WHO KNOWS WHAT:
THE POLITICS OF ACTIVISM AND URBAN
RE-QUALIFICATION IN PALERMO

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FRANCESCO MONTAGNANI
STUD. N. 9613261

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCS
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List of Acronyms

ALAB: *Associazione Liberi Artigiani-Artisti Balarm*, Association of Free Artisans-Artists Balarm.

ASP: *Azienda Sanitaria Provinciale*, or Provincial Healthcare Provider.

BRIA: Broughton Road Improvement Association.

CA: *Comitato Antimafia* or Antimafia Committee

CEP: *Centro di Edilizia Popolare* or Public Housing Centre.

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019.

D.A.: *Decreto Amministrativo*, or Administrative Decree.

DFZ: Displacement Free Zone

EZLN: *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, Zapatista Army of National Liberation.

FAC: Fifth Avenue Committee.

FESR: *Fondo Europeo Sviluppo Regionale*, or European Fund for Regional Development.

GRO: Grass Roots Organization.

HUD: Housing and Urban Development.

IACP: *Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari*, or Autonomous Institute for Public Housing.

NAS: *Nuclei Antisofisticazioni e Sanità*, or Antisophistication and Public Health Units.

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization.

POS: Point of Sale.

P.R.G.: *Piano Regolatore Generale*, or General Masterplan.

RAP spa: *Risorse Ambiente Palermo società per azioni* or Palermo Environmental Resources incorporated.

RUM: *Regolamento Unico Mercati*, or Unified Marketplace Regulation.

RUMS: *Regolamento Unico Mercati Storici*, or Unified Historical Marketplace Regulation.

SerT: *Servizio Tossicodipendenze*, or Service for Addictions.

SOS (Ballarò): *Storia, Orgoglio e Sostenibilità* or History, Pride, and Sustainability.

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

ZEN: *Zona Espansione Nord* or North Expansion Zone.

ZTL: *Zona Traffico Limitato*, or Traffic Limited Zone.

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Abstract

This thesis draws on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Palermo, southern Italy, between November 2016 and January 2018. It focuses on the inner-workings and activism of a public assembly: SOS Ballarò. During my fieldwork I became a member of the assembly and gathered data on the methods activists use to tackle issues of population disenfranchisement, urban degradation, and political marginality in Ballarò, a quarter of Palermo's city centre. I will discuss how the assembly fosters democratic participation in the quarter's population in an attempt to decide how a portion of the city considered marginal and overlooked by the state should attain much awaited and desirable change. Through an exploration of processes of legitimate knowledge production, strive for political representation, and direct impacts on the Ballarò area, I will examine how this change is envisioned by the quarter through the works of the assembly, and how ideas thusly produced are brought to the municipality to be put into practice. I will clarify these processes through two case studies of two adjacent if separate marketplaces: the San Saverio market and the historical market of Ballarò. San Saverio is a completely illegal second-hand market and source of harsh conflicts between vendors, residents in the area, and municipal institutions. I will describe how SOS Ballarò brought these conflicts to a manageable level and created a field of possibilities for political discussion about how to make the market more orderly and functional, while retaining its features of safety-net for vendors and customers, without employing practices of removal through police intervention. The second case study revolves around the historical market of Ballarò. I will describe how infrastructural intervention in the form of the construction of a covered market created the premise for marketers to establish themselves as a legitimate political subject that, through the help of SOS Ballarò, was able to decide how the cover should look like and what purposes it should serve. In my thesis I will explore concepts of political legitimacy and democratic practices, urban re-qualification as opposed to gentrification, and rearguard theory as a way to balance political discussions in favour of those perceived as more marginal and less influential in the political cityscape. I will argue that SOS Ballarò's activism is plausible and productive thanks to those concepts and to an idea of politics that is deeply rooted in the ordinary lives of those who build it piece by piece without suspending any of their everyday activities.

Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Copyright Statement

Acknowledgments

First, I want to thank all those who made me feel home in Ballarò. I won't name names, but I'll be back soon, and I love you all to the bone. You are amazing, and I hope you can see it in my writing.

In the UK

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From all over

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In loving memory of Matteo, companion of a thousand epic adventures. I'm yet to forgive you for leaving so early.

Introduction
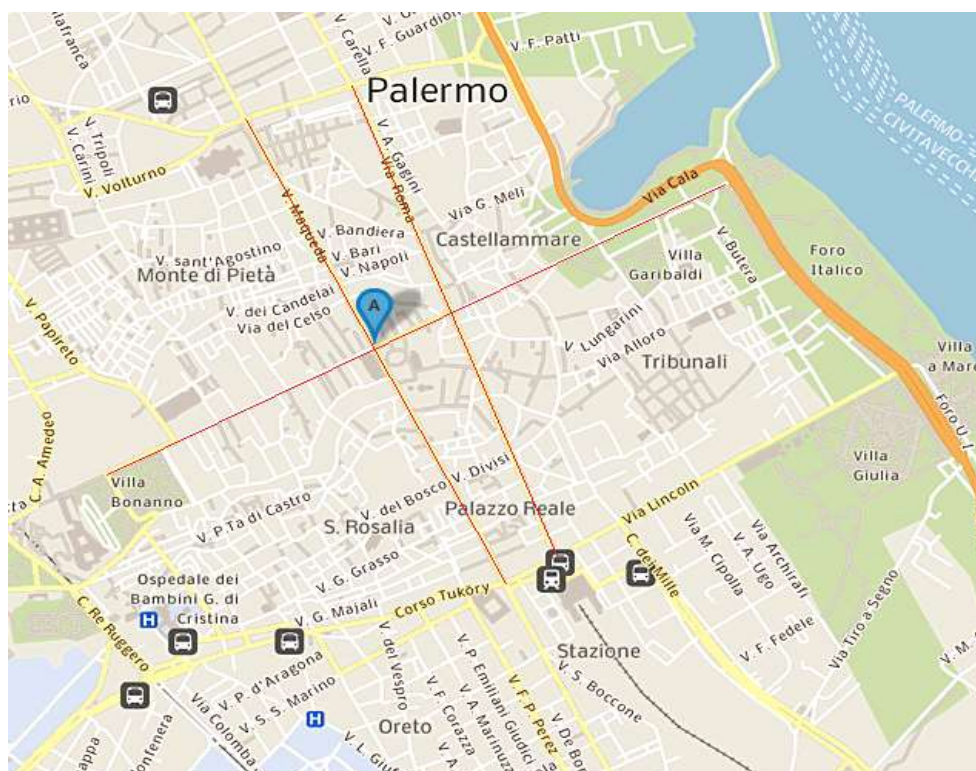
Fig. 1: Palermo city centre and the four quarters: Monte di Pietà or Capo, Castellammare or Vucciria, Tribunali or Kalsa, and Palazzo Reale or Albergheria. In red the three straight avenues dividing the city centre, Corso Vittorio Emanuele (E-W), and Via Maqueda and Via Roma (N-S). Source: https://www.tuttocitta.it/mappa/palermo. Accessed 28/02/2021.

This ethnographic research is set in Sicily, south of Italy, and more precisely in Ballarò, a neighbourhood in the city centre of its regional capital: Palermo. It is the result of a 15-month-long fieldwork started in November 2016 and ended in January 2018. Its main subject is SOS Ballarò (*Storia, Orgoglio, e Sostenibilità* or History, Pride, and Sustainability), a public assembly born as a response to an act of intimidation perpetrated by mafia in Ballarò at the end of 2015. In this thesis I will examine how SOS Ballarò went from protesting against mafia influence to developing a political program to foster and drive processes of urban renewal in Ballarò Albergheria, especially focussed on the two markets present in the quarter. Through my ethnographic account, I will analyse SOS Ballarò's continuous practice of assembly methods and consensus building aimed at creating legitimate political subjects in parts of the population considered overlooked by the state and marginal to the economic system. I will focus on three main aspects. Firstly, I will look at the ways in which SOS Ballarò operates in its daily activism, how it builds its

legitimacy, how it strives to engage the population of the quarter in the political process through assembly practices and democratic participation, and how it engages in a continuous conversation with the state apparatus. Secondly, I will examine the concept of gentrification, to show how SOS Ballarò interprets and affects the debate on urban change in Palermo following from its strong rejection of revanchist policies, removal of marginal populations, and substitution of historical residents for more affluent ones. Alternatives to those are envisioned in Ballarò according to the principle that a specific space in the quarter has certain qualities that need to be re-discovered and made functional for those who created them in the first place. Finally, I will discuss how this process of re-qualification takes shape through two case studies: the San Saverio market and the historical market of Ballarò. The two processes SOS Ballarò started to, respectively, formalize a completely illegal second-hand market and revamp one of the oldest grocery marketplaces in Europe, exemplify two key aspects of SOS Ballarò's activism. The first shows how high levels of conflict can be managed through assembly practices and mediation, so that a new field of possibilities for political discussions can be opened, and all those interested in (or affected by) the process can contribute towards the establishment of its intended outcome and possible pathways to reach it, de facto improving their conditions of political marginality. The second case study will clarify how these contributions take shape and how ideas are refined after periods of personal reflections and group discussions, in a process I will label as political oscillations. The main argument of this thesis is that forms of assembly-centred activism deeply rooted in the ordinary life of a certain territory and socio-cultural context can have significant outcomes in reshaping the political cityscape and determining the ways in which a specific area should change.

1. Setting the Scene: "Does Ballarò even Exist?"

Throughout the thesis I will remark the significance of the relationship that core members of the public assembly, but also residents and marketers/vendors, have with the quarter of Ballarò Albergheria, and how this relationship defines everyone's approach towards the political processes I

will describe. Given the stratified complexity of the quarter, it is necessary to introduce it in detail, especially in its geography. Ballarò is a part of Albergheria, one of the four central quarters of Palermo historical city centre. Standing in *Piazza Quattro Canti*, the so-called Four Corners Square at the geographical and symbolic centre of the city, one finds oneself at the juncture of the four quarters, namely *Monte di Pietà* or *Capo* looking north-west, *Castellammare* or *Vucciria* looking north-east, *Tribunali* or *Kalsa* looking south-east, and *Palazzo Reale* or *Albergheria* looking south-west (fig. 1). The four quarters are divided by three large streets, two going south to north (Via Maqueda and Via Roma) and one east to west (Corso Vittorio Emanuele); these three avenues have different origins, as Via Maqueda and Corso Vittorio Emanuele can be roughly superimposed on the old cardo and decuman traced by romans in the 4th century BC (Inzerillo 1984), while Via Roma is the result of politics of urban renovation enacted after WWI (Blandi 1998, Giorgianni 2000, for more see chap. 3). The ample spaces of the square and the three avenues sit in stark contrast with what one finds inside any of the quarters. In all four, open spaces are scarce; alleys, little corners, sudden turns are here the norm. In the intricate urban tissue of the city centre, one might lose one's bearings, as the way in which one street ends into an alley, a square, or somebody's backyard always feels slightly random. The complexity of Palermo's topography works at every scale. As I noted, quarters have at least two names, sometimes three, with every name indicating a slightly different portion of the city centre.[1]

This is particularly true of Ballarò Albergheria. In December 2017, almost at the end of my fieldwork, I was invited to speak at a seminar happening in the headquarters of a local NGO (Circolo Arci Porco Rosso) to discuss not only where Ballarò starts and finishes on the map, but (as per the title of the event and of this section) if the quarter even exists. I was one of three speakers together with a geographer and an architect. This was an open event the NGO organized as part of their attempt to reach out to the quarter and work together with the local population, alongside their primary goal of legally assisting

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[1] A good example of this is the two portions of the city centre between Via Maqueda and Via Roma, sometimes incorporated in the four quarters, sometimes referred to with other names, Meschita and Champagneria, and intended as standing alone.

migrants. We discussed and answered questions for almost three hours in front of an audience of 30 people made of activists, residents, and people from the department of Architecture in the University of Palermo. The architect, the geographer, me, and the audience, all had different ideas about what Ballarò is and where it lies, only being able to agree on the fact that Ballarò needs to be a specific geographic entity, especially if one has a political agenda to pursue. With that discussion in mind, I worked on a multi-layered map of the quarter that could represent Ballarò and the different ideas people attach to it. The result was a map with more than 50 entries between routes, areas of interest, spots, borders, etc. that I struggled to read and interpret myself. For the purpose of this introduction though, a visual representation of the area of Ballarò Albergheria is necessary, and, in figure 2, one can see a version of that map reduced to the bear minimum.
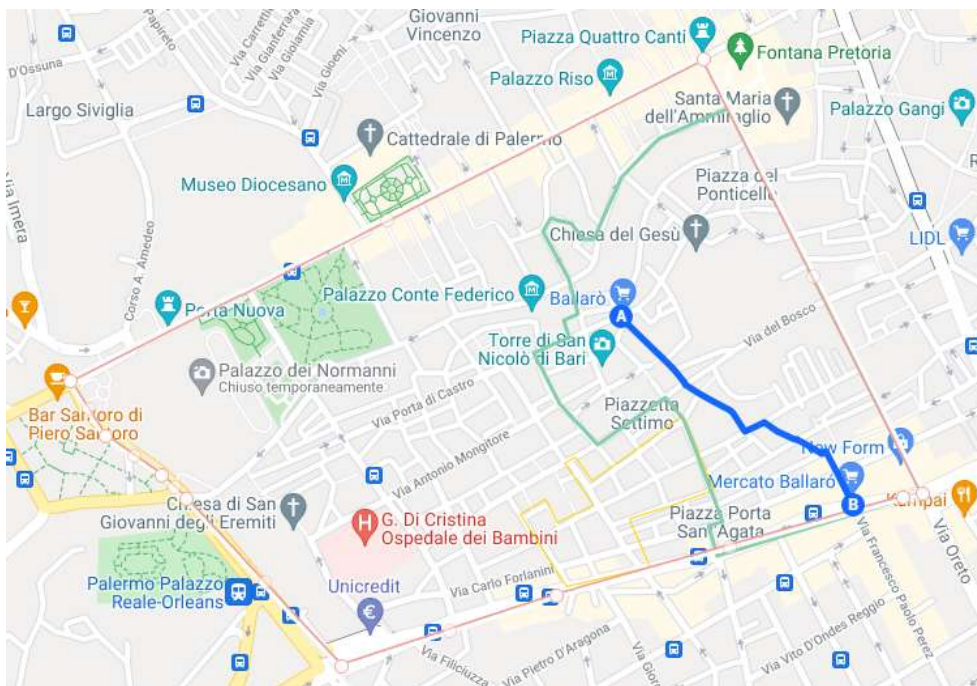
Fig. 2: A minimalistic representation of the Ballarò Albergheria area. In pink the portion recognised as Albergheria, in green the portion recognized as Ballarò, in yellow the San Saverio market, in blue the historical market. This image is a synthesis of a myriad of variations as all participants to this research would change one or all the details (source: https://www.google.com/maps/place/Albergheria,+Palermo,+PA/@38.111516,13.3486837 ,15z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x1319ef620dbcfd5b:0x45c014b756194832!8m2!3d38.11 12899!4d13.3572848). Accessed 28/02/2021.

The map shows the four main areas of interest of this research: Albergheria, Ballarò, the San Saverio market, and the historical market. Throughout the thesis I will refer to the first two as the backdrop for the others, to then analyse in detail the second two in chapters 4 and 5, respectively. The choice to allow considerable space in my thesis to the two markets reflects both academic literature about Palermo, emic perceptions, and my ethnographic practice. But before turning my attention to the marketplace, it becomes necessary to situate Ballarò and Palermo in their historical contexts and in the literature about Sicily, especially in relation to the struggle between mafia and antimafia and their position in wider global dynamics.

2. Sicily, Palermo, Ballarò: How History Impacts Academic Production.

In the description of the Sicilian mafia, historical events and academic writing intertwine in various ways. The shape organized crime has taken over the years has deeply influenced the major theoretical frameworks scholars have used to describe it. The history of the island after the second world war and into the XXI century can be split in three parts: from the end of the conflict to the end of the 1970s; the so-called long decade (Lupo 2004) going from 1979 to 1993; the period from 1993 to nowadays. The same trends can be observed in academic production.

2.1. From WWII to the second Mafia War: micro and macro analysis.

After WWII ended, scholars approached Mafia as a predominantly rural phenomenon and were interested in studying its origins and the ways it gained political, social, and economic power (Blok 1974, Lupo 2004). Mafia origins became a highly debated topic, but scholars agreed it has its foundations in a peculiar cultural setting, where specific codes of behaviour and social values have a high resonance. Banfield (1958) labelled this cultural context as 'amoral familism', or the archetypical southern Italian attachment to one's own nuclear family, whose good and prosperity are far more important than those of the state or the community. In his view, every southerner is potentially a mafioso. Scholars' efforts of in the 1970s aimed at reshaping the

concept in less generalizing and prejudicial terms. Blok (1974) and Schneider & Schneider (1976), for instance, believe that Sicily's particular historical conditions are a *sine qua non* for the emergence of the phenomenon.[2] The former undertakes a detailed reconstruction of the history of land heritage practices in a small rural Sicilian village. Blok shows how over-fragmentation of land on one side and latifundia on the other contributed to the rise of a violent rural entrepreneurship. In the first case, mafiosi acted as mediators in disputes between heirs. Their success was due to their social abilities and employment of violent methods in settling controversies. In the case of latifundia they were in charge of the management of vast properties, given that landowners usually lived in Palermo and were not interested in the administration of land (Blok 1974). The Schneiders (1976) approached the theme from a macro-historical perspective. They reconstruct a series of events that see Sicily deeply involved in a worldwide colonialist system. Starting from the XVI century, the two authors systematically place Sicily in a peripheral position in the world-system. Sicily was one of the first providers of agricultural products and non-skilled manpower for different imperial centres (Spanish, French and English) for more than four centuries, and remained marginal after Italy was unified (1861), becoming an intra-national colony for the north. This peripheral condition is the main cause of the lack of bureaucratic control over the territory. According to the authors, this legislative and bureaucratic empty space left by the central state was a particularly flourishing field for the action of violent rural entrepreneurs (Schneider & Schneider 1976).

None of the authors forget the 'culturalistic debate' (Santino 2002) over mafia. The Schneiders highlight four cultural codes, necessary for the rise and prosperity of Cosa Nostra: *onore*, *amicizia*, *furberia*, and *omertà* (honour,

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[2] This move by Blok and the Schneiders towards a historically grounded explanation for the origins of mafia is not completely new. In 1876, Franchetti and Sonnino travel to Sicily to run an investigation on mafia and its origins. Their hypothesis is that after the unification of the Italian state (1861), local lords had to give up their military power in favour of that of the unified state. The majority of their private guards became suddenly unemployed and, while some of them were used as custodians or managers of vast plots of land and some others became bandits, some decided to put their military experience and their social influence at use for common criminal purposes. Mafia became a social force through intimidation and extortion, giving way to what the authors called a proper "industry of violence" (Franchetti and Sonnino 2000, 90) Interestingly enough, this idea will be the basis for other analyses about Sicily in the 1980s (Gambetta 1996), and Russia in the 2000s (Varese 2001)

friendship, cleverness and 'the rule of silence'). The first three are fundamental in the creation of mafiosi's reputation. Honour and friendship are indispensable in the accumulation of social capital, to be spent in the creation of a strong social network (Sciarrone 2009). Cleverness is the characteristic of being able to manipulate existing laws or exploiting their absence for personal gain (Schneider & Schneider 1976). The last cultural code linked to mafia is omertà, or the rule of silence. Omertà creates a buffer zone between events and what somebody who witnessed them can tell other people. It imposes a degree of censorship on what can be the object of gossip.

Sciarrone resolves the culturalistic debate with a complex formulation: the rise of mafia comes from specific historical conditions, mixed with the "*manipulation* of specific traditional cultural codes and […] of social and political relations" (2009: 22, my emphasis, my translation)[3]. Thanks to this complex approach, the culturalistic explanation of mafia becomes only part of a multi-faceted definition, a piece of the puzzle called the "paradigm of complexity" (Santino, 2002: 52).

In this period, academic production on antimafia is scarce, but this does not mean antimafia was not a part of the Sicilian context. As Santino (2009) recalls, after WWII ended, a strong peasant movement took hold of Sicily to demand and promote land reform, a project at the basis of the new Italian republic aimed at redistributing land. The communist matrix of the peasant movement in Sicily sparked the interest of the USA and USSR and, for a brief period, put the region at the centre of the cold war. The peasant movement was crushed (almost for good) on the 1st of May 1947 at Portella della Ginestra, when a group of bandits, allegedly financed and promoted by American agents, opened fire on a pacific demonstration, killing 11 and wounding 27 (Calivà 2017, Lupo 2004, Santino 2009). Although the history of antimafia activism continued throughout the century, this peasant component of the movement, and its aim of wealth redistribution suffered immensely after then (Santino 2009).

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[3] Together with omertà, friendship, honour and cleverness, Sciarrone (2009) uses concepts like family and religious values and symbols.

2.2. Dark Times and the Rise of Civil Society

The 1970s season of ethnographic research conducted in Sicily ends abruptly at the beginning of the 1980s, with the so called second mafia war (1981-1983). The period saw two internal factions of Cosa Nostra fighting for supremacy. Families from the province, and especially from a small village 60 km away from Palermo, Corleone, gave battle to the wealthier and more powerful families of the inner city. The former wanted to establish a different leadership in the drug traffic and in the exploitation of public contracts. In three years only in Palermo there were approximately 1000 killings, the highest homicide rate in European cities (Dicky 2005). At the end of the period, the families from the inner city were annihilated by the Corleonesi. The change in the leadership resulted in a more overt attack to the state. The next decade (1983-1993) is commonly labelled as the decade of terror (Lupo, 2004) and is punctuated with illustrious victims (prosecutors, politicians, law-enforcers, priest etc.), the so-called *excellent cadavers* (Stille, 1996). On the other hand, Cosa Nostra experienced a flourishing period for its economic activities, especially concerning the heroin traffic (Santino, 2007). These two aspects deeply influenced academic research: the high number of violent acts happening in Palermo posed a serious threat to all those who wanted to ethnographically investigate the matter; moreover, Cosa Nostra economic potentials attracted the attention of researchers to one of its main features, the accumulation of capital (Santino, 1994).

One of the few ethnographic investigations in this period is that of Gambetta (1996): following Franchetti and Sonnino's (2000) definition of mafia as an industry of violence, he formulates the paradigm of the industry of private protection. In his view, Cosa Nostra works as a firm selling a particular product, private protection, in an environment featuring a chronic lack of trust in legal channels when it comes to economic transactions. Cosa Nostra becomes a brand with a specific reputation, built also (but not only) on its violent potential. The extreme consequence of the sale of private protection is extortion, or the payment of *pizzo*: mafia families impose a fiscal system on economic activities of all sorts, protecting them from the threat they themselves represent (Santino, 2009). Gambetta's theory obtained a

great success, and it is still one of the best interpretative keys in the analysis of mafia-like phenomena, especially when integrated with other concepts like cultural codes, social networks, and social capital (as in Sciarrone 2009).[4]

In the midst of the second mafia war (3rd of September 1982) antimafia suffered the first of a long list of losses in its ranks. General Dalla Chiesa was sent to Sicily to fight Cosa Nostra on behalf of the state, armed with the promise of special powers and the experience he gained fighting political terrorism in the north of Italy. The state did not offer significant backup, leaving him in institutional solitude (Lupo 2004). Cosa Nostra took advantage and gunned him down in broad day light. Some point at this *excellent cadaver* (Stille 1996) as the beginning of a new antimafia sentiment, based on the importance of civil society and a moral awakening in Palermitans (Dalla Chiesa 2014, Schneider & Schneider 2003).

After Dalla Chiesa's murder and the conclusion of the second mafia war, the Italian state started to actively fight Cosa Nostra, mainly through the use of two weapons: the Palermitan antimafia pool of magistrates, and former mafiosi turned state witnesses, the so-called *pentiti*.[5] After years of investigations, in 1986 the state faced Cosa Nostra in one of the biggest trials ever held in history, the maxi-trial: 460 people were indicted at the same time and as an organization (Stille 1996). Prosecutors charged Cosa Nostra members with murder, kidnapping, financial crimes, drug trafficking and the new prosecuting weapon in their hands, the accusation of *associazione a delinquere di stampo mafioso* (mafia-like delinquent association, article 416 of the Italian penal code).

The maxi-trial ended with an outstanding result: of the 460 indicted, 346 were condemned to prison. Judges distributed 19 life sentences and 2665 years of prison among the culprits. The reaction of Cosa Nostra was brutal and lead to one of the darkest seasons of Italian history. The two leading prosecutors, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, were killed in terroristic

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[4] Especially in the analysis of Russian mafia origins, scholars used the paradigm of the industry of private protection in a rather non-critical way, applying it without significant changes according to spatial, temporal, social or political differences (see for example Varese 2001).

[5] For a nuanced definition and analysis of this phenomenon and how it combines to contemporary mafia and antimafia activities, see Rakopoulos 2018.

attacks alongside their security details. Cosa Nostra killed its political interlocutors who were unable to change the outcome of the trial (Stille1994). It started the season of terror, a series of bombings around Italy, killing random civilians (Dicky 2005). As a result, parts of the state started negotiating with Cosa Nostra to establish a truce in what has been labelled the state/mafia negotiation (Biondo & Ranucci 2010).

The maxi trial allowed scholars, journalists, and antimafia activists to gather significant knowledge about Cosa Nostra from an inside perspective (that of pentiti) that resulted in a frantic production of theoretical frameworks centred on three main aspects: cultural codes, accumulation of political and economic capital, and network theory (Sciarrone 2009 offers a prime example of this multifaceted approach with a focus on networks). At the same time, the maxi-trial and the killings of Falcone and Borsellino, reignited the discourse about the necessity of a moral awakening in civil society, aimed at bringing to an outright refusal of mafia practices and mafia mentality (Comitato dei Lenzuoli, bedsheet committee, 1992, Grasso 2001, Santino 2009, Schneider & Schneider 2003 among many).

2.3. Cosa Nostra Goes Quiet: the Aftermath of Terror.

At the end of this period there was a significant shift in Cosa Nostra leadership: in January 1993 the police arrested the Corleonese boss of bosses, Totò Riina. Another Corleonese replaced him, Bernardo Provenzano, who had a different idea on how to conduct business. If Cosa Nostra wanted to survive it had to establish a low profile and drop the level of violence against the state close to zero. At the turn of the century, Cosa Nostra went silent, killings stopped, and its economic activities differentiated in a complex system of money laundering through legal activities (Grasso, 2001; Santino, 2007). As properly highlighted by Sciarrone (2009) and Grasso (2001), while changing its hierarchical structure, Cosa Nostra showed a high degree of adaptability to economic, social, political, financial, even technological changes occurred in the outside world.[6]

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[6] For a thorough critique of the relation between organized crime and globalization, see Paoli (2002) and Santino (2007)

In this period of relative quiet, academic production shifted firstly towards different theoretical frameworks, and secondly towards different topics. In the 2000s and 2010s, academic production moved away from the stark dichotomy mafia/antimafia to push towards more nuanced analyses. On one side, literature focused on antimafia activism is obviously still relevant, especially when scholars undertake research projects aimed at understanding the long term effects of the mafia war and the years of terror, focussing on one main aspect: gathering quantitative and qualitative data to paint a picture of the status quo in Palermo and its quarters (Boscaino & Giambalvo 2006 on the city centre, Fava 2008 on Zen, one of Palermo's public housing quarters, Picone & Schilleci 2012 on the whole city). Authors tend to highlight how more than 50 years of mafia presence, a war, inefficient and corrupted administrations, wild urban development etc. brought on conditions of extreme marginality and exclusion of entire sectors of the population from 'civil society', therefore re-shaping the concept of antimafia activism as reserved to those who can afford it, namely the urban middle class. To complicate the notion of antimafia activism even more, authors like Rakopoulos investigate the many ways in which antimafia becomes a practice. In *From Clans to Co-ops* (2017a) Rakopoulos unpacks the many ramifications of the use of land confiscated to mafia clans and assigned to antimafia co-ops. Modes of employment, creation of value, modes of networking, all become analytical keys to understand how people make sense of the shift from a solid century-long mafia control to working for a cooperative formally part of the antimafia movement. At the same time, authors add complexity to well-known aspects, like omertà (Di Bella 2011) or the deeply rooted religious symbolism of mafia practices (Palumbo 2020), offering nuanced readings of the semiology of the phenomenon and how it spills into ordinary lives, not always through violence or intimidation.

The last aspect of literary production about Palermo I want to highlight comes from the most recent contributors, like Giubilaro (2019), Bartoli (2019), Prestileo (2020), and Riina (2021). All these authors are Palermitan and have conducted research on specific territories, sometimes for decades (Riina 2021). They come from different disciplines: cultural geography, jurisprudence, economics, and anthropology. They all nevertheless contribute

to add complexity to the debate on antimafia practices and their relation to civil society. None of their contributions are focused on antimafia per se, but on the history of marginality, exclusion, and stigma (Fava 2014) that decades of neglect and criminality left behind. Riina's reasoning is especially interesting for this thesis. Starting from her decadal experience in Borgo Vecchio (one of Palermo's poorest quarters) she describes her work as an anthropologist and an educator, working in NGOs to fight educational poverty. By working on two levels, that of affectionate labour (Muehlebach 2011) and structural/infrastructural interventions, she shows how, in the 2010s, activism in Palermo moved away from mafia/antimafia logics and tackled issues through more inclusive methodologies, especially along class and gender lines. I intend this thesis to be part of these contributions and add complexity to a reading of the city and its quarters to push forward new forms of activism impacting marginal living conditions of marginal sections of the population.

3. "Albergheria is the Natural Habitat of Marketplaces!"

The architect present at the event mentioned above defined Ballarò as the "market city". In a similar vein, professor Lecardane, lecturer at the University of Palermo, used this label to indicate Ballarò in a series of his lectures. Bartoli (2019) uses the same phrase to describe the conglomerate of the historical market and the San Saverio market. Alba (2016), Balistreri & Pollaci (2008), La Duca (1994), dedicate full volumes to the markets in Palermo, extending the definition of market city to the whole city centre. According to some authors, the presence of a market in Albergheria dates back to, at least, 1468 (Balistreri & Pollaci 2008), with some, like La Duca (1994), placing it to 1299. In both cases, Ballarò is the oldest market in Palermo. Nicolò, a core member of SOS Ballarò and tourist guide in the quarter, remembers reading

> that, yes, the market was [in Ballarò] since the XIII century, but
> there is also a diary from an Arab traveller that says the market

was here in 961! If that's true, Ballarò is the oldest market in Europe still working!

Even though I was never able to verify this last information and the literature seems consistent in dating Ballarò's origins between the XIII and the XV century, Nicolò echoes what many believe to be true: Albergheria and Ballarò are, and always have been, "the natural habitat for marketplaces", as an SOS member put it during a workshop on San Saverio in March 2017 (see chap. 4, sec. 1).

As we will see in chapters 4 and 5, this idea drives much of SOS Ballarò's political activism. Following from this, my ethnographic routine was largely set in the two markets. I spent countless hours in between stalls, having conversations in San Saverio and the historical market every day, drinking coffees and smoking cigarettes while debating legislation enacted by the city council or football match results with the exact same intensity and involvement. In my daily routine, I would walk to the markets with three aims: do my shopping, carry out my duties as an active member of the SOS Ballarò assembly[7], and conduct ethnographic fieldwork. In line with the history of social anthropology, this thesis treats the marketplace as an ethnographic object worthy of attention and detailed analysis. Since the 1970s, and especially with the geertzian account of the Sefrou market in Morocco (1978), anthropology has treated marketplaces as complex ethnographic objects holding the key for broad interpretations of the wider socio-cultural context in which they happen (Gell 1982, Goldstein 2016, McGrath, Sherry Jr., & Heisley 1993, Stoller 2002). Ethnographers ventured in the market to observe a vast array of socio-economic phenomena: the laws of *penny-capitalism* (Geertz 1978, Geertz, Geertz, & Rosen 1979), ways to establish monetary value (Shepherd 2015), society-wide configurations like the caste system in India (Gell 1982), ethnic and economic integration/interaction between different communities in China (Liu 2007) or the USA (McGrath, Sherry Jr., & Heisley 1993, Stoller 2002), the reshaping of entire economic systems in post-socialist countries (Spector 2014), issues linked to indigeneity and informality/illegality in Bolivia (Goldstein 2016)

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[7] I will discuss my positionality as an ethnographer/activist later on in this Introduction.

etc. In this thesis I will follow the literature on markets and approach San Saverio and the historical market as complex and stratified ethnographic objects. I will add to the conversation on the subject in two ways: next to a thick description of both markets that shows how both can be read as representations of the quarter and of my ethnographic experience, I will focus on the ways in which they are also representative of a specific need for urban renewal and the tension between gentrifying and re-qualifying processes. As many told me during my fieldwork, the markets "can't stay like this, they need to change, or they will disappear!" What kind of change were my interlocutors referring to? How should a completely illegal marketplace like San Saverio be reformed without it disappearing? How should the historical market of Ballarò, now economically stagnant and loosely regulated, be revamped and reimagined, so that it can be the engine of the quarter's re-qualification?

On the other hand, I will unpack the relationship between the two markets and SOS Ballarò to show how the former reacted to the presence of the public assembly. This will allow me to highlight not only political dynamics involving individuals or categories inside and around the market (Goldstein 2016, Stoller 2002, Spector 2015), but the ways in which both markets attempted to constitute themselves as a new institutional subject, a body politics tasked with deciding in what ways San Saverio and Ballarò should change. How did SOS Ballarò start a conversation *about* the markets *inside* the markets? Following what principles did people active in the two markets attempt to build a new body politics to represent themselves? How did these body politics interact with municipal authority and the state more generally?

To answer these questions, I will consider the important fact that, in marketplaces, one trades both material and non-material goods. As all the authors cited above highlight, reputation of the seller, their legacy as marketers/producers, their ability to advertise, the history and tradition of the market itself, are all part of a commodifying process, influencing the price, therefore the profit one can make. This aspect of commodification of the non-material, although not central to my argument, has a particular relevance. As I will show in chap. 3, Palermo historical city centre is in the midst of gentrifying or touristifying processes (Prestileo 2020). These phenomena

entail a deep change in the urban fabric of a city following certain economic or social dynamics (e.g., the rent gap, Smith 1979, or spikes in touristic presence, Prestileo 2020). In the context of Albergheria, gentrification and touristification could have and are having the classic effects, like increases in rent and property value, removal of historical inhabitants to make space for more affluent ones, or replacement of historical shops and activities for newer ones tailored to the needs of tourists (see chap 3 sec. 4). At the same time, the quarter is strongly attached to its tradition and history. SOS Ballarò's action tries to lay the foundation for a project of urban re-qualification that centres around this history and those who made it, especially in the historical market. As I will show in chapters 3 and 5, marketers are keen on changing the market and their trade to improve their livelihoods but want to do so together with the rest of the quarter and its historical inhabitants. Commodification of non-material goods, if an integral part of market activities, has to remain one of the many features of the historical market, instead of becoming the main selling point for tourists or one-off customers. To do so, marketers came up with different selling tactics, mindful of tourist presence but keeping the people from the quarter as the centre and primary focus of their activity (chap. 5 sec. 3.1).

Following from this last point, it is necessary to highlight that the historical market of Ballarò is part of a larger economic system, neoliberal capitalism. The Market obviously has a strong influence in Ballarò. This can be seen in menial things, like price fluctuations in specific products due to supply/demand dynamics, or in larger trends related to the economic crisis of 2008 (see chap. 1 sec. 3) or the appearance in the cityscape of multinational and national powerful competitors, like LIDL or big shopping malls. I will touch on this topic later on, especially to show how marketers and activists interpret the presence of these larger economic actors in the city, and the kind of reaction they spark (chap. 5 sec.3.1). Here I will focus on the relationship between two aspects of the historical market at the centre of the debate about capitalist institutions: economy and society. In *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi (2010) focuses on the two entities concluding that, throughout the XIX century and beyond, an unregulated Market emerged, transforming economic principles according to a thorough commodification of production,

distribution, and consumption processes. The consequence of this was the minimization of other socioeconomic aspects like redistribution and reciprocity that formed the basis for people's livelihoods. Therefore, we witness "a unique historical phenomenon where the economy is disembedded from society" (Buğra 2007: 174). Buğra pushes Polanyian analysis forward into the XX century, showing how the "double movement" of deregulating the Market while protecting socioeconomic factors continued in the second half of the century, shifting from one side to the other, from the wild deregulation of the 1980s to a more cautious position and relative interest from governments in the Global North for workers' rights or social welfare policies.[8] At the beginning of the XXI century (and still today) the question then became: how can a balance between pure unregulated market economy and responsible social welfare politics be reached? One of the answers can be found in the proliferation of NGOs and non-for-profit humanitarian organizations, operating a redistribution of social responsibility from the public to the private sector (Buğra 2007, Edwards 2009, Muehlebach 2011, 2012). Far from being a new phenomenon (see Toqueville 1997), this accent on charitable work and civil society as the crux to solve the tensions between economy and society is typical of liberal thinking and protestant ethic (Weber 2003). In theoretical terms, SOS Ballarò intended as a hub for NGOs and associations active in a territory with the purpose to improve it (i.e., make it more civil) can be inscribed in a Tocquevillian idea of civil society. I will nevertheless refrain from using this category for three reasons. On one side, and as Edwards remarks (2009) the analytical category of civil society has been used to interpret many different phenomena, according to contradictory agendas, and furthering opposite arguments. More focussed labels like assembly-based movement or horizontal democracy seem more descriptive of SOS Ballarò's experience. On the other, I will show how SOS strongly disagrees with the idea of being 'more civil' than the rest of the quarter. On the contrary, the assembly often assumes it is less civil and able than the rest of the population, therefore in need of learning (see chap 2 sec. 3 and chap. 4 sec. 2). Moreover, SOS does not aim at a redistribution of social

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[8] This discussion becomes more complex if we consider factors like neo-colonialism or exploitative politics in the Global South (Buğra 2007)

responsibility, so that the private sector can manage certain aspects of social welfare the State is unable to perform. As I will show later on (see sec.5), SOS Ballarò's purpose is to drive State action, so that it can exactly address the needs of the people in the quarter. In chapters 4 and 5 I will discuss this aspect in more details to show how SOS Ballarò points at a solution to the tension between economy and society not through private charity or non-for-profit work, but through making certain qualities of the quarter as an integral and structural part of the S/state.[9] To do so, I will describe and analyse the two markets not just as marketplaces, where Market dynamics take place, but as two growing political subjects, and the streets where they happen as the political stage where individuals and groups put together and act upon their political ideals.

4. Marginality: Obstacle and Resource.

The need for change felt in both markets at the beginning of my fieldwork (and still felt in June 2021) is linked to another feature of the quarter: its condition of marginality. As shown in figure 2, Albergheria is at the centre of the city, bordering one of the main streets in Palermo, next to the cathedral and Piazza Pretoria, where the city hall is. Nevertheless, academics and participants to this research consider it to be economically and politically disenfranchised and marginal. Capursi & Giambalvo (2006) title their edited volume on Albergheria *Al Centro del Margine* (at the centre of the margin), Bartoli (2019) subtitles her book on Ballarò *Il Diritto Visto dal Margine* (the law as seen from the margins), Solaro (forthcoming), Cannarozzo (2000, 2007) and many others use this label and all its implications to describe Ballarò and the city centre. All participants to this research think of the quarter as marginal and neglected by the state. When reasoning around city politics, Tommaso (a core SOS member) explained how "[people in Ballarò] have

[9] As I will show later on (chap 1 sec. 1) many NGOs are active or take their first steps in Ballarò. Ideas of humanitarianism, charitable work, and affective labour (Muehlebach 2011, 2012) are very much present. I argue they are not at the centre of SOS Ballarò's project.

always been nothing but an electoral constituency [to local and national politicians]". Especially in the historical market,

> [marketers] have to look at this or that politician walk by in his nice shoes and suit, waving at them, pretending to listen to their complaints, stopping by for half a moment, maybe even eat something out of the stall, and then disappear until the next election.

Echoing Tommaso, when a vendor in San Saverio was asked if the law existed by a law student from the university of Palermo conducting an interview, he answered that "the law exists, of course it exists, but not for us" (Bartoli 2019: 134). Even though these answers are focused on electoral politics and jurisprudence, they are a specific articulation of the way in which people in Ballarò feel about their position in wider society and in relation to the state. One day after a workshop in San Saverio, I asked Gaetano, one of the vendors, why he did not speak. He answered: "Who am I to speak about the market? I can't speak proper [Italian], I don't know what [other vendors] think, I'm ill clothed, I don't know any armchair in there [as in people in power]…" Nevertheless, when in front of his stall in the midst of the San Saverio market, Gaetano routinely introduced himself as the "Mayor of Ballarò" and invited my family to come to Ballarò as his guests whenever they wanted. At the time he was homeless, sleeping in a foldable deck chair on the other side of the street.

In short, Ballarò is simultaneously central and peripheral, populated by "excess population" (Biehl 2005 in Ross 2015: S105), lives that carry little political meaning, and to which few rights attach. Conditions of marginality and disenfranchisement though, are not exclusive to people living in Ballarò, and have sparked a multi-faceted debate in anthropology. As Millar describes (2008, 2014, 2018), marginality and precarity also allow individuals considerable manoeuvring space to determine what their lives should look like. She describes how c*atadores*, self-employed garbage collectors in a dumpster outside Rio de Janeiro, are constantly lamenting their precarious living conditions, the risks involved in walking through a dumpster all day,

the inconsistency of their earnings; conversely, they praise the fact that they can decide when and how to work, independently determining how to provide for themselves and their loved ones. At the same time, they (attempt to) organize politically in cooperatives and consortia, looking for ways to make the system of garbage collection work to their advantage. In a different context, Bourgois' *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (2003) shows how crack dealers' lives in East Harlem at the end of the 1980s are ravished by marginality and exclusion through what he labels a de facto apartheid. The main repercussion of being excluded from mainstream society (and legal employment) is that crack dealers are dependent on informal economies like drug pushing, while being structurally deprived of the social, cultural, and economic capital necessary to access mainstream society. Nevertheless, marginality and exclusion are also the premise for the existence of the drug market, thanks to which dealers can search for respect and access capital in all its forms, even if they can only spend it in the confined reality of their segregated community. For both *catadores* and crack dealers, being incorporated in mainstream society often means losing the possibility to have at least *some* political meaning and self-determine *some* rights that attach to them despite their marginality. Throughout this thesis I will show how marginality and disenfranchisement experienced by population in Albergheria allowed for considerable wiggle room for SOS Ballarò to build political legitimacy, and for others in the quarter to determine what purpose that political legitimacy should serve. In the next section I will examine in depth the tool that SOS Ballarò deploys every time they decide to use that wiggle room to create legitimacy and give way to democratic decision-making processes: the public assembly.

5. Public Assemblies and Ordinary Life.

SOS Ballarò is an informal political subject revolving around the idea of democratic participation through assembly practices. It is informal because, after its birth in 2015, members decided to not register it legally as an NGO or any other juridical subject. Nevertheless, it has accrued significant political legitimacy, and although informal, it is often directly or indirectly mentioned

in official documents by the municipality (see e.g., mayoral deliberation n. 81, 21/04/2017 or mayoral note n. 992137, 06/09/2017). On the other hand, SOS Ballarò firmly believes in the principle that an open-to-all public assembly is the best tool to start new decision-making processes directed by those who will be affected by them the most. The third relevant aspect for this discussion is that SOS Ballarò members think of their activism as ordinary, enmeshed in the everyday life of the quarter. SOS Ballarò is not unique in this sense. Literature on democracy and assemblies is rich of similar examples, that I will divide in two macro categories to further my analysis following two main distinctions: that between official and informal, and that between ordinary and extra-ordinary.

On one side, there are countless political experiments of social movements revolving around assembly practice, like the #Occupy movement (Boni 2015, Nugent 2012, Razsa & Kurnik 2012) that started as alterpolitical practice (Boni 2015) and revolved around the idea that new political forms should emerge directly from 'the people' in a truly democratic way, aimed at bypassing the system of electoral representation, deemed hostage of financial institutions and corporations. In Greece, Spain, the USA, Italy, Slovenia, Turkey, etc. protesters set up camps in central squares of cities and towns to participate in a general assembly 24/7, with the purpose to discuss the economic and political system in which they were living and redefine what it means to be active political subjects. The #Occupy movement is an example of a general assembly featuring huge numbers of participants engaged in a discussion about the ways in which their lives are affected by capitalism and neo-liberalism. This discussion happened, at least potentially, *outside* of those same systems, *as if* they don't exist (Boni 2015, Graber 2009), as it rarely involved lobbying of governments or actions against economic interests like boycotts. In short, #Occupy can be viewed as an experiment in alterpolitics fostering the birth of informal political subjects (the general assemblies) outside mainstream political arenas and acting according to extra-ordinary timeframes by occupying squares or buildings and de-facto suspending ordinary life (Chertish, I., Holbraad, M, & Tassi, N. 2020).[10]

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[10] Other political experiences can be classified as informal and extra-ordinary: Italian *Autonomia* (Grindon 2007, Mitropoulos 2007), the NoGlobal movement (Graeber 2009) and

The second macro category I want to consider groups together assembly practices featuring high levels of officiality that happen without significantly disrupting people's ordinary lives, being them highly scheduled and requiring less time and effort than 24/7 engagement. A good example of this is the Swiss *Landsgemeinde*, or people's assembly (Lucardie 2014, Kriesi 2012). In two cantons of the Swiss federation, approximately 5.000 people gather twice a year to propose, discuss, and vote on legislative matters. The vote of the assembly is final and has to be made executive by the government. Being a deliberative body, the *Landsgemeinde* follows a set of laws that determine what counts as a legitimate proposal (e.g., number of subscribers to a petition) and who can vote on it: only citizens of the canton can participate to the assembly (the canton of Appenzell Innerrhoden famously only granted women the right to vote in the assembly in 1991, Kriesi 2012). Something similar happens in recurring town meetings in New England (Bryan 2004, Lucardie 2014), where bureaucracy and regulation play an even more important role in determining how decisions made by the assembly become executive. A third instance of a formal assembly setting enmeshed in people's ordinary lives can be found in classic ethnographic settings (Boni 2015), like among the Ochollo in Ethiopia (Abélès & Abélès 1976). Here, deliberative methods are less stringent and formal, but only members of the community can take part in assemblies, and the system is stratified along lines of class, gender, and age, depending on the matter to be discussed.

The two categories I highlighted, although centred on assembly practices and some forms of consensus building (Boni 2015, Graeber 2009), are very different. On one side, extra-ordinary social movements and alterpolitical experiments allow for considerable freedom of participation and expression, the space to (re)discover imagination (Graeber 2011). At the same time, they seem to happen *outside* of the system they critique (Boni 2015, Graeber 2009) and do not seem to have the deliberative power to deeply affect it. The fact that they also impose an extra-ordinary timeframe on participants, often asking them to postpone their ordinary lives to maximise the movement's

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many of the protest movements revolving around marches or demonstration (Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, etc.) feature high levels of informality and suspension of ordinary life, both for the subjects directly involved in the movement and society at large.

immediate efficacy (Jansen 2018), results in an inherent difficulty to keep the momentum going without experiencing burnout (Gorski 2018).

On the other side, formally structured assembly-centred systems like the *Landsgemeinde* have considerable legislative power and happen with precise regularity, minimizing the effects of burnout while maximising those of regular scheduling. These aspects contribute to the longevity of these systems (the *Landsgemeinde* has a 600-year uninterrupted history, Kriesi 2012) but also have negative effects. In the case of Switzerland, the assembly happens twice a year in April and May. Citizens must therefore wait up to 11 months to discuss issues that may arise, as extra-ordinary meetings are possible but very rare (Lucardie 2014). Moreover, a highly structured nature like that of the examples mentioned above imposes consequential restrictions on who can participate to the assembly.[11]

In this thesis I will argue that SOS Ballarò strives to thread the needle between all the examples mentioned above, in an attempt to rip the benefits while avoiding disadvantages. As I said above, SOS Ballarò is not formally registered as a legal subject. This allows the assembly to be fluid and changeable, given that being registered would impose nominating a president, and a board, have a statute/membership etc. By bypassing this aspect, SOS tries to maintain the assembly accessible to all, while trying to avoid leaderism and maintain a coherent and shared voice amongst its members, to the point of being treated by activists, municipal institutions, and me in this analysis, as a unified subject with a unified voice. As I will show, this apparent lack of internal conflict in the assembly is the result of intense mediation, discussion, and consensus building processes, both inside the assembly and in its relationship with the rest of the quarter.[12] At the same

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[11] A case that stands out of my categorization is that of EZLN in Chiapas (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* or Zapatista Army of National Liberation) and other similar experiences. As Melenotte (2015) shows, new forms of assembly centred governance started in Chiapas parallel to old forms of democratic representation (elections through secret ballot) and governance (city councils). From the extra-ordinary situation of an armed insurrection, Chiapas transitioned to an ordinary way of doing politics through assemblies for almost 40 years. Nevertheless, as Melenotte (2015: 61) shows, it is almost impossible to conduct a thorough analysis of this context, given the "well-preserved secrets of the Zapatistas about their internal organization."

[12] I do not imply here that there are no conflicts in the assembly, especially in relation to gender or race, or that some personalities did not emerge as politically stronger. For more on internal conflict, see chap. 2 sec. 1.

time, SOS Ballarò is dissimilar to social or anarchist movements (Boni 2015, Graeber 2009): the assembly almost never "proceed[s] as if the state does not exist" (Graber 2009: 203). Dialogue and coordination with municipal institutions are always a part of SOS Ballarò's action (Wulff Barreiro & Brito Gonzalez 2020). In the first 'official' document the assembly produced in 2015, activists highