times of economic crisis which focused upon directly transforming some aspects of society by means of the very action itself, rather than claiming something from powerholders (Bosi and Zamponi 2019). Urban commons differ from other squatted spaces because they do not pose themselves just in contraposition to the legal, formal paradigm of urban development. To the contrary, they aim at inserting themselves in their contradictions and strive at dialoguing with the institutional powers. The relationship of the urban common with the institutions cannot be limited to the process of institutionalisation, but may include other processes such as dialogue, negotiation and legitimization. Hence the interplay of urban commons with the local institutions helps us to interpret how these spaces and practices are perceived from the outside and the weight they have in shaping urban dynamics.

This is demonstrated by the fact that, over the years, the notion of urban commons has also been embraced and at times widely adopted by local authorities as a means to formally include citizens in participatory processes with the intention to demonstrate a certain degree of citizen inclusion in local governance procedures. In that regard, the notion has served as an instrument of top-down forms of democratic innovation in the post-representative era (De Blasio and Sorice 2018). Examples of this type of urban common are, for instance, urban gardens, the collective management of parks assigned by local administrations to citizen committees, and the like.

In other cases, previously occupied buildings and abandoned spaces have been entrusted to their occupants for “civic use”. As a result, citizens use previously abandoned buildings that local administrations have made legally available to them. The relationship between commons and state institutions has been extensively discussed by several scholars in recent years. In his account of commons in crisis-ridden Greece, Roussos invites us “to rethink the interrelations between institutional agents and grassroots movements” (Roussos 2019, p. 266), disclosing that commoning ventures can open up a horizon for social transformations that are institutionally driven. Similarly, Asara explored the struggle between institutionalization and autonomy emerging from the encounter of social innovations with public authorities through the case of *Can Battló* in Barcelona, a large-scale initiative of self-managed public provision (Asara 2019). In her study, she points to the communitarian management of public services enacted by the participants and activists of *Can Battló* together with local institutions, in a process she termed “flexible institutionalization” (Asara 2019, p. 542). Along similar lines, Coppola and Vanolo explored the struggles and negotiations with Danish institutions of Christiania, a semi-autonomous Free Town in Copenhagen, born as a squat in 1971 (Coppola and Vanolo 2015). Specifically, they argue that the agreement signed with Danish authorities created a new governance scale that sanctioned the “passage from an ‘insurgent’ autonomy to a ‘regulated’ autonomy” (p. 1165), carrying thus the risk of cultural

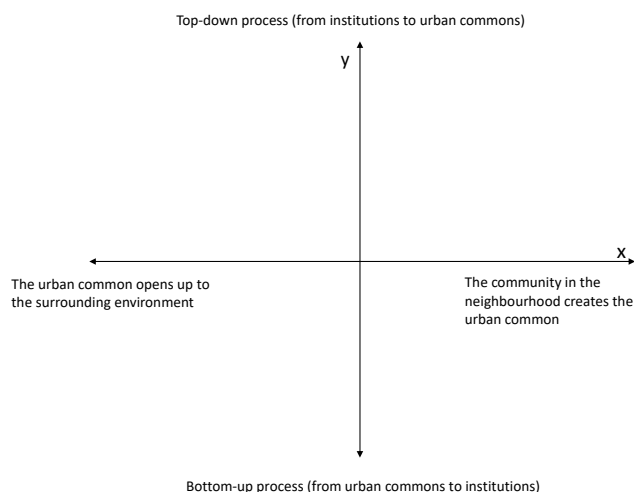
and social homogenisation, as well as of sparking gentrification and commodification processes in the Free Town.

Despite the different political attitude underpinned in diverse urban commons, they all deal with failures and gaps of the neo-liberal urban scenario reproduced both in the management of the institutions and in the spatial relations. Therefore, the horizontal dimension of the relationship with the urban environment and the vertical one of the relationship with the institutions embody the main challenges of the contemporary urban commons. These two dimensions represent also the two main risks that contemporary urban commons face: on the one hand, the risk of being completely absorbed and neutralized by the market dynamics while on the other, the risk of preserving their conflictual potential but being marginal and unreproducible experiences (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015, p. 51). For this reason, we suggest looking at how these two dimensions intertwine to understand the contemporary challenges of urban commons, bringing into the dialogue literature on urban commons and on social movements (Varvarouis et al 2020). We thus advocate exploring the large universe of urban commons by looking at the ways through which they move in time and space along these two axes.

