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RESEARCH ARTICLE

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN SELF-MANAGED SOCIAL CENTRES

Direct social action and institutionalization in Bologna city

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ABSTRACT: While regeneration is emerging as a paradigm capable of inspiring public policies and transforming lifestyles, the urban space remains a fertile ground in which collective initiatives based on activism and solidarity can emerge. The aim of this article is to describe some social and political practices in self-managed spaces and their relationship both with the wider background of the city and with local institutions. We argue that processes of institutionalization could affect practices of self-organization and political participation in different ways: these processes could mark the cooptation of conflicts into local administration strategies as well as open new forms of politicization around urban commons. We will present a case study, the evolution of the social centre Låbas in Bologna city, as a testing ground to explore and examine these practices and interactions. In the following paragraphs, we define the self-managed social centres, considering the processes of repression and institutionalization, and the development of new forms of political participation. Then we focus on the history of Bologna's social centres. Finally, we analyze the case study, briefly describing the process of institutionalization and the evolution of its practices.

KEYWORDS: political participation, social centres, institutionalization, direct social actions, Bologna

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1. Introduction

Processes of capitalist reorganization occurring in our cities, combined with periods of economic crisis, have led to an increase in conflicts concerning urban resources and space management/functions (Hodkinson 2012; Harvey 2013; Della Porta 2015). Since 1980s, urban space has been conceived as a productive factor, and public policies have been oriented towards providing competitive advantages to companies located in certain areas, affecting the architectural and economic profile of cities (Harvey 2007; Vicari Haddock 2004). Moreover, the progressive commodification of the city has accelerated in recent years following the development and spread of a sharing economy and platform capitalism, which has strengthened the role of private and commercial actors in the transformation and re-signification of urban spaces (Davidson and Infranca 2016).

If, on one hand, regeneration strategies are presented as forms of revitalization of cities (Uitermark et al. 2007), on the other, it is not possible to analyze such transformations only as undisputed top-down processes. Informal practices of temporary reuse are developed as alternatives or antagonists to these processes. Such bottom-up initiatives – promoted by citizens, associations and social movements, rather than by public authorities or large economic actors – often arise in opposition to top-down regeneration policies, and include illegal appropriation of urban spaces for social, cultural and environmental purposes (Cellamare and Cognetti 2014). In some cases, such experiences could trigger forms of political engagement such as a more general public debate on the right to the city. At the same time, practices of squatting are subject to repression or institutionalization by the authorities to affirm legality and neutralize conflict.

The aim of this article is to describe some social and political practices in self-managed spaces and their relationship both with the wider background of the city and with local institutions. We argue that processes of institutionalization could affect practices of self-organization and political participation in different ways: these processes could mark the cooptation of conflicts into local administration strategies as well as open new forms of politicization around urban commons. In the attempt to understand the relationship between processes of repression/institutionalization and political participation within self-managed spaces, we intend to answer the following questions: which kind of interactions can be identified among social centres, local institutions, citizens, and other players within the larger background of city transformations? Which practices and processes develop from these interactions? We will present a case study, the evolution of the social centre *Làbas* in Bologna, as a testing ground to explore and examine the above questions. In the following paragraphs, we define the self-managed

spaces, highlighting the link between occupations, repression and institutionalization, and the development of new forms of activism and political participation. Then we focus on the history of Bologna's occupations. Finally, we analyze the case study, briefly describing the process of institutionalization and the evolution of its practices of self-organization.

Concerning the methodology, we adopted qualitative techniques, specifically participant observation, discursive interviews and collection of written documents. Most of the data comes from a previous research carried out during the period 2016/2017¹ and our participation in the activities of Låbas and TPO² allowed us to spend time among the activists. Ethnographic approaches are central to study social interaction and meaning in specific contexts and very useful for the analysis of fluid and shifting phenomena as social movements. Militant research perspectives include a close relationship between researchers and activists (who may cooperate in different forms during the research) and tend to support (fully or in part) the ideas of the actors involved in the study. In many cases, research can be aimed at having a positive impact on activists' objectives or build a bridge between academia and social movements (Plows 2008; Martínez and Fernandez 2012). In this case, both authors were involved in different forms and intensities in the political, social and organizational dynamics under study. This has fostered access to the field and trust between researchers and activists. However, the research design was not the result of a collective process, but rather the authors were engaged in building meaningful relationships with militants, participants and frequenters through informal dialogues and direct participation in activities. Therefore, if qualitative research prevents a neutral and objective representation of observed "social worlds" (Becker 1974), adopting a "reflexive approach" can help to ensure a separation between political (and personal) sympathies and research practice, especially in a context of engaged research as in the case of social movements (Plows 2008).

2. Squats and social centres as urban social movements

The practice of occupation - that is the direct action based on the unauthorized settlement by individuals or groups inside buildings or abandoned areas – is not a recent phenomenon as it has been widespread all around Europe (mainly in Italy, Spain, Ger-

¹ The data has been collected for Vito Giannini' Master thesis through document analysis, participant observation (6 months), and about 30 interviews with militants, volunteers, frequenters and residents.

² Teatro Polivalente Occupato (TPO) is a self-managed social center in Bologna.

many, Netherland, Denmark and more recently UK) for half a century (Piazza 2012; SQEK, Cattaneo and Martínez 2014). Even if it often happens furtively and singly to satisfy instant needs as lodging, this practice has deep political implications as it represents a form of protest against capitalism and it is frequently supported by social movements (Martínez 2018). Social practices are “routinized way[s] in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described, and the world is understood” (Reckwitz 2002, p. 250). Social movements are conceived as “sustained, intentional efforts to foster or retard broad legal and social changes, primarily outside the normal institutional channels endorsed by authorities” (Jasper 2014, p. 15). The practice of squatting is considered a relevant tactic in the dynamics of urban conflict, as it represents a direct solution to basic needs such as shelter and protection, allows the construction of anti-capitalist political spaces, is an obstacle to urban speculation processes, and encourages the development of alternative and countercultural lifestyles (Martínez 2018b).

