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EDITORIAL

The value of the city. Rent extraction, right to housing and conflicts for the use of urban space

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ABSTRACT: The extent of residential alienation and urban inequalities made visible in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis shed light on processes of politico-economic transformations that altered the role of housing within society since the late 1970s. The focus on (re-)commodification and financialization has become central in the debate and opened up rich interdisciplinary strands of research on the impacts that these processes have on housing. Building on such a fertile academic body of work, it is paramount to contribute to the setting of the public agenda, putting housing issues at the heart of the political debate and policy actions. Introducing this special issue, the paper is firstly asserting the political dimension of housing. Secondly the issue of urban rent extraction is discussed as crucial, especially in the face of the disruptive effects of extensive processes of re-commodification and financialization of housing and land markets in a context of neoliberal urban policies. Thirdly, the Italian case is presented as extremely relevant when it comes to understanding the political dimension of housing, recalling the controversial debates and clashes developed along the 20th century and the current trends of a country confronted with intense processes of financialization of housing, with a significantly accelerated real-estate cycle transforming the residential landscape and resulting in the most intense building cycle of the last half-century. Finally, the dynamics of de-politicisation (and re-politicisation) of housing are recalled with reference to the contributions collected in this special issue.

KEYWORDS:

Housing, Italy, Politicisation/Depoliticisation, Re-Commodification, Right to Housing, Right to the City, Urban rent, Value extraction

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1. Introduction

In the last fifteen years, scholarly attention to housing has grown enormously, while transcending disciplinary boundaries. Inevitably so, since the extent of residential alienation and urban inequalities made visible in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis shed light on broader processes of politico-economic transformations that altered the role of housing within society since the late 1970s. The focus on re-commodification and financialization (or hyper-commodification as referred by Madden and Marcuse, 2016) has become central in the debates on displacement, accumulation by dispossession, new social housing schemes, gentrification or rent-gap (Lees and White, 2020; Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018; Belotti and Arbaci, 2021) and opened up rich interdisciplinary strands of research bringing together planners, urban sociologists and geographers, and politico-economists among others. Building on such a fertile academic body of work, it is paramount to contribute to the setting of the public agenda, putting housing issues in the place it needs and deserves: at the heart of the political debate and policy actions (see also Monbiot, Grey, Kenny, Macfarlane, Powell-Smith, Shrubsole and Stratford 2019).

This special issue has a two-fold aim. On the one hand, it seeks to offer an interdisciplinary contribution from social sciences to the political dimension of housing, i.e. the relationship between conflicts, political processes and regulation. It is not a question of providing an inventory of political movements, conflicts and practices (in the broad or narrow sense); rather, of bringing to the fore the eminently political nature of housing and, above all, the regulation of the use of urban space. Thus, the focus on policy-related actions and instruments from a critical approach in social sciences is central in the papers presented in this special issue as lenses to explore societal and politically significant issues and voices by social movements, political activists, public institutions and civil society as a whole. The question is not only about the problematisation of the phenomena, but also on progressive policies, actions, and discourses.

On the other hand, this special issue presents analytical works that contribute to the broader theoretical debate. It does so with a focus on a specific context, the Italian one, which displays some distinctive features that may be regarded as exceptions but helps to consider and discuss some aspects of the regulation of housing and urban space as a political process.

2. The political dimension of housing

Following the financial crisis of 2008, the housing question took a central stage in the social sciences, with housing studies no longer considered a niche field. The worldwide financial collapse ended one of the most intense housing cycles of the Post-War period and, in Western advanced capitalist societies, revealed how the dismantling of the Keynesian-based welfare regimes changed the role of housing systems from a

redistributive instrument for the many (housing as a right) to a device for accumulation for the few (housing as a good and an asset) (Belotti and Arbaci 2019). The impact on housing deprivation and inequality has been profound and planetary (UN Human Rights Council 2017). In the public debate and in the media, the discussion often revolves around the idea of the housing crisis as a local and conjunctural phenomenon, and as a result, short-sited and emergency solutions are offered (Tosi 2017). Conversely, considerations on housing crisis as a structural call for more systemic views and policy responses.