#### 4. Matching two axes of analysis: a renewed analytical framework

In this section we outline the configurations, or ideal types, that result from the interplay of the two aforementioned axes. We conceive each axis as a continuum along which urban commons move. It follows that the nature and role of urban commons cannot be evaluated merely through the configuration they assume according to a specific dimension. Crossing the two axes, we obtain four possible configurations of urban commons (see figure 1).

**Figure 1 - Contemporary urban commons: a new analytical framework**



X: relationship with the surrounding environment  
Y: relationship with the institutions

**Source: Authors' elaboration**

As far as the first axis is concerned, namely the relation with the surrounding environment, we identify two possible configurations. In the former, urban commons represent the expression of the needs and desires of the community living in the neighborhood. In the latter, the urban common arises from the will of a specific and

narrow subset of community and the act of commoning constitutes an attempt to open up to the surrounding space and community. For the sake of clarity, we draw upon two examples from the city of Florence.

The first is the self-managed farm Mondeggi, which defines itself as “Mondeggi as a Commons - farm without masters” (*Mondeggi bene comune - fattoria senza padroni*). The farm is situated in the area of the former Villa di Mondeggi Lappoggi, a large, historical abandoned farm near Florence that formerly belonged to the Province of Florence (which later transferred the estate to the Metropolitan City of Florence). The 200 hectares of land remained abandoned following the bankruptcy of the public corporation that owned it, and which had the Province of Florence as the sole shareholder. Occupied in 2013 by a group of commoners (activists and citizens alike), the farm strives to intertwine the claim for accessing the land with the right to inhabit it. It does so by proposing an agricultural model and establishing a new local food system that differs radically from the mainstream. In the case of Mondeggi, it was the community that expressed the urban common. The land was in fact occupied in 2013 following a campaign called *Terra Bene Comune* (Common Good Land), which opposed the austerity policies foreseeing the privatization of land launched by the Italian Government in 2011-12 (Andretta and Guidi 2017). The so-called “Salva Italia” decree represented an attempt to cut public spending. The campaign involved actively agricultural producers, university students, social movements and antagonist groups which identified the Mondeggi plot as the best location where to build an alternative grassroots food network (Andretta and Guidi 2017).

The *Mondeggi* example is paradigmatic of this first ideal type of urban commons. The success of this experiment is largely due to the presence of local inhabitants in the management of the farming activities and institutional relations. Despite the original input coming from activists, the surrounding community immediately participated in the organization of activities as well as in defending the plot from eviction. This is well elucidated by an interviewee with the following words:

This area has always been a place which local inhabitants have taken care of. This is a place for Sunday walks, for wedding parties, it has always been crowded with people. Thus, we [a group of a few activists coming from the student movements] started to go to the local Community House (or Union House) [*casa del popolo*] saying “please, pay attention, Mondeggi will soon get privatized, it will become inaccessible”. There we found what I call the “army of retired people” (*esercito di pensionati*) ready to take charge of this place (I1).

The large local community participated in the occupying of the land and this was consequently perceived as a social action carried out for the land by people living in that space. In this sense, the Mondeggi model came to represent the desires of a community that had been totally thwarted by the privatization urban plans of Florence. Following occupation of the land, single citizens, associations and movements were directly involved in the production management through a process of popular stewardship launched in 2014 (Mondeggi Bene Comune 2017). The “common good” of Mondeggi is nowadays managed by local farmers with the direct involvement of individual citizens and associations who take care of the land and govern the farm. These actors are involved in collective harvesting, while the project Mo.T.A. (*Mondeggi Terreni Autogestiti* - Mondeggi Self-Managed Plots) gave the inhabitants of the area stewardship over 150 olive groves and 35 olive trees (Mondeggi 2017). The abandoned olive groves were recovered after many days of collective work and are now self-managed. In the case of Mondeggi, it was thus the organizations of small producers that operated as “brokers in the construction of the network supporting the co-production experience” (Andretta and Guidi 2017, p. 251). The crisis radicalized the practices of the Tuscan small producer organizations, which started to interact with more politically oriented groups in search of alternative co-production systems. In this sense, the self-management directly related to the struggle of land workers, rendering Mondeggi not just an alternative space for social reproduction but also a loudhailer disclosing working conditions and deprivation of urban life.