Occupations can be considered as urban social movements, namely “collective actions consciously aimed at the transformation of the social interests and values embedded in the forms and functions of a historically given city. Yet, if the process of production of cities by societies is most evident in the case of social revolt and spatial innovation, it is not limited to such events. Every day and in every context, people acting individually or collectively, produce or reproduce their rules of society, and translate them into their spatial expression and their institutional management” (Castells 1983: xvi). In this sense, practices of squatting are alternative forms of appropriation and regeneration of urban areas, often addressed by speculative processes (Montagna 2006; Holm and Kuhn 2011). Moreover, new forms of political participation and cooperation between activists, institutions and community actors (students, associations, informal groups) are being experienced within self-managed spaces (Bosi and Zamponi 2019; Pitti 2018).

It is possible to differentiate between housing squatting and social centres (SCs) – the first more widespread in central and northern Europe, the second more common in southern European cities – even if many occupied buildings often host both residences and public activities (Piazza et al. 2018). The SCs are a European phenomenon but their history arises and develops mainly in Italy. It is a heterogeneous movement that shares the occupation and self-management of abandoned spaces – of public or private property – frequently addressed to projects of urban renewal connected to private interests. These places are occupied by political collectives – mainly composed by students and precarious workers – and transformed into public spaces where it is possible to or-

ganize political, social, cultural (and also economic) activities, experimenting more egalitarian forms of relation building and decision making (Piazza 2013).

The SCs' movement led urban struggles for the control and social production of space, drawing new "political geographies" mainly in the suburbs (Mudu 2012). Nevertheless, also downtowns have been impacted, both in the Seventies with the first occupations for the right to the city and in the 2000s when the economic crisis, capitalist reorganization and migration flows produced new urban fractures. SCs could be considered as collective local actors, but the claims and protest campaigns insert themselves into more general frames denouncing each form of dominion or social, economic and cultural exploitation – precariousness, racism, fascism, sexism, repression, colonialism, unwanted land uses, privatizations, etc. (Piazza e Genovese 2016; SQEK 2010).

3. Squatting cycles, socio-spatial context and strategic interaction

Some studies on SCs have investigated microsocial and cultural aspects, such as activists' and participants' narratives, public discourses of criminalization, everyday activism practices, frames production. Other research focused on structural factors, exploring the relationship between the socio-spatial context and the agency of squatters (Martínez 2018). In these analyses, the attention of scholars focused mainly on the development of SCs as an urban phenomenon (Montagna 2006; Martínez 2018) and on the relationship with institutions (Prujit 2003; Montagna 2007; Piazza e Genovese 2016). According to this perspective, "squatters mobilise as an organised and collective response to those contexts, but they also mobilise their subjective aspirations, their symbolic and material resources, and their alliances with other social movements and groups. They do this in a strategic manner—that is to say, actions are decided according to the evaluation of the existing circumstances and performed within their boundaries—not as a mechanical or direct reaction to particular grievances" (Martínez 2018b, p. 5).

Research has shown the presence of factors that influence the development of *squatting cycles* in different urban contexts (Martínez 2018b) In general, the concept of protest cycle³ refers to a specific period of time when conflicts between movements and institutions intensify, the number of participants increases, sectors and geograph-

³ Although authors distinguish between periods, phases and stages of movements, the terms "cycles" and "waves" are used to identify peaks and troughs in the actions of the movement and can be useful to analyze variations and differences when compared to other social movements and to the socio-spatial context.

ical contexts extend, new organizations emerge, new frames spread and innovative forms of collective action are introduced (Tarrow 1995). In the case of squatting, socio-spatial transformations affect the diffusion of occupations, although there are variations and differences between national and local movements. Moreover, the socio-political context and the interactions among collective actors also have an impact on the development of self-management practices. In European cities, squatting results from the combination of local/urban (e.g. evictions, urban regeneration), national (e.g. laws for urban development and security, mobilizations) and international/transnational (e.g. economic crises, migrations) factors (Piazza e Martínez 2018; Bosi e Zamponi 2019).

Squatting cycles are frequently followed by *repression* and *institutionalization* that can lead to an arrest or a transformation of practices (Prujit 2003; Uitermark 2004; Rossini et al. 2018)⁴. In many cases, legalized SCs maintain a form of "flexible institutionalization" when they continue to use unconventional tactics alongside conventional ones. When conventional action repertoires completely replace conflict practices we can talk about "terminal institutionalization" (Prujit 2003). In northern Europe, since the late 1990s, governments have pursued strategies of repression against most social centres, while a minority (especially artistic and cultural spaces) have requested and obtained forms of institutionalization within the context of urban regeneration processes. In southern cities, administrations adopted a more tolerant approach (selective neglect and containment strategies) until 2000s, while later phases of repression and legalization in different forms and intensities were alternated (Rossini et al. 2018).

Therefore, squatting and self-management practices emerge and decline in different temporal phases depending on the relationship between the *socio-spatial context* and the agency of movements. In general, the socio-spatial context is understood as the set of relationships that emerge from the processes of social construction of time and space. These structures do not only describe the spatial distribution of social

⁴ Rossini et al. (2018) define three basic approaches to the institutionalization and repression of movements for occupations: 1) *Selective neglect*: institutions are not able or are not interested in resolving the conflict situation, therefore they ignore the problem and tolerate the phenomenon although deemed illegal; 2) Control over space: 2.1) *Repressive strategies*: a repression, stigmatization and criminalization of practices through normative and discursive strategies that determine evictions and the increase of coercive policies; 2.2) *Containment strategies*: forms of normative legalization, mostly temporary, that imply a bureaucratic and economic commitment for the activists but the possibility of implementing alternative strategies within the "liberated spaces"; 3) *Integration/co-optation*: while containment strategies are usually implemented to manage an unwanted phenomenon, this approach involves the inclusion of bottom-up initiatives within dominant strategies (urban regeneration, temporary use of public spaces) in order to renew the image of the city and provide low-cost social and cultural services (Uitermark 2004).

groups (divided by class, ethnicity, gender, etc.), but represent the configurations that assume the production and transformation of spaces and places, value creation, discourses, power relations, institutions and social practices (Harvey 1996). For example, the effects of globalization on urban level, housing or restructuring policies, real estate market, spatial segregation, migration flows, relations between governments and local organizations, can influence waves of squatting in historical and geographical settings (Martínez 2018b).