Social movements and social science scholar often see the housing question as an eminently political issue: as Madden and Marcuse (2016, 9) argue, "for working-class and poor communities, the crisis is the norm". To state the political dimension of housing means to take at least four key aspects of the issue into serious consideration. The first aspect – which could be called of political-moral quality – concerns the role of housing in the lives of individuals, families and societies. Asserting that housing is an essential part of the foundational economy – that provides the infrastructure for everyday life and social cohesion (see Foundational Economy Collective 2018) – is not a trivial assertion; rather, a normative proposition based on a variety of orders of justification. For instance, in a philosophical anthropology perspective (see Sen's 1999 capabilities approach), the availability of essential goods and services, including housing, is considered a prerequisite for a life worth living, as the basis of elementary and complex functions. Materialist anthropology, drawing on Engel's theorem, recalls a hierarchy of needs and aspirations ascribed to consumption practices whereby the demand of housing as a core good/service is particularly inelastic (see Foundational Economy Collective 2018, chapter 2). A great deal of qualitative empirical research, in fact, shows how social actors' perceptions of their needs and preferences inform what "the place of the home" should constitute (see f.i. Bourdieu 2000). Finally, broader political-moral justifications underpin the constitutional arrangements of many European democratic states, whereby housing is conceived as a basic need, and therefore as a social right. This is not just a tokenist criterion that complies with legal norms, whereby fundamental rights are regarded as a rhetoric instrument to maintain the status quo, as argued in critical legal studies (see Kennedy 2002). Conversely, constitutional arrangements must be interpreted as historical expressions of social orders, since these reflect established conceptions of the common good and social welfare. From this perspective, right to housing can be seen as an essential part of a citizenship strategy based on the renewal of the foundational economy (Foundational Economy Collective 2018), while considering the enormous impact housing has – together with other foundational economic sectors such as food and transport – in terms of environmental sustainability and climate change (Gough, 2017).

The second aspect of the political dimension of housing relates to regulatory processes and the role of the State. One of the essential characteristics of the public sphere in the forty years of neo-liberalisation is the representation of social and economic transformations as a technical, and thus the substantial depoliticisation of the housing crisis (Hay, 2014). Technocratic responses persist as the dominant paradigm in public action, while disguising a relentless process of de-regulation of the housing market, particularly the rental sector and own-ownership capital gains. As Marcuse (1996, p. 40) pointed out, "it is not, however, a reduction in the role of the state; to the contrary, it may even be an increase in that role. (...) They rather shift direction, from a social and redistributive to an economic and growth or profit-supporting purpose. At the same time, they shift from a public, in the sense of democratic or popular instrument, to an instrument of private business purpose." Meanwhile, housing financialization might be driving a re-regulation process, but one that benefits corporate accumulation of wealth. Public housing has been an essential part of the construction of democratic states in Europe. Although it has largely retained the characteristics of 'one-class solidarity' as financed mainly through payroll taxes, public housing has been an essential part of the infrastructure of basic goods that have underpinned welfare and social cohesion in Europe. Moreover, in many cases - such as in

context of the social democratic policies and vast building program of the early 20th century “Red Vienna” (Tafari 1995) -it has been a major laboratory of architectural and social innovation. However, since the late 1970s, most European welfare states have halted the production of public housing, privatized the social housing stock, and withdrawn social policies for housing needs. Since the 1980s, housing has become one of the most neglected topics in the political agenda (while housing studies have been relegated to a niche field of studies), now considered an “amputated arm” of the welfare state (Cole and Furbey 1994, 2). The role of the State in the housing question is, however, even more crucial nowadays. At the heart of the processes of re-commodification and financialization of housing, there is indeed a considerable process of regulatory transformations, which have paved the way, for instance, to the expansion of the mortgage market, the liberalisation of the private rental market (from the abolition of rent control to the weakening of security of tenure), or the securitisation of the public housing stock already sold to profit and non-profit companies (Aalbers 2016). Central in this process of housing re-commodification is the State’s active role in fostering the market-led extraction of rent value from urban space (accumulation of wealth), thus weakening the potential redistributive role of housing policies and regulations