The commoners of Mondeggi “have been practicing the idea of land as a common area by constructing a form of property that is based both on the static idea of property over something (e.g. land, means of production, some animals) and the dynamic notion of communal land management (commoning the land as a way of living on the land in community and sharing, caring and producing for more than mere individual return)” (Maughan and Ferrando 2018). The project of collective stewardship of olive trees aims to engage the surrounding communities to bring them back to the land (Maughan and Ferrando 2018), and to grant “free access



to land and the right to genuine, accessible, locally produced food” (Mondeggi Bene Comune 2017). The farm is opened to the citizenry and at times it organizes events to foster local awareness and socialization, while developing numerous agricultural, social and cultural projects (Mondeggi Bene Comune 2017). In the case of Mondeggi, an abandoned public good was thus transformed into a commons self-managed by and accessible to the whole community (Mondeggi Bene Comune 2017), participatory and autonomous system of stewardship of public lands by local communities, proprietary form beyond the public/private division, redistribution of utilities and respect of the ecological limits of the planet.

The second example is an urban common that followed a different path, meaning that it was opened up to the citizenry after being occupied by a group of activists. This is the case of *Centro Popolare Autogestito* (CPA, Self-managed Popular Centre) Firenze Sud, (in the south of Florence), located in the premises of a former primary school in the peripheral neighborhood of Gavinana. In 1989 the inhabitants of the Gavinana neighborhood squatted an abandoned primary school, in search for a place of aggregation outside market logics. The squat was intended also as a means to provide an accessible alternative to contain the spread of heroin consumption amongst youths living in the outskirts of Florence<sup>2</sup>. Evicted six months after the first occupation, CPA found shelter for twelve years in the abandoned Longinotti factory. In 2001, it moved to another abandoned primary school, which the activists transformed again into a self-managed social center where to stage recreational, cultural and political activities. The former school was repurposed to serve as a social good. Over the years, it has been reorganized around exchange, based on mutual aid rather than profit-based logics. Since its beginning, the political squat has sought the support of the wider neighborhood, with which it has interacted in different ways. Nowadays cultural and recreational activities are open for participation to the community. At times the training sessions of boxing, usually staged in the premises of the local gym (*palestra popolare*), take place in the main square of the Gavinana neighborhood, involving kids and bystanders in the activities. This action aims to illustrate the activities of the squat to the wider neighborhood, and at the same time to raise awareness on the importance of popular sport as a political practice, accessible to everyone regardless of age, gender or sexual orientation (Milan 2019). The activists speak of themselves in prefigurative terms, meaning that they sidestep the institutional level and create in their daily activities the type of society they seek (Graeber 2002). They thus operate through practices of direct action. Collectively managed, the school became a commons, although it deliberately never applied for institutional recognition on the grounds of being already self-legitimized (I2). The history of CPA mirrors the traditional paths undertaken by occupied social centers in Italy, while addressing some important issues, such as the constitutive relations with the surrounding space. Indeed, though born from the will of a group of youngsters, later also the wider community in the neighborhood took part in the occupation.

The second axis of our analysis takes into account the relations of urban commons with the institutions. Specifically, it explores whether the community appointed the urban commons, or whether it was the institutions that entrusted it to the community. The former is a bottom-up process that moves from the commoners to the institutions, whereas the latter goes the other way around. The case of Mondeggi is useful to shed light on this process. Despite the fact that *Mondeggi* qualified as a squatted property, the decision to occupy the land was taken following the decision of the institutions to ignore the will of commoners to manage the land via formal channels, as the following excerpt of an interview clearly illustrates:

At the beginning we presented a project to the municipality. We asked them to let us manage the area as a common upon payment of a moderate controlled rent [*affitto calmierato*], a right of use contract [*contratto di comodato d'uso*]. We tried hard to follow the institutional path. They always said: “We will let you know”. One day we realized that the administration of the town council was selling the land at auction. So, we decided with the community to occupy it. We squatted as this was the only way to stop the negotiation (I1).