Urban movements participate in the constitution of the social-spatial context by creating new social practices, but they are also restricted. According to the perspective of *political opportunity structures* (POS), social groups and movements have a greater possibility of formulating political demands when the ruling elites are divided and the channels of access to institutions are open. Repression, political alliances, media coverage and actors' subjective perception can also favour or limit the movements' opportunities for action (McAdam 1996; Meyer 2004). However, in agreement with some critics of the POS model (Goodwin and Jasper 2004; Jasper 2006), "if opportunities and constraints of the political system affect the decisions and behaviours of social movement activists, in turn their actions and choices influence the POS, which we cannot consider as a static and structural factor" (Piazza and Genovese 2016, p. 2).

To integrate structures and agency, we consider a *strategic approach*, which is "able to bridge this gap by giving equal and symmetric weight to protestors and to the other players whom they engage, and by focusing equally on players and the arenas in which they interact" (Jasper 2015, p. 9). For Goodwin and Jasper (1999), leaders and activists not only act according to the possibilities offered by the political, social and cultural environments in which they operate, but create new opportunities with their strategic choices and keep social networks alive by producing meanings and emotions. Therefore, to understand the dynamics of conflict and cooperation in urban space, it is useful to look at arenas (physical, political, economic, judicial, media) and interactions among players (movements, governments, parties, companies, police, judges, media, citizens), taking into account cultural and psychological mechanisms (speech acts, frames, identities, emotions) that are at stake (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015).

4. Direct social action and mutualism in self-managed spaces

The squatters' agency is not limited to the appropriation of spaces but can acquire importance for activists and other actors during periods of decreased visibility of the movement. Highlighting the role of daily processes of interaction, learning and con-

struction of meaning in social movements, Melucci (1985, 1996) considers the relation of reciprocity between moments of *latency* (internal dynamics) and *visibility* (mobilization). According to the author, "latency allows visibility in that it feeds the former with solidarity resources and with a cultural framework for mobilization. Visibility reinforces submerged networks. It provides energies to renew solidarity, facilitates the creation of new groups and recruitment of new militants attracted by public mobilization who then flow into the submerged network" (1985: 801). If during mobilization and resistance a movement can directly challenge institutions, recruit new participants and manifest a collective identity, it is in the moments of scarce visibility that the links among activists and local communities are intertwined, alternative cultural codes are created and new repertoires are tested (Melucci 1996; Yates 2015; Cattaneo and Engel-di Mauro 2015).

When institutions are not interested in repression/institutionalization of squatting movements (selective neglect), or in cases of temporary legalization of spaces (containment strategies or integration/cooptation), political action can develop in different ways. According to the critical literature, we can identify some forms of action of urban movements that are adopted in occupied and self-managed spaces in the phases of visibility and latency: a) *unconventional* or *demonstrative* forms, such as protest and direct action, e.g. demonstrations and new campaigns of occupation; b) *everyday activism* (Pickerill and Chatterton 2010; Yates 2015), such as daily and less visible activities concerning, for example, supply and preparation of food, waste management, use of the spaces and division of internal work; c) *direct social action* (Bosi e Zamponi 2015, 2019), namely the activation of initiatives of solidarity, mutualism and alternative economy directly addressed to the population and characterized by a strong political significance.

Let's briefly examine these latter forms of political participation which are developing in urban space. Since the end of 2000s, in a context of economic crisis and mobilization, new practices of political participation and social resilience have spread, aimed at challenging austerity policies and providing tangible responses to people's needs (Della Porta 2015; D'Alisa et al. 2015; Kousis and Paschou 2017; Bosi e Zamponi 2019). These forms of "direct social action" (Bosi and Zamponi 2015) are not completely new but have their roots in the socialist tradition of the Nineteenth century and have been proposed again and again, especially in times of crisis. These are "forms of collective action that aim at directly changing, by means of the very action itself, some specific aspects of society without being primarily oriented towards securing the mediation of public authorities or the intervention of other actors (e.g. opponents in labour struggles). These forms of action have in common a primary focus on the political power of the

action itself, instead of its capacity to express political claims” (ivi: 373). Emphasizing the politicization of social action, the authors include conventional and unconventional repertoires oriented to long-term goals and different political traditions (barter systems, alternative currencies and ethical banks, alternative food networks, cooperatives, occupied and self-managed spaces, initiatives to support migrants, legal and health help-desk, recovered factories, critical consumption, cultural and educational activities, popular sport). Following a process and strategic oriented approach, they argue that collective actors choose the forms they consider most effective and legitimate based on three factors: 1) *socio-political context*; 2) internal *organization* and *resources* (material and symbolic) available; 3) *collective identity* and past experiences. In order to analytically investigate the choice of forms of action, they identify four paths⁵, considering the mutual relationship between factors related to the environment and collective actors (Bosi and Zamponi 2019).

Regarding the connection between youth and political participation, De Luigi et al. (2018) highlight the political potential of new experiences of *mutualism* and self-management, distinguishing them from the more classic forms of volunteering. “In a similar way to what voluntary associations have always done, mutualistic forms of participation aim to respond to increasing demand for material and immaterial needs (e.g. food, housing and health) and for free-market spaces where it is possible to meet other people and take part in cultural events” (ivi: 257). Differently from reformist approaches, the concept of mutualism expresses a political vision that challenges the socio-economic system, perceived as unfair, by trying to directly achieve the aims set from the contributions and resources introduced by the participants. Research on some experiences in Italy (helpdesk for migrants, dormitory for homeless people and food projects) proves these projects to be laboratories of civic and political resistance. In these places it is possible to establish relations of mutual aid between beneficiaries and participants, aiming at building alternatives to the neoliberal discourse and traditional models of institutional welfare (De Luigi et al. 2018). In this sense, young activists in-

⁵ The paths can be defined as a) *social* (organizations, third sector, solidarity economy): direct social action has always been the defining characteristic of these organizations and political demands are not a priority or are delegated to others; b) *political-social* (housing, social centers, trade unions): strongly identitary, they defend a political statement- often conflictual - however they have strategically chosen to use direct social action to complement their activities in a period before the crisis; c) *social-political* (social centers from the latest generation, reconverted factories, cultural and mutualistic spaces): their identities are hybrids and pragmatic, direct social action is their constitutive element and they are born from the economic, social and political crisis; d) *political* (parties): these are characterised by a claiming approach and at a time of economic crisis they chose to implement direct social action to enforce their political motives (Bosi e Zamponi 2019).

vent new forms of participation that escape traditional definitions, with the re-appropriation of conventional repertoires and the attribution of new meanings and political goals (Pitti 2018).