The third aspect of the political nature of housing lies in its symbolic complexity. As Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, a dwelling is never just a shelter: it is the object of desires, aspirations and representations, which emerge from the trajectory of actors in the social field. A fundamental aspect of the symbolic dimension of housing is what the sociological scholarship calls the homeownership ideology, which regards home not just as a use value (living space), but as an exchange value and an asset. This is not a straightforward ideological construction but the outcome of a process of “rationalisation of existence” produced through a succession of «norms now deeply imprinted in governmental practices, institutional policies, and management styles» (Dardot and Laval 2013, 22). The symbolic frame associated with the notion of home(-ownership) varies greatly. For example, in many Northern European countries, the fostering of a homeownership ideology is a recent phenomenon that developed along, and underpinned the re-commodification of their housing system (e.g. the earliest was the UK since Thatcher’s period). Conversely, home-ownership ideology has always been the dominant in Southern Europe countries since attached to the notion of ‘family patrimony’ which should perpetuate through generations (thus differing from the conception of home-ownership as a tradable good). Home-ownership is, in fact, central in the reproduction of other pillars of familistic Southern European welfare regimes as a model of national political economy where the family plays a double role as the key provider of welfare and a key agent in the model’s socio-economic and political reproduction (Arbaci 2019).

Finally, the political dimension of housing sheds light on the importance of political claims. As early as in the 20th century, claims to housing rights were no longer an appendix of the industrial conflict with the prospect of an emerging urban revolution (Lefebvre 1970). In the last four decades, struggles for housing have suffered an almost disparaging representation in the public sphere: at best, they are described as desperate expressions of urban misery; at worst, as acts of sheer illegality that endanger urban decency. Overall, the picture of housing movements, which played a decisive role in the construction of welfare in the 20th century, is today very composite. Among the most significant mobilisations, we found activists developing research and analysis, as well as freelance journalists whose empirical work disveals the ways financial actors and local governments undermine the right to affordable housing across Europe (see for instance, the Arena for Journalism in Europe - <https://journalismarena.eu/> - that recently released the result of a comparative research over 16 European countries - “Cities for Rent: Investigating Corporate Landlords Across Europe”, <https://cities4rent.journalismarena.media/> - developed by 25 journalists and experts in visualisation). Grassroots networks including public officials, academics and lawyers are emerging across

the globe to address issues related to increasing urban inequalities and access to adequate housing, while reclaiming housing as a fundamental right, away from its notion of commodity, asset-class or extractive industry (<https://www.make-the-shift.org/>; Rolnik, 2019). The role of civil society in actions aiming at a socially sound housing renewal that ensures genuine affordability and the right to the city is nowadays at the core of the policy making debate in some urban contexts (Garcia Lamarca 2017) and not limited to a discursive narrative. Big cities are swarming with innovative experiments (sometimes building on the legacy of 20th century experiences) offering a greater diversification of tenures and typologies. A variety of new actors working in partnerships are developing new social housing programmes that ensure affordability and respond to emerging housing demands and social profiles (Arundel and Doling 2017; Peverini 2019; Bricocoli and Salento 2020). There is a renewal of cooperative and mutualist forms of housing that, by moving away from individual ownership, offer alternative forms of affordable access to housing and security of tenure. A great potential of social innovation is nested, and may be generated, in this variety of experiments. Their radical nature is not ascribed to ethic, aesthetic or cultural experiments addressing the style of living, rather to political experiments concerning the modes – and regulation – of the use of urban space (see Bricocoli and Salento 2020). These experiments challenge market-led mechanism of urban rent extraction, a core issue that – as discussed in the next section – is at the heart of the housing question (as both problem and solution).