Another explanatory example is provided by the commons entrusted to the commoners and the community by means of the *Urban Civic Use Regulation* elaborated firstly in Naples. In this case, previously occupied

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<sup>2</sup>“La storia del CPA Fi-Sud”, available at: <http://www.cpafigiud.org/la-storia-del-cpa-fi-sud1/> (retrieved 28 May 2020).

buildings and abandoned spaces are entrusted to their occupants for “civic use” after their occupation. In 2015, a space that used to be a forensic psychiatric unit was recovered and transformed into a political squat called “Ex OPG Je so pazzo”. The story of the ex OPG begins with a group of commoners composed of different political collectives<sup>3</sup> that had joined forces ten years before. After a few attempts to occupy diverse spaces in the city centre, the four collectives “acknowledged the need to have a physical space in which to conduct our activities and bring people together” (I3). For this purpose, in 2015 they decided to occupy the former forensic psychiatric unit that had remained abandoned for ten years, “with the intention to open it to the public, to the wider community, to the citizens of the neighbourhood” (I3). Following a process of dialogue and negotiations with the local institutions, the City Council of Naples entrusted the building to its occupants. The act of the City Council of Naples stemmed from a debate that aimed to restore to the community of citizens the “commons” intended as set of essential resources, usually abandoned public properties fallen into disuse, that belong to the community of citizens (Masella 2018, p. 78). According to the City Council Regulation, these assets are to be “removed from the ‘exclusive use proprietary logic’” (Masella 2018, p. 78), to be collectively owned and managed. To overcome a top-down approach, the Naples administration designed an administrative mechanism that “strengthens citizens’ participation in political institutions committed to the care of the commons” (ibid., 79). The 2015 *Urban Civic Use Regulation* ratified by the City of Naples acknowledges thus urban commons as “place(s) that have been produced in an autonomous way by the community that benefits from the good and which places the self-management of the structure as one of the main principles of its administration” (Masella 2018, p. 80). The “urban civic use” *de facto* recognizes and institutionalizes bottom-up initiatives emerging in abandoned public properties. It attributes the burden of managing the space to the community of its inhabitants, which in turn has to grant “the non-exclusive use of any part of the property” (Masella 2018, p. 80) and freely maintain it. The Municipality, on the other hand, acts as a guarantor and takes care of the operational maintenance costs of the space. While the urban civic use gives urban commons legitimacy and strengthens citizens’ participation in the policies involving public assets, on the other it risks depriving these grassroots initiatives of their conflictual character.

The second typology implies a sort of top-down process, that means a process in which institutions “call” on the community to take charge of the management of a “common good”. This is usually made through an institutional call. An important example of this typology derives from the housing rights movement in Rome. At the beginning of the 2000s, when new migratory waves changed the facets of housing precariousness significantly, the sub-municipalities<sup>4</sup> of Rome invited housing activists to organize “help-desks” dealing with housing rights within public offices. This collaboration turned out to be highly problematic for housing movements because it developed along a delicate cleavage in which movements risked neutralizing their contentious dimension. At the same time, housing movements gained legitimacy through this institutionalization attempt, as they increased their power in the public arena and had also an impact on the administration’s approach to housing emergency. Thanks to the “credibility” provided by their presence in the institutional offices, the number of people involved in the housing movements increased. This practice appears with frequency in privatized welfare systems such as the one in Italy. However, in these cases the administration co-opts movement organizations to offer services that the institutions have ceased to provide, transforming them into service-providing organisations (Pruijt 2013).

The relationship between housing movements and institutions is sensitive also for another reason. These collective subjects are not just demanding more public houses, as they were doing in the 1970s or ’80s, but advocating the “right to inhabit the city” that implies a more sustainable approach to urban development, avoiding urban speculation and the construction of new buildings. By calling upon the existing regional and municipal laws, many housing movements are asking institutions for funds to transform squats into self-recovered houses. This is a tricky point that poses dilemmas for the movements. On the one hand, the relationship with institutions would allow them to accomplish their social role of making housing less precarious. On the

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<sup>3</sup> CAU (Collettivo Autorganizzato Universitario), Studenti Autorganizzati Campani (SAC), Collettivo Politico CAMO attivo nell’area nord di Napoli, e il Clash City Workers, collettivo di lavoratori, disoccupati, precari.

<sup>4</sup> The Municipality of Rome - as well as other Italian metropolises - is organized into administrative divisions, districts called sub-municipalities (*municipi*).



other hand, they risk neutralizing their political role of challenging the urban development model that produces housing inequalities. These controversies exist also for many other autonomous realities that decide to undertake the pathway of institutionalization. For example, recently European calls for “urban regeneration” have been considered by some squatted social centres as a good opportunity. However, while it risks neutralizing their conflictual potential, the institutional path offers them the opportunity to “legitimize” their struggles, hopefully gaining leverage in the urban politics dynamics.