After having briefly retraced the waves of occupation characterized by different strategies, practices and frames, in the next pages we will describe the development of new forms of activism in the context of political and socio-spatial transformations of the city of Bologna, through the analysis of the case study.

5. A brief history of squatting in Bologna city (1970-2019)

Bologna is a unique case study as it could be considered a lab-city: a city where social and political innovations often take place. The "red city" has been a model of local welfare since the post-war era with a communist administration, and has also been a fertile ground for the first SCs and for the development of artistic and communicative trends that have been coopted by mainstream cultural industries (D'Onofrio and Montevanti 2011). Over the decades, local administrations have adopted different strategies to control the urban space, favoring or limiting the activity of social movements. The latter have elaborated strategies, frames and collective identities, building local, national and international networks, acting in conflict or cooperation with institutions. To briefly retrace the history of squatting in Bologna, we have identified different waves and phases following the periodization proposed by scholars (Mudu 2012; Mudu e Rossini 2018).

If during the 1960-70s the practice of squatting was also supported by the Italian Communist Party as a response to the housing needs of southern immigrants, after the mid-1970s the first SCs were established in large Italian cities by radical left-wing militants. In a phase characterized by the transition to post-Fordism, the spread of new social movements favored the emergence of collective places of socialization (Mudu 2012). In Bologna were squatted some municipal spaces, both in the suburbs (Berretta Rossa), and in the city center, where took place the first free Radio (Radio Alice) and housing, political and countercultural squats (Crack, Traumfabrik). Since 1985 - after a period of strong repression against political movements on national scale - a first wave of SCs spread, driven by an autonomous (left-libertarian) movement composed by autonomist militants and anarchist squatters. In this phase, occupied and self-managed social centers (Centri Sociali Occupati e Autogestiti, CSOA) established networks and became political and cultural laboratories, while struggling against heroin and urban speculation (Mudu 2012). In Bologna an underground counterculture developed (Isola

nel Kantiere), and political collectives started to support migrants (D'Onofrio and Montevanti 2011).

In the 1990s, after the 1989 violent eviction of the SC Leoncavallo in Milan and following the student movement 'La Pantera', a second generation of SCs emerged, while previous occupations consolidated. In this period, some squatted spaces were repressed while others were legalized – the latter labelled self-managed social centres (Centri Sociali Autogestiti, CSA) – and the relationship with the institutions played as a divisive issue in the movement⁶. In Bologna, mostly anarchist groups (Livello57, Lazzaretto) occupied several buildings for housing and cultural purposes. On the other hand, the local administration – alternating repressive and containment strategies – evicted new occupations and legally assigned municipal spaces. In 1995, precarious workers and Pantera's activists squatted TPO, which played a central role in the mobilizations of the early 2000s and creation of national networks (Carta di Milano). In 1997, Atlantide was occupied, becoming a reference point for the LGBTQ and feminist movements in Italy.

In the context of alter-globalization movements and in the wake of the G8 in Genoa (2001-2007), a new wave of occupations developed (Membretti e Mudu 2013). The attention was aimed at the international context and mobilizations against neoliberal policies took place, while at a national level campaigns for migrants, against prohibitionism, privatizations and major works spread. At a local level, housing movements strengthened, while many SCs labelled themselves as 'social spaces', 'social laboratories', 'public space' or 'liberated spaces' (Mudu 2012). In Bologna, TPO squatted a new space in 2000 (after the eviction of the same year), while in 2003 Crash was occupied by autonomous militants. In these same years, after occupations and evictions, spaces were assigned to collectives Xm24 (2002) and Vag61 (2004) which organized social and cultural activities (music, counter-information, DIY, community gym, courses, workshops, etc.), while city administration mainly adopted repressive and containment strategies.

Since the end of 2000s – in the wake of the economic crisis, anti-austerity protests (Indignados and Occupy) and student mobilizations (L'Onda) – a new cycle of occupations has been observed, especially in main Italian cities (Rome, Naples, Milan, Turin

⁶ In 1995, for the first time in the city of Rome, a municipal resolution recognized the right of formal associations to use abandoned spaces for social purposes. If until then the authorities adopted selective neglect and repressive strategies, from the mid-1990s some SCs have been legalized and considered potentially useful for the regeneration of suburbs and degraded areas (Mudu and Rossini 2018). In 1998, with the drafting of the Carta di Milano, some SCs committed themselves to adopting new strategies to defend squatted spaces also in institutional forms.

and Bologna). During this time, struggles for the commons (Hardt and Negri 2010; De Angelis 2014) intensified (involving a referendum for public water or the reuse of abandoned urban areas) and many CSs settled in both downtown and suburban schools, cinemas and theatres⁷. In Bologna, in 2008 Bartleby was occupied by students in the university area. In 2009, the collective Crash squatted a new space in the suburbs (after several evictions in the previous years) while TPO was granted a space within a popular area near the center. In 2012, a military area in the city center was occupied by Làbas, a collective of students and activists close to TPO. After that moment, a wave of housing occupations reached many city districts and provided temporary shelter for hundreds of people in the period 2012-2017. From the 2013, the municipality's strategy has been oriented towards increasing control over urban space. The SCs Bartleby (2013) and Atlantide (2015), and housing occupations (2015-2016) have been dismantled. In 2017, Làbas and Crash were cleared. In the summer of 2019, the repressive strategy also affected the countercultural and libertarian space Xm24 – whose convention expired in 2017 and had not been renewed – which tried to oppose the eviction with creative resistance (shows, music, live radio) involving hundreds of people.

Urban transformations in Bologna city are related to the recent diffusion and repression of SCs. Spatial changes are linked to a shift towards an economy of food, tourism and culture, while previously it was based on small and high-quality factories as well as on construction industry⁸. Since 2010s, the centre-left city government has developed forms of urban regeneration and civic collaboration to try to deal with the erosion of political participation and consent (Boarelli 2010). In 2014, the 'Regulation between Citizens and the City for the Care and Regeneration of the Urban Commons' was approved to promote a collaborative governance of urban planning. Moreover, the administration adopted participative budgeting in order to manage the effects of the

⁷ In some spaces medical and legal offices, dormitories, social food laboratories and gyms, community gardens are put in place, while other occupations become mainly places of cultural production. Many CSs were evicted over the years, while others were legalized (e.g. in the city of Naples about ten occupied spaces are recognized as commons through municipal resolutions).