3. The question of urban rent extraction

By re-centring the housing question on its political dimension, the crux of the matter lies, above all, on urban rent extraction. In a nutshell, we are arguing that the housing question is fundamentally about the value of urban space and how it is used, owned, and governed. From a classic Marxist perspective, «it is the rent of land and not the house that is properly the main object of building speculation in rapidly developing cities» (Marx 1894, vol. III, Part VI, ch. 46).

The escalation of housing price, combined with the stagnation of salaries and fall of households' purchase power, has hampered access to (affordable) housing, especially in cities and towns attracting large-scale real estate speculation. Residential inequalities have widened dramatically, especially since the the mid-1990s, following a variety of processes of re-commodification and financialization of housing and land markets. Housing prices are, in fact, linked to land value (rather than building value) which is positional, since it depends on its location. By buying or renting a house, one buys or rents, first of all, a location in the urban space – so that, for instance, in the centre of Palermo the price of an apartment is on average double than in the suburbs, but three times less than in the centre of Milan (Nomisma 2014, 244). Although this seems obvious, the question of the value of urban space is essentially removed from the public sphere.

On an international scale, a recent survey of 14 advanced economies across the globe revealed that, between 1950 and 2012, just 19% of the increases in housing prices were related to rising construction costs, while escalating land prices accounted for the remaining 81% (Knoll, Schularick and Steger 2017). Ultimately, housing problems cannot be addressed in isolation from land rent dynamics; in other words, on how the (socially produced) value of urban space is made subject to the appropriation and value extraction, and how land value could be secured, conversely, to collective welfare.

Classical economists were extremely sensitive to the issue of land rent, which of course, referred to the land as key to agricultural production. The privileged position of the landowner was paramount: since the

supply of land cannot increase at the pace of the growing demand, the price increases. Hence, the concept of rent as an unearned income underpinned the concern – common to Smith (1776), Ricardo (1817) and Mill (1848) – that land ownership could generate individual wealth and adversely affect growth. Henry George's ground-breaking work on *Progress and Poverty* (1879) described the positional nature of rent, closely linked to the processes of urbanization, and argued that rent extraction curbs economic growth, as rent tends to grow more than income. George's proposed solution – the Land Value Tax – was confiscatory taxation that would reduce the tax burden on labour and production, finance public investment, and foster productive investment over rent-seeking. The idea of the Land Value Tax was never implemented, and the focus on urban rent faded away with the emergence of the neoclassical paradigm. Once the concept of land was absorbed into capital (Clark 1891), land rent was assimilated to any other form of return on capital.

Since the 20th century, the exploitation of urban space largely increased. Typically, the case is that of transforming agricultural land into building land on the edges of expanding cities. More recently, speculative land value extraction has transformed entire districts through complex governance arrangements between public and private actors. Either short-term urban programmes (Micelli 2020), or longer-term processes, these have often resulted in gentrification, touristification and displacement (Atkinson 2000; Tulumello and Allegretti 2021). «When housing units are bought on the assumption that they can be turned into more liquid commodities, displacement is the predictable result» (Madden and Marcuse 2016, 43).

An impressive acceleration was given to these processes by the introduction of new financial practices and instruments. Since the 1980s, the expansion of credit for home buyers and builders has financed the most impressive real estate cycle of the century, which collapsed in 2008. The spread of real-estate funds, significantly since the 1990s, has transformed housing into financial products (Rolnik 2019; Belotti 2021). Non-financial companies also contribute to this process: firstly, by diverting investments from productive activities to eminently financial activities, such as real-estate (and often introduce into their portfolios participations in real estate companies); secondly by capitalising their twentieth-century real estate assets – such as large factories or railway yards – through complex urban regeneration operations, or financial instruments. In this respect, the redevelopment of the former industrial sites of the Pirelli and Falck industries in the North of Milano are remarkable cases (Kaika and Ruggiero 2016; Savini and Aalbers 2016).