Another example of a “top-down” relation between commons and institutions is related to the deliberative and participatory experiments enacted by local administrations. Several European cities have introduced institutional instruments such as, for instance, the participatory budget (Sorice 2019). This instrument of direct political participation (Crouch 2004; della Porta 2013) consists in entrusting a share of the local institutional budget to the direct management of citizens. Thanks to this instrument, some grassroots local organizations started to dialogue with the local administration via an institutional path. The participatory budget can also be used to afford citizens the management of an area or to start experiments of direct participation in the local decision-making process. Within this framework, over the last years several experiences of “urban gardening” and collective management of otherwise neglected portions of public space have emerged. Yet the limits of this instrument are manifold. First of all, its selective nature, as it involves just a small portion of the population (Cotta et al. 2001). Moreover, it usually hands over to citizens only a marginal aspect of the urban life. Citizens could be entitled to manage a park, for instance, but they do not hold any decisional power about the amount of resources to be allocated to the public space.

The cases outlined in this section are just a few examples (of the many) that show how the majority of controversies that contemporary urban commons are involved in develop around the relationship with the surrounding environment and the local institutions. To understand their objectives, mode of reproduction, aims – in a nutshell, their role in contemporary cities – we argue that it is not enough to look at these axes separately, but rather at the way they intertwine. Examining how urban commons position themselves along these two axes allows us to disclose their differences and similarities. Furthermore, it helps us to navigate the rich empirical configurations of urban commons accounting for their peculiarities, while obviating the endorsement of this conceptual instrument as a merely descriptive tool.

The four configurations mentioned above demonstrate that urban commons cannot be considered just as spaces in which new modes of social reproduction are envisioned, or as political spaces broadcasting criticism to capitalism. Taking both dimensions into account helps to understand which kind of role and function they have in relation to these two dimensions. In the next section we explore this point further.

## 5. Problematizing the impact of contemporary urban commons

The four configurations that result from the combination of the two axes constitute useful instruments with which to map and guide our analysis on urban commons further. In our view, the role played by different types of urban commons in constructing or changing urban development models is neither fixed nor predetermined. Given that we live in a global capitalistic economy, autonomy and opposition as well as the benefits of collaborative attitude are always nuanced, fractured and in need of negotiation case by case (Coppola and Vanolo 2015). This does not entail just the attitude of collective subjects but also how the structure of the urban space reacts to commoning. In our analysis we distinguish between three possible impacts that urban commons can have in the contemporary urban scenario:

- a) **Resilience**, which occurs when the urban commons mainly fill the gap of local policies without challenging them at a broad political level;
- b) **Incorporation** into the processes of urban transformation such as gentrification and touristification, which happens when the recovered and repurposed urban common becomes functional to the urban development model it initially opposed;

c) **Resistance and transformation**, whereby the urban common prefigures an alternative model of urban development by representing an alternative space that at the same time challenges the mainstream model of urban development.

In what follows we explain each of those impacts.

### *Resilience*

This impact occurs when urban commons end up providing services that are no longer supplied by state institutions. Despite the intentions or initial goals, the urban common finishes by filling the gaps of local institutions without being able to challenge the broader paradigm of resource allocation. Recent scholarship has stressed the increasing role of the social dimension in political change. Specifically, some scholars pointed out how in times of crisis even those actions from below that aim at filling the void left by the institutions turn out to have a role in the process of politicization of individuals (Bosi and Zamponi 2019). Thus, actions that are not considered strictly political - i.e. solidarity, mutual aid – become the precondition for nurturing a transformative scenario (Bauder 2019). Indeed, in many cases they turn out to articulate forms of resistance and contestation to commodified urban lifestyles (Camps-Calvet et al. 2015). However, this occurs far from automatically. For instance, in the case of urban gardens commoners can take charge of a space in the city to make it accessible for the wider citizenry. These initiatives contribute to building communities in neighbourhoods characterized by deepening atomization, individualism and competition mechanisms (Bertuzzi et al. 2019). However, this aggregative role can be played without necessarily calling into question the market-oriented model of city construction or elaborating an alternative to the mainstream model of urban development.