⁸ Some scholars prefer to analyze the impact of such transformations in terms of "gentrification" (Bonora 2015) – insisting on spatial changes and social groups' displacement – while others talk about "re-urbanization" (Buzar et al. 2007) – insisting more on migration flows and social behaviors. Nevertheless, forms of social exclusion from city life and spaces could also be witnessed, especially among some "weak" subjects like migrants and homeless people who are incompatible with the new image of a "gentrified inner city which is now increasingly designed to be consumed as a real commercial good" (Bergamaschi et al. 2014).

economic crisis and public services cuts⁹. Nevertheless, "opposing the positive effects celebrated in the mainstream public and political debate with other, less positive ones that have not been publicized" (Bianchi 2018, p. 293), such forms of citizens' involvement in decision-making processes risk being a method of de-politicizing participation, e.g. filtering urban claims with a preference for moderate ones and the exclusion of antagonist ones or favoring institutionalized actors over more informal ones (Bianchi 2018).

Specifically, as part of the Urban Innovation Plan approved by the Merola administration in 2016, both the 'District Laboratories', which create processes of civic collaboration and regenerate public spaces for the community, and the 'Participatory Budget', through which part of the municipal budget is allocated to projects proposed by citizens, were introduced. In 2018 the 'Foundation for Urban Innovation' was created (from a collaboration between Municipality and University), giving rise to the project of 'Laboratory Spaces'. From this moment on, organizations, informal groups, and collectives have been involved in a process of recognition of the experiences of self-management (following Barcelona and Naples) that has also led to the formal allocation of abandoned or disused spaces to the collectives *Làbas* and *Crash*, and the renewal of the concession for *Vag61*. Concerning *Xm24*, after the failure of the negotiation among activists and local government for the allocation of a new space, on November 2019 the collectives have squatted a large military area in the same district where the SC was located¹⁰.

6. Occupation, repression and institutionalization of SC *Làbas* (2012-2018)

In November 2012, the political collective *Làbas* (formed by young students, precarious workers and activists related to TPO) occupied the former Masini barrack located in the rich and conservative Santo Stefano district. The military complex, owned by the State, had been abandoned since 1999. From 2010 to 2012, it was put up for sale in a public

⁹ In fact, the crisis of public participation is not ascribable only to a managerial model of local governance, but also to the incapacity to keep social cohesion. Another crucial sector that has been under transformation – outsourcing and privatizations – in recent decades is the so-called "Emilian" welfare model, considering it not only is service-providing but is also a "place of socialization" through its institutions (Cossentino 2010).

¹⁰ Despite the initiatives of the administration, there are about 60 spaces occupied and then cleared that are still in a state of neglect. Two years after its eviction, the Masini barrack (squatted by *Làbas*) is unused and no project has yet been presented at the municipal offices by the property.

auction but did not generate any interest in the real estate market¹¹. Between 2012-2017, several self-managed projects (housing, dormitory and school for migrants, study room, children's playroom, farmers market, pizzeria, microbrewery, organic garden, carpenters) and political/cultural initiatives (debates, concerts, exhibitions, workshops, etc.) were launched. These practices allowed the militants to regenerate the barrack and transform it in a headquarters for organizing political intervention in the city. Moreover, they offered the inhabitants the opportunity to freely use a place so far inaccessible, thus profoundly transforming its sense and purpose.

The collective has tried to highlight the topic of social reuse of urban spaces, through both demonstrative actions and dialogue with institutions. Regarding housing, militants started campaigns with the aim of raising public awareness and engaging the administration through communicative actions and occupations¹². In relation to the barrack, activists have repeatedly tried to obtain legal recognition. Examples of this attempt are the symbolic occupation of the State Property Agency's office or the pacific invasion of the district council, in which they called for a public stance of the administration against the eviction. However, in December 2013 the barrack was sold to *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP)*, an investment bank controlled by the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance.

1. Main events of *Làbas* experience (2012-2018)

13 November 2012	Occupation of Masini barrack
December 2013	Masini barrack sold to CDP
July 2015	City council approves new urban plan (POC)
December 2015	The Public Prosecutor's Office orders the seizure of the barrack.
January 2016	The "Comitato per la tutela e affermazione dell'esperienza dell'ex Caserma Masini Bene Comune" is constituted
March 2016	After some failed meetings and the final approval of POC, a definitive closure is announced by the local government with respect to the request for negotiation with <i>Làbas</i> collective
June 2016	A <i>Làbas</i> activist is elected as a member of the district council

¹¹ The area (of about 9000 square meters), located within the historic center, consists of several buildings, underground rooms, a porch and a large central courtyard. Before becoming a military barrack in 1866 and hosting an RSI fascist brigade between 1943-45, the building belonged to some religious orders. The events concerning the complex since 2000s are related to initiatives by part of public administrations aimed at redeveloping the disused urban heritage, which largely includes former military areas.

¹² 'Crowdhousing' and 'loccupo' campaigns was launched to claim the right to housing against property speculation in abandoned urban areas. In one year, activists have squatted empty buildings in the city center (evicted after a few months) giving temporary accommodation to about 50 people.

July 2017	Làbas activists meet the director of CDP who asks to free the property
8 August 2017	Masini barrack is evicted
30 August 2017	Public assembly on the fate of Làbas after the eviction
9 September 2017	A demonstration of 15000 people 'Riapriamo Làbas' crosses Bologna streets asking for a new place for Làbas activities
4 February 2018	After a public investigation, the association 'Nata per Sciogliersi' signs a cooperation agreement with the city council for the use of some spaces in Vicolo Bolognetti.

On 30 July 2015, the local council presented the new urban plan (POC), that established the commercial use of the barrack. From that moment, the residents recognized Làbas as a "common" space. In fact, while on December 2015 the Public Prosecutor's Office ordered the seizure of the SC, the collective responded with a request for a public negotiation and collected more than 1700 signatures to support the claim. On January 2016, the "Committee for the protection and affirmation of the experience of the former Masini Barrack Common Good" required a moratorium of evictions until the municipal elections. In March, after some failed meetings and the approval of POC, the local government denied all negotiations. At the elections of June 2016, some activists of TPO-Làbas were strategically presented as candidates in a municipalist-inspired civic list¹³. The results obtained with the election of a young activist into the district council and the media coverage allowed for a temporary postponement of the eviction.