Platform capitalism has in turn contributed to this transformation of urban space by building tools for the *mise en tourisme* (Kadri, Bondarenko, Pharicien 2019) of private real estate through short-term rentals (which curbed the supply of long-term rentals). Airbnbification – as it is slangily called – has relevant impacts in terms of valorisation of housing stock and entire neighbourhoods with the emergence of new economic actors (e.g. households who operates as rentiers, or small entrepreneur in the tourism sector) that merge earned income with unearned income. But also a vast number of multi-property companies operate in this domain, sometimes in the guise of individual hosts. However, the protagonist of value extraction is undoubtedly the platform itself (Srnicsek 2017; Aquilera, Artioli and Colomb 2019)

The outcome of these transformations is what Madden and Marcuse (2016) call the hyper-commodification of housing, referring to the replacement of the use-value of the house with its exchange value (or, more correctly, its asset value), resulting in the residential alienation of an increasing proportion of the population.

4. The relevance of the Italian case

Most of the contributions in this issue refer to Italy. In the framework of the international literature on housing transformations, the Italian case is relatively under-represented. This can be due to at least two different reasons. On the one hand, Italy is a relatively peripheral context, and even the Italian academic field remains – though with remarkable exceptions – on the margins of some fields of international social science research. On the other hand, like other Southern European contexts, it is considered (mistakenly) relatively uninvolved in the processes of financialization. On the contrary, here we argue that the Italian case is a laboratory of great importance for understanding the housing question as a political issue, because some questions that are now discussed in the international literature have arisen in Italy with particular evidence and, sometimes, prior than in other countries.

Firstly, in Modern Italy, the relationship between the housing question and the extraction of income from urban space has emerged very clearly and has been the terrain of a violent political clash. After the Second World War, Italy's large cities, both in the North and South, expanded rapidly. The transformation of land use in the city's outskirts was the driving force behind an abnormal growth in rent. At the time, 'building speculation' even became the subject of movies (Francesco Rosi's "Le mani sulla città" was awarded the Golden Lion in Venice in 1963) and novels (see f.i. Italo Calvino's "La speculazione edilizia"). Above all, in the urban debate, the question – with all its political entanglements – became a much-debated theme, at least until the 1970s (see e.g. Campos Venuti 1972). In the early 1960s, the issue was openly raised in the political arena when a radical reform project was presented in Parliament. The reform envisaged that the right to build would be disconnected from private land ownership: land on the outskirts of cities would be acquired by municipalities in exchange for compensation equal to its agricultural value, and then municipalities would auction off the right to build, earning profits to be allocated to works of urban interest (Sullo 1964). A broad political spectrum rejected the reform project and the promoter of this reform, Christian Democrat MP Fiorentino Sullo, was the target of a campaign of denigration.

On that occasion, the extraordinary strength of a political composition transversal to the political parties emerged – which was defined by its critics as the "brick block" (Parlato 1972) – that could count on the tendency of a substantial portion of the Italian electorate to defend the reasons of private property even in the face of an evident collective interest in limiting speculative phenomena. In other words, the spread of a homeownership ideology well rooted in the Italian social fabric. The pre-eminence of homeownership is not a recent acquisition, but a constitutive element of the family spirit, was decisive in that political affair. Moreover, private property – the "terrible right", as a famous Italian jurist called it (Rodotà 1981) – has always exercised a powerful hegemony even in legal culture. In 1977, the Italian Constitutional Court profoundly downgraded a subsequent attempt to separate the right to build from the private ownership of land - Law No 10 (the so-called 'Bucalossi Law'). However, the spread of private homeownership, does not mean that Italy is – as is often claimed – "a country of small owners". Instead, it is a country of small, medium and even large owners: property value is concentrated in the hands of an elite (Filandri, Olagnero and Semi 2020), and the wealthiest 20% of households owns around 60% of the housing stock value¹.