In the case of housing struggles, a similar resilient function can be played by some housing squats. Despite the conflictual, anti-capitalistic scope of the housing movements, at the territorial level housing squats often end up helping local administrations instead of challenging them on the few resources they allocate to housing policies (Baldini and Poggio 2013). Nevertheless, these spaces fulfil their social function of providing a roof over the head of dozens of people left with no housing support and no public houses (Caciagli 2020).

### *Incorporation into gentrification and touristification processes*

The ongoing urban transformations brought about by gentrification and touristification have been said to be predatory of spaces and urban lifestyles (Beauregard 2013, Jager 1986). This means that urban commons such as autonomous spaces can have a controversial role in fostering the displacement mechanisms that lie at the basis of gentrification and touristification processes. On the one hand, urban commons oppose gentrification as they subtract space from speculation. On the other hand, they might also be “the real storm trooper of the process” (Pruijt 2013, p. 148). For instance, at times, squatters’ lifestyles and the urban culture they promote are appropriated by the market to construct hipster-fashioned neighbourhoods and to convert what would have been perceived as urban decay into a fashionable and attractive environment for the typical gentrifiers, namely the new, creative class (Florida 2004). This is the case of cultural and recreational clubs that promote alternative lifestyles (Ruggiero 2000). These spaces become then attractive also for tourists looking for the so-called “real urban experience”. By means of the activities they promote, these spaces create a parallel market with a strong no-profit and social component. As a result, the middle-class and the artistic component of the population hang out in the alternative, often squatted-style area, dampening in this way its contentious content. Often these clubs become part of the same urban renewal projects they initially opposed, which transform them into an additional source of profit. This risk became evident in the case of Sparwasser, an ARCI (Italian Recreative and Cultural Association) club located in the “hyper-gentrified” neighbourhood of Pigneto in Rome. The club was founded in 2015 by a group of off-site university students looking for a place where they could continue engaging in politics outside the university premises. They were looking for a way to do politics through recreational means that were accessible to precarious workers and students in the capital. Aware of being at the same time *subject and object* of gentrification, the young activists of Sparwasser still believe that offering free

cultural activities in a gentrified neighbourhood offers a valuable contribution to the social fabric of the city. Nevertheless, they are at the same time wise to the fact that they are experiencing a situation that is contradictory to the social fabric of the neighbourhood, as a spokesperson explains:

I do not want to claim that there can be good gentrification, but that starting up an activity with a strong social value [*valenza sociale*] can help the neighbourhood and give something back to the citizenry. Ours is not the mainstream club that offers only high-volume music and gives nothing to the territory (I4)..

When embedded in gentrified neighbourhoods, one of the difficulties that urban commons face is not just to defend but also to find a way to communicate outside the space's identity. The self-managed tea-room called "Sala da tè di Porto Fluviale" in Rome represents an appropriate example of this dynamic. The *Sala da tè* (Tea Room) is a self-managed café located in the premises of one of the oldest housing squats occupied by the housing movement organization "Citizen Coordination for Housing Justice" [*Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la casa*]. Porto Fluviale is located in the former industrial neighbourhood *Ostiense*, one of the most affected by the gentrification processes of the capital. On the one hand, the housing squat constitutes an attempt to resist and oppose gentrification, as it provides low-income families with the opportunity to inhabit an expensive and inaccessible area of Rome. The recent transformation of the area introduced new challenges and altered also the nature of this urban commons, as the following excerpt elucidates:

Our Tea Room looks like the one of the most radical-chic cafés of *Ostiense*. Most of those people who are attracted to this place come here ignoring what it is. They don't know that the shabby aspect is not something deliberately sought... it stems from the necessity of recycling things and furniture (I5).

Because of its attractive colours, re-cycled materials and murals painted by the well-known Italian graffiti artist Blu, the people who hang out in this area often target *Porto Fluviale* as a "trendy bar".

These examples point out how the relationship between neighbourhoods and urban commons can be multifaceted. The attempt to "restore a space to the neighbourhood" implies that the neighbourhood shapes its internal dynamics. Despite the intentions and self-representation of the Porto Fluviale inhabitants, the role of the café in the urban fabric can be very controversial and difficult to evaluate.