Despite the uncertainty about the future, in 2017 political initiatives and cultural events within both the occupied spaces and the city were organized. On July, activists met the director of CDP who requested to free the property. On August 8th, Làbas was evicted by the police. Immediately, activists convened at a public assembly and launched a demonstration on September. In following days, movements and citizens spoke out in defense of the activists, both on a local and national level, recognizing the social value of the experience. Subsequently, local government and activists started a negotiation for the allocation of a temporary space. On August 30th, hundreds of people intervened with a request for a public debate on abandoned urban areas. The mayor accepted the requests of Làbas' activists and agreed to find them a temporary alternative location.

On September 9th, about 15,000 people took the streets of Bologna for the right to the city. In the following weeks, also in the wake of the mobilization that fueled public debate, the mayor Merola and assessor Lepore formalized the decision to issue a call

¹³ The aim was to defend experiences of self-management also at institutional level, focusing on the direct participation of citizens in the decision-making process of the city.

for the premises of the complex of San Leonardo¹⁴. If on the one hand, Làbas obtain a space in a central position and in a very short time, on the other, the operation was brought forward using a legal framework and a cooperation agreement, included in the 'Regulation of the Urban Commons'. Despite the activists' initial proposal to discuss legal forms and develop innovative tools to recognize commons (Mattei and Quarta 2015), they took part in the call (presenting a project with some local associations) and constituted a formal association for the purpose. On February 2018, the spaces were officially assigned to Làbas despite discontent from part of the council and the district administration.

To sum up, in the first period the local government alternated selective neglect strategies and attempts for integration/cooptation. The collective, on the other hand, has tried to negotiate a flexible institutionalization, asking for the formal recognition of occupied spaces (through the modification of the POC) as a strategy to stop privatization and save the social projects. During the phase of repression (2013-2019), which affected all squatting movements, the administration has clarified the intention to integrate the experiences of self-management within the institutional model of participation. However, urban movements have reacted in different ways to these pressures by trying to reopen the debate about commons and the right to the city: through mobilizations and occupations, the establishment of committees, and the "critical participation" in the paths of civic collaboration. In the Làbas case, a flexible institutionalization is occurring, whereas conventional and unconventional forms of participation continue to coexist. Practices within legalized spaces show the will to re-politicize the debate about the social use of abandoned areas and to build "counterhegemonic public spaces" (Boniburini 2010), transforming some existing administrative tools into fields of tension and conflict.

7. Social-political path and self-management in squatted/legalized spaces

The case study can help us to explain the nature of self-organization practices and direct social actions in the larger background of urban transformations. If repression lead to the interruption of activities, processes of institutionalization may affect the nature and development of practices in different ways. Depending on strategies adopted by

¹⁴ Located in Vicolo Bolognetti, within the university area, it is a former convent of the seventeenth century, which hosts municipal offices, a conference room and a library. The complex (composed of several rooms inside, a porch with a colonnade and the central courtyard) has been used since the Seventies by young residents as a place of aggregation to organize concerts and music festivals.

movements and governments, forms of *flexible institutionalization* (coexistence of conventional and unconventional repertoires) can become contentious ground for the *re-politicization of commons* (mobilization and self-management of urban resources) or lead to *terminal institutionalization* (exclusive use of conventional repertoires).

In order to analyze the link between institutionalization and political participation, following Bosi e Zamponi (2019), it is possible to observe the construction and development of a *social-political path*, based on direct social actions, in the two spaces managed by Làbas (the Masini barracks and Vicolo Bolognetti). We will highlight the following aspects: a) *socio-political context*; b) internal *organization* and the available *resources*; c) *collective identity* and *biographies* of activists and participants. The relationship between these dimensions can help to interpret the dynamics of construction and transformation of practices within self-managed spaces: 1) in the phase of occupation and 2) following the process of institutionalization. In the following sections, we will focus on squatted spaces, as well as identify some trends that are developing within legal spaces.

“Làbas Occupato” in the former Masini barrack

The 2012 occupation of an abandoned area by the militants of Làbas responds to the need to react pragmatically, through the experimentation of innovative forms of collective action based on cooperation and solidarity, to the multiple effects of the crisis¹⁵. Individuals and groups’ desire to satisfy material needs, to rebuild ties and community relations in an increasingly anonymous and commodified urban space, to open up new spaces for participation and political involvement in a phase of decline in mobilization, are the reasons that explain the birth and development of projects.

We can distinguish between practices of direct social action activated in the spaces of Làbas: *self-production and alternative economy* (farmers market, community garden, pizzeria, brewery, carpentry); *mutualism from below* (housing occupations, workshops for children, social dormitory, and Italian school for migrants). Relating to the former, the main objective is to politicize the market through the creation of community and local economies, where the profit is subordinate to social equity and environmental

¹⁵ Bosi and Zamponi (2019) identify three different dimensions of the 2008 crisis with reference to the Italian context. An economic dimension characterized by a limited impact of the financial crisis and austerity policies in relation to a long-term productive decline that the crisis has accelerated. A social dimension, which in front of a worsening of material living conditions for some social groups, has witnessed an increase in feelings of insecurity and isolation, a loss of content in interpersonal relations and a consequent weakening of the social fabric. A political dimension, with effects of the economic dimension on public discourse, on the delegitimization of political representativeness and on the development of mobilizations.

sustainability. As far as mutualistic projects, they are based on cooperation and reciprocity between beneficiaries and participants, trying to overcome the relationship typical of volunteering in favour of an approach oriented towards autonomy.

Regarding the factors that have contributed to the development of the projects, it is appropriate to examine the socio-political context, the organization and the identity of the collective actor. According to the data collected before the eviction, many residents perceived Lâbas as a well-established place in the *context* of the neighborhood and the city¹⁶. The presence of a squatted space has fostered a cultural and political change, creating networks of solidarity and cooperation among the inhabitants, strengthening the production of social capital and the perception of public safety (Cas-trignanò 2012):

“Now it's an area, it's a lively street, before it was a dark, dark street, where there was no reason to walk by. I mean, I now arrive at the parking lot of Baraccano and I feel safe if my children go away and walk for a while by themselves, because anyway I know that there are activities, so much that they have opened, [...], before there were none. So, certainly it has given life to an area, and a street, with schools.¹⁷”

Some residents immediately supported the occupation and informal regeneration of the barrack, which had been closed and abandoned for many years, as evidenced by this e-mail conversation between two inhabitants of the neighborhood:

“Dear P., I went to see the Masini barrack, which has been occupied from five days by a student collective, Lâbas. The place, after thirteen years of neglect, is in poor condition, but it is of a truly extraordinary beauty. The guys are trying to make some improvements. They have worked like crazy. They have cleared out the entrance and cleaned and decorated two large rooms, and these days they are using them to show children's films, organize debates, offer aperitifs and give concerts (trying not to disturb the neighbors). Their ideal would be to revive the entire block, taking care of the greenery that already abounds and creating spaces to be made available to the population of the neighborhood. There would be a chance to do many inspiring things. For now, no one helps them (they do not have sponsors): at least let's hope that they do not push them out! If you can, go and see. It seems to me that the projects of these guys could be very

¹⁶ The area surrounding the SC is a sort of "enclave" within a well-off and politically right-oriented neighborhood. In addition to a strong student component, the area is inhabited by elders, self-employed or low-income workers, an "undergrowth" of precarious workers in the fields of communication and culture, and by young families with children, mostly without family ties and support.

¹⁷ Interviews are translated from Italian by the authors.

useful for our neighborhood, especially now that the gardens of Via Orfeo are closed and unreachable. Bye! M.”.

According to residents, mainly the weakest groups (children, youth, elders) need spaces to gather in a mostly residential area. The effects of crisis have determined a new demand for welfare that is not satisfied by local institutions. Some associations and groups complain about the lack of public space and the unwillingness of the administration to grant physical places free of charge to citizens who request it:

"to do something social in this neighborhood is absolutely not taken for granted and free, and we who have tried to do it know it well, it is a struggle, it is a job, and the people of Làbas have succeeded better than us, even if they do not have the requirements, let's call them formal, more suitable, that is, in my opinion, a great result".

Considering *organization* and *resources*, one of the strengths of Làbas has been the ability to expand the possibility of access and involvement. The ‘calls for volunteers’ led hundreds of people to approach the SC through a tool that combines volunteerism and self-management, revealing a strong desire for political and social activation. The symbolic meaning of squatting and the opportunity to engage practically have set in motion a large participation, especially in the two years preceding the eviction. The composition of the collective, which is constantly changing, sees a prevalence of students. The average age is around 25/30 years, there is a balance between genders and the origin covers almost all regions (mainly central and northern ones) and some foreign states. Forms of participation range from external support (sympathizers and frequenters), to direct involvement in projects and activities (volunteers), to regular intervention in political assemblies (activists/militants). Some new participants – mostly youth – decide to engage regularly, and gradually take on roles of responsibility. Others generally perceived themselves as volunteers rather than militants incardinated in a “political structure”¹⁸.

¹⁸ The terms ‘militancy’ and ‘activism’ do not have the same meaning, although the members of Làbas tend to overlap them. In fact, if the militancy is historically characterized by a strong ideological belonging and a regular and totalizing commitment in the political activities of the organization (party, union, collective), activism is more recent and foresees a more voluntary and personal approach, a partial adhesion to the political claims, an occasional participation in the activities (Revelli, 2001; Illuminati 2003). In our case, the term ‘volunteer’ is used to indicate the participation in social projects but not in decision-making processes, ‘activist’ means the one who participates with a higher degree of ideological adherence and assiduity, while the ‘militant’ is totally identified with the group and is involved on a daily basis in political activities and/or management of spaces. According to a Làbas’ militant, militancy is a specific relational dimension, different from other forms (family, friendship, work), which is based on trust and mutual respect

Practices of alternative economy and mutualism generated within the spaces can be described as “processes of re-appropriation and re-elaboration of ‘what already exists’, and experiences of anomalous and experimental re-use of existing physical and symbolic objects, socio-economic models, and socio-political tools” (Pitti 2018, p. 73). These initiatives have allowed some people (beneficiaries and participants) to find direct access to housing, legal help, psychological and emotional support, as well as, new knowledge and skills. As a volunteer says:

“Meals and cleaning are managed almost entirely independently by guests unless we want to cooperate as volunteers, but we are not obliged to do so, well, because it is not a real dormitory, I mean, our goal is the autonomy and therefore the independence of those who come to live here. It will never be a home because it does not have everything, the comforts that a house can have, but we do everything we can to make this place a home more than a dorm”.

The physical and morphological structure of the area (with a large central courtyard, some trees that form a small wood-garden and large spaces) has contributed to the construction and operation of a “collective gear”. The barrack has become over time a public space characterized by density and social heterogeneity. The concept of “square” often recurs in dialogues and interviews. According to an activist, Làbas is:

“a square, and by square I mean an urban place, where you meet diversity, ehm, which then can also decide to do things together, know each other and then set something up inside the square, or go outside the square and claim something else, in short, a place of meeting, of clash, [...] a place of passage, dynamic, but at the same time has a tendency to be rooted in their space and outside it”.

According to some testimonies, sociality is often associated with chaos, degradation and insecurity. Some residents would prefer car parks and shops, condemning the presence of Làbas as illegal. Others underline the condition of illegality, but positively evaluate the presence and action of the SC for the spaces and activities it offers to the neighborhood. The possibility of using spaces without being subject to restrictive laws and bureaucracy has favored the construction of projects which elsewhere would have entailed costs and formal authorizations. Activists whose actions do not always meet the legal criteria of justice clarify the topic of the link between squatting and legality.

among the members, a strong sense of responsibility, the sharing of common ends and specific codes of conduct.

Illegality is a means and a possibility, but not an end for activists, who claim the right to use abandoned spaces for political and social purposes:

“Occupation is not the solution, it is a passage. The matter is that by occupying you show that there is a void stable that can be used in another way, and that it is not difficult to use it in another way. So, in fact, we always say, we do not want a world of occupations, after that the occupations are necessary to make it understood, both to the administration and to the people themselves, that not everything in the law is legal, in the sense that it is more illegal to keep closed spaces, houses, and then the best thing would be that one should no longer hide, can lead a normal life, have a residence”.

Projects and activities have strengthened the *collective identity* of the group, at the same time favoring the introduction of new actors in the management of spaces. The occupants, who were initially perceived as “strangers”, were able to build a relationship of trust with the inhabitants showing a willingness to open the space. This inclusive approach allowed those who had never attended a SC to get in touch with the militants and participate in their activities. This has allowed the construction of a fluid identity, not necessarily restricted within a precise political-ideological boundary, but characterized by a pragmatic approach based on inclusiveness and willingness to establish new relationships with social and institutional actors.