¹ The patrimony of the Catholic Church in Italy is particularly large. The lack of transparency of its finances does not allow accurate estimates, but – according to journalistic reconstructions (Zunino 2016) – in Rome, where between 8 and 10 thousand wills in favor of the clergy are registered every year, a quarter of the real estate (partly for the use of the clergy themselves, partly for investment) would refer to the Church.

It can be understood that Italy is no stranger to the phenomena of hyper-commodification and financialization of housing, which have fuelled a significantly accelerated real estate cycle, transforming the real estate landscape. According to Istat census data, between 1981 and 2011 the number of dwellings not occupied by residents rose from around 4.4 million to around 7.1 million (20% to 23%). Against this apparent surplus of supply, between 1981 and 2007, according to data reconstructed by Muzzicato, Sabbatini and Zollino (2008), the average price of housing in Italy has multiplied by 5.5 times, thus showing that the demand for dwellings is mainly independent of *housing* need. As happened elsewhere (see Aalbers 2016), such a disconnect stemmed from the increasingly close relationship between real estate and financial activities. In Italy as in the rest of Western Europe, over the last three decades, the volume of private financing, both to construction companies and households, has grown dramatically in line with a market-driven European integration process. The changes in the regulation of the banking system (Cotula and Rossi 1989) have been a turning point for the new dynamics of the real estate market. The outcome was the resounding increase in consumer credit and mortgage loans, also boosted by the banks' ability to securitize mortgage loans (Hardt and Manning 2000; Aalbers 2008). The role of banks on the supply side of the market was equally relevant. Between 1998 and 2011 the number of loans to the construction sector increased from around 54 to around 163 million euros a year. Similarly, since 1994, the activity of real estate funds has started in Italy and developed with particular intensity. Since the late 1990s, it has overgrown, boosted by the favourable tax regime, the sale of properties by banks, insurance companies, industrial companies, and the securitisation of public real estate assets. Between 2001 and 2015 the number of real estate funds active in Italy rose from 7 to 402, and the total net asset value went from around 2.5 to around 48 billion euros. In 2019, Italy became the third-largest country in terms of managed assets, totalling 77 billion, 11% of which is represented by residential stock (Scenari Immobiliari 2019).

The main result of a neo-liberal regulation of housing and rent is the most intense building cycle of the last half-century, second only to post-war reconstruction. Between 1997 and 2006, the production of residential buildings grew by around 40%; annual sales doubled; real estate values increased by 63% in the national average and almost doubled in Milan and Rome; the growth of investment in construction (13.6%) was twice that of GDP. However, the two cycles display very different features. After the war, real estate development grew along with social wealth, and housing was the primary use value for families. In the new century, the production of real estate grows along with the financialization of the economy, fostering wealth accumulation, and houses are widely viewed as an investment tool: exacerbating instead of reducing inequalities; boosting financial accumulation and making indebtedness grow out of proportion.

This remarkable transformation is the result of political processes, which have revolutionised the normative basis of capital accumulation. However, when it comes to urban transformation, the role of politics and local administration is also crucial, especially when the exploitation of urban land takes place in already built areas rather than in greenfield areas (see Tocci 1999). Redefining the functions and appearance of significant portions of the urban fabric is a much more complex task than traditional building speculation: it implies the activation of a profound transformation of the urban context, with the involvement of economic, financial, political and cultural actors, as well as complex communication and sometimes even the involvement of local communities. These are processes that enjoy a broad consensus, not least they seem to incorporate «some of the recipes invented in the 1970s and 1980s as alternatives to functionalist urbanism: patrimonialisation, pedestrianisation, “tramwayisation”, the re-conquest of riverbanks and waterfronts for the benefit of leisure and entertainment activities, and so on» (Pinson 2020, 68). Negotiated urban development plans and urban regeneration schemes play a decisive role in transforming urban space into a financial

product. Given the different socio-economic compositions of Italian cities, actors and modes of interaction may be significantly different. Among cities with the most significant presence of prominent financial players, Milan presents the most relevant cases. The redevelopment of vacant sites has been the terrain in which these processes have been flourishing. While the redevelopment of the Pirelli factory in the Bicocca district (see Kaika and Ruggiero 2013) was the pioneering case, it is worth mentioning the transformation of the former Falck industrial site (Savini and Aalbers 2015), the Porta Nuova district (Anselmi and Vicari Haddock 2019), and the CityLife complex in the Portello area (Mosciaro 2020). In large cities where the penetration of financial actors is moderate, such as Rome, the protagonists of “negotiated urbanism” are “traditional” players in the construction sector, who – through a (broadly speaking) collusive relationship with the political class – manage to maintain a hegemonic position in urban planning (see the essay by Esposito, Moini and Pizzo in this issue). Although this phenomenon primarily concerns large cities, smaller cities are not exempt: they present a wide variety of forms of patrimonialisation and gentrification of historical centres (Gentili, Tassinari and Zoboli 2018), especially in the case of cities and towns which are attractive touristic destinations. In any case, the difficult financial situation of Italian municipalities puts them in a weak position in negotiating the use of urban space.

When it comes to understanding the political dimension of housing, the Italian case is also extremely interesting from the perspective of housing movements. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, housing policies resulted from the strength of social movements that demanded a right to housing (Daolio 1974). A relative 'autonomy' of the urban question emerged. While in the large industrial cities of the North, housing was one of the demands of the workers' movement, in the large cities of the Centre and South – where the industrial fabric was much less developed – the housing movement operated as a sort of "functional equivalent" of the workers' movement. The trade unions themselves realised that the urban question was emerging as a relatively autonomous issue from the industrial conflict, deserving a specific organisational structure. In 1972, the CGIL Union set up a union of tenants and assignees of public housing (SUNIA), with a clear commitment to «raising and defending the working and living conditions of workers [...] not only within of factories and other workplaces but also outside, even to avoid that [...] increases in wages, salaries, pensions, are frustrated by increasing housing costs, by physical and psychological damages, by the general surge of the cost of living»². As in the rest of Western Europe, the last thirty years in Italy have not only been a time of a sharp decline in social rights, worsening inequalities and increasing poverty, but also a time of decadence of representative democracy. In this context, the question of housing – and more generally the question of the use of urban space – has been progressively removed from political agenda. Although there are social forces abstractly capable of conceiving and representing its moral and political value, the entire foundational economy has undergone a process of de-politicisation. In this framework, the peculiarity of the Italian case – or, as Perry Anderson (2014) would say, the Italian disaster – is the special de-legitimation that the political class has earned since the 1990s and, conversely, the growing legitimisation of technocracy as a way out of the impasse of the country's 'ungovernability'. The impressive sequence of 'technical' governments in the last three decades coincides with the process of neo-liberalisation of a country that in the twentieth century had gained a constitutional set-up in many ways close to that of an accomplished social democracy.

² <http://www.sunia.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/tesi-per-costituzione-sunia.pdf>

5. Investigating variety : the political dimension of housing in the contributions of this issue

The common goal of the essays collected in this issue is to explore the political dimension of housing and to understand the dynamics of de-politicisation (and re-politicisation) developed in the last thirty years.

The enduring vitality of movements for the right to habitation - their ability to offer innovative perspectives for housing policies - is the subject of Margherita Grazioli's contribution. Through an ethnographic research on squatting for housing purposes in Rome, the essay shows that the movements for the right to habitation not only express a claim for the right to housing as such, but also mobilize a great capacity for experimentation, repurposing different types of urban constructions. They offer prospects for radical innovation in housing policies, but above all show that the practice of homemaking through the re-appropriation of urban vacancies and interstices has the capacity to transform models of social reproduction, responding also to the imperatives of environmental and social sustainability, and disrupting both the idea of housing as an asset and the privatised notion of habitation "as the place where the individual households' life (and carework) unfolds". Far from being represented as a pure expression of deprivation, housing movements express - through their capacity for spatial and relational regeneration - a grounded vision of the right to the city, capable of crafting innovative practices and emancipative everyday routines, radically questioning the traditional conception of public housing as agglomerates of social marginality at the fringes of the city centre.

An opposite aspect of the political dimension of the use of urban space is the intertwining of administrations and private actors in the operationalisation of a top-down conception of urban regeneration, concentrated on the renovation of private estates. The contribution of Esposito et al. adopts the concept of urban regime to analyse the collusive relationship between public actors, land rentiers and real estate developers. The analysis is based on a research on large-scale Urban Development Projects in Rome: instruments designed in the 2000s, under different local political majorities, as strategic devices for enacting a polycentric metropolisation, attracting investments in the periphery or near-periphery. The case study concerns the realisation of the new Italian headquarters of the BNP Paribas bank, located within a wider large-scale development site. Through the analysis of secondary data and the non-participant observation of multiple rounds of public consultation, the essay illuminates some characteristics of the typical configuration of hegemonic projects: they are presented as the innovative and regenerative way to pursue objectives of general urban interest, but in fact operate as instruments of coordination and conciliation between specific interests, local and extra-local, to implement accumulation strategies based on the capture of urban rent.

In the same line of argument, Veronica Conte's contribution analyses the role of planning and state actors in urban development processes, focusing on two urban development projects: CityLife in Milan and Tour and Taxis in Brussels. Far from being irrelevant, planning and state actors play a primary role in urban development, giving stability to the balance between private and public interests, i.e. providing a common scheme for cooperation to public bodies and private interests. The differences between the local contexts are very relevant - and this calls the researcher to a contextual analysis focused also on the specificities of the structures of opportunities, governance settings and planning systems, and therefore on the different interpretation of urban development projects - but the research clearly shows that in both cases planning has mainly benefited the interests of financial investors and property developers, legitimising the idea that the city should be a business friendly context.

The relationship between strategies for extracting value from urban space and the costs of living is the issue addressed by Marco Peverini's contribution. Here, the concept of affordability is used both as a criterion for analysing the processes of housing alienation that citizens undergo in an urban space penetrated by processes of financialization, and as a criterion on which the idea of a grounded city can be based (Engelen, Froud, Johal, Salento and Williams 2017), i.e. a city understood and designed as a space of interactions that provide an increasing quantity and quality of foundational goods and services for a prosperous life, rather than as an engine of economic growth. Affordability - the author argues - is not an abstract characteristic of real estate when its market price is related to income. On the contrary, it is a political attribute, since it is produced in the urban space, on the basis of the processes of urban restructuring, of capitalist accumulation, and above all on the basis of local governance (that is not only about housing policies). Affordability is shaped - Peverini argues - by different policy domains and their interactions: spatial planning, active land policies, housing allowances, localised welfare services. As the only contribution not referring to the Italian context, this essay considers the case of Vienna as a particularly interesting example of a fertile field of affordability policies in action, though not immune from the global affordability crisis.

The studies collected in this issue testify that housing is again a topic of political debate. This does not necessarily mean that a process of re-politicisation of housing is taking place everywhere and univocally. Tulumello and Caruso's contribution, which closes the volume, shows that the usual categories of comparative politics and political economy – according to which Southern Europe can be considered a homogeneous area – do not account for the variety of situations. In spite of its tradition of activism and political conflict over housing, Italy is an exception. Although housing struggles are still many on an urban scale, a specifically political (and conflictual) understanding of the problem on a national scale, nor corresponding national policies and politics, does not emerge in Italy. The explanation of this “absent politicization” – the authors find on the basis of an empirical research on Turin – lies in the special consumption of the political and institutional fabric, in a country where a mass disgust for politics has emerged, and local administrations – even when led by so-called populist political forces – are entrusted to the reassuring management of technocratic elites.

A contextual approach to the analysis of the housing question is therefore indispensable -neither to deny the evidence of international isomorphic transformational processes nor to replicate once again the pattern of capitalism and welfare models -to refine the macro-hypotheses by enlarging the framework of the analysis.

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