### *Resistance and transformation*

Urban commons can be resistant and transformative spaces when they constitute themselves as bulwarks against gentrification and commodification processes. At the same time, they embody an alternative model of urban development centred around socialization rather than profit. To that end, they develop their political, transformative potential. They do not only countervail the scarcity of spaces and sociability outside commercial circuits (Piazza 2018), nor are they even completely neutralized by gentrification dynamics, but they rather prefigure an alternative form of urban development with their presence and non-profit activities (Graeber 2002). In this way they embody a distinct vision of urban development centred on the constituency's needs, promoting social inclusiveness and making political use of aggregation (Milan and Milan 2020). Nonetheless, this function of resistance may not last forever, but is rather a trend that needs to be confirmed on a daily basis and which is not without contradiction.

To give another example, the cultural and recreational association *Gammazita* occupied a space that used to serve as a polyfunctional centre in the deprived neighbourhood of San Cristoforo, in Catania (Sicily). Abandoned for ten years, the young activists of *Gammazita* cleaned up the space and repurposed it to serve as a social space. Nowadays they stage sportive and recreational activities (mainly theatre and circus) inside its premises. The "Midulla" centre, as it is called, managed to open up to the constituency of the neighbourhood and to actively involve individuals and families living in a situation of urban and social decay. Through their occupation, activists and volunteers countervailed the chronic absence of physical spaces in which to practice sport, theatre and other cultural activities in Catania. The existing spaces are either private or have been

abandoned and looted. On the other hand, the occupied space performs a social function as the activists retain a strong relation with the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, to the extent that some of the activists decided to move to San Cristoforo and nowadays perform the role of educators for children living in a territory with a high rate of non-attendance at school (16). Together with other youths of the neighbourhood, they occupied and recovered also the main square of the neighbourhood, transforming it from a car park into a place for socializing, furnished with self-made and recycled benches, free books and flowerpots. In addition, they opened a bar and a small book shop, for which they pay a low rent, recovering and returning a looted and dangerous space to the local citizenry. Together with the youngsters involved in their recreational activities, they take care of the neighbourhood and play the role of a bulwark against urban decay and gentrification processes. In so doing, they embody an alternative model of urban development centred on people's needs rather than on profit (Milan and Milan 2020).

The example of Mondeggi tells us something similar. There is no doubt that most of the activities and social life of Mondeggi are constructed around the physical space and rural activities of the Mondeggi community. Nevertheless, the community is embedded in an increasing number of networks organized at the national level (i.e. *Genuino Clandestino*) and in urban struggles, such as for example those for housing rights. Over the years, Mondeggi has taken part in the most relevant and conflictual struggles in Italy, such as the *No Tav* protests to halt the construction of the high-speed train in Val di Susa. Thus, the resistant attitude of this urban common is rooted in the local, bounded community and practices are combined with a clear political conflictual perspective enacted in different campaigns and movements.

## 6. Conclusions

In this article we have argued that disentangling the notion of urban commons in specific analytical dimensions makes it a promising lens with which to explore the possibilities of collective action and participation from below in contemporary urban scenarios. Accordingly, we suggested approaching urban commons by examining their relationship with local institutions (first axis) and the ways in which they inhabit the surrounding local environment, namely the neighbourhood and the city (second axis). The four configurations of urban commons that result from the intersection of the two axes allowed us to account for the complexities, controversies and variegated configurations of these alternative urban spaces. This reformulation allows also a better understanding of the function that urban commons perform in the urban scenario. In particular, we identified three main possible functions that urban commons can play: resilience, incorporation in urban dynamics and resistance.

In this study grounded on cases in Italy, we have therefore challenged the static configurations of urban commons. As other collective forms of politics from below, we show that these spaces and processes change across time, hence their function should be evaluated taking a diachronic perspective. Moreover, this article opens up the path for a new research agenda that would be interesting to engage with and explore further. For instance, further research could take into account how those four configurations and roles change over time and across spaces, adopting a comparative perspective that involves countries other than Italy.

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## Interviews

- I1. Interview with Mondeggi activist. Florence, 12 December 2019
- I2. Interview with CPA activist. Florence, 15 July 2019
- I3. Interview with a representative of the ex OPG Je’ so pazzo. Naples, 6 April 2018
- I4. Interview with Sparwasser activist. Rome, 12 February 2018
- I5. Interview with *Coordinamento* Porto Fluviale activist. Rome, 20 May 2016
- I6. Interview with Gammazita activist. Catania, April 2019

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