Internal relations are mainly based on a belonging to what is defined as "political community" and on a shared path of “militancy”. Between "comrades" there are not necessarily strong bonds of friendship, although this can happen. Even if activists impose certain political duties on themselves that allow for them to identify with a collective "we", forms of sharing and communality are created among heterogeneous subjects. Despite individual differences and the difficulty to manage group relations, activists have overcome moments of internal conflict. Yet, biographical changes shaped different phases characterized by different levels of participation and by the presence of new people who generate new relational dynamics¹⁹. According to an activist:

¹⁹ The differences in participation may depend on several reasons, mostly biographical, related to time and life choices that do not allow to devote oneself to full-time militancy. But there are also political-ideological motivations that can lead some participants not to fully identify with the strategies of the collective. In other cases, the degree of participation and the sense of belonging depend on psychological factors, that is, the ability of the individuals to react to the pressure of the assembly, to manage relations and the emotions that derive from responsibilities and the commitment required (Brown and Pickerill 2009; Chatterton 2010).

“Làbas survives if there are still people, more and more people who look after it, the novelty is fundamental, being new, then one can show you something from another point of view and maybe you've been there for three weeks trying to understand how to do, then here comes someone new that tells you his point of view and from there... I'm not saying that they will find a solution, but it will help figure out how to do things”.

According to activists, Làbas produced a hybrid and vital social fabric where different cultures converge. This awareness emerged especially in cases of necessity. During the evictions, citizens mobilized to materially support the squatters through donations of food, essentials goods and money. Moreover, the creation of a committee for defending the occupation, the election of a young militant in the district council, as well as the solidarity after the eviction are important signals. On the other hand, they show that Làbas has a wider identity than the militants and include individuals and groups that demand to engage politically, while not belonging to antagonistic cultures.

“Làbas oltre Làbas” in Vicolo Bolognetti

Vicolo Bolognetti is in an area near the university and inhabited mainly by students, immigrants, workers and elders. While civic participation is high and many associations are present, social conflicts over use of public space (e.g. between students, residents, families and marginalized groups such as homeless and substance addicts) are evident, constituting new challenges for activists. As in the case of Làbas, self-managed spaces can create fractures and connections within the city, by settling in central areas and thus recovering the role of streets and squares as places of sociality, involving heterogeneous populations, and promoting dialogue between social movements and territory (Cavaliere 2013). Currently, activists share spaces and create initiatives with associations, schools, migrant communities, informal groups, both in self-managed forms (e.g. assemblies, cultural events, exhibitions, courses) and through processes of civic collaboration, such as the Participatory Budget (e.g. the creation of green spaces within the area) and the Laboratory Spaces (e.g. the management of a public space within the city center in collaboration with associations and third sector organizations).

As we have seen, the mobilization forced the administration to find an alternative place for Làbas' projects. At the same time, activists must recognize some spatial, legal and economic constraints that limit their autonomy. The costs for utilities and legal responsibility falling now on the association. Moreover, some activities have been interrupted or changed. The social dormitory could not be replicated because of the lack of space and the legal difficulties that this project would encounter, while food self-production projects (farmers market, pizzeria, brewery) have undergone similar prob-

lems but are now working. Changes in biographies of activists (e.g., students who find a full-time job or leave the city) and the challenge to readapt the collective identity within the new political and organizational context also had an impact.

Nevertheless, during the first period other projects were born in the legal spaces, while other have grown. The position – close to schools and university – allowed to test for new forms of cooperation between individuals, groups and institutional actors. The presence of youth – mostly university students – has favored the creation of an Italian language school for migrants (with a special class targeting women), music rehearsal spaces, writing and theater laboratories, study room, social afterschool, basket activities, bike workshops, employment helpdesk, while a free medical service is in the pipeline. In addition, activists try to redefine, also visually, the public space of Vicolo Bolognetti through the posting of illustrations, photos, posters, banners or symbolic acts such as the naming of places for commemorative purposes.

In general, the porosity and fluidity of the collective, with the uncertainty about the future (the renewal of the agreement is every 4 years), on one hand excludes an excessive formalization of activities, by having ever-shifting and temporary forms, on the other, imposes a continuous redefinition of the organizational and communicative mechanisms among the people that choose to cooperate. Therefore, to keep the space inviting and dynamic, activists must constantly invent new frames and strategies to encourage participation and ensure coordination among different projects.

Làbas' experience is an attempt to elaborate new forms of political engagement in a context of repression and integration of urban social movements. Its hybrid nature, halfway between a social movement organization and an urban political laboratory, has generated a certain degree of consensus around an idea of alternative urban regeneration. At the same time, strategies and tactics of Làbas-TPO have been criticized. On one hand, activities are stigmatized as illegal, on the other, some militants condemn the choice to collaborate with institutions rather than try to occupy new spaces. According to activists, its adaptive capacity makes Làbas a resilient entity able to respond to challenges. However, it remains to be seen to what extent political participation within the legalized spaces will continue to be decisive to produce mobilization and social change.

8. Conclusions

Occupied and self-managed spaces represent a specific urban configuration of protest and opposition to neoliberalism. Practices of urban squatting and self-management re-

produce themselves according to waves of mobilization influenced by socio-spatial transformations, political opportunities and strategic interactions among players within arenas. These cycles are followed by phases of repression and institutionalization. According to the analysis, in a case of squatting, and selective neglect by local governments, practices of direct social action can arise and develop depending on factors affecting the collective actor as the socio-political context, organization and resources, collective identity, history and biographies of participants. In case of flexible institutionalization, practices may stop or change. Depending on specific cases and local contexts, legalization can develop in a contentious field to re-politicize the discourse on commons, or in the contrary can lead to a terminal institutionalization.

Public and scientific debate to define practices of participation and self-management is an open field. Urban space is still significant for the production and expansion of commons as alternatives to neoliberal policies (Pusey 2010; Bazzoli 2016). However, the discourse about commons is ambivalent because of different interpretations and pressures such as, for example, in the case of sharing economy or processes of civic participation and collaboration (Rossi and Enright 2016). Future research may investigate the state and evolution of processes of institutionalization and commoning in the city of Bologna, both with respect to this case study and other experiences, especially considering the different strategies and identities of the players and the role that administrative tools seem to have as new forms of negotiation between institutions and social movements.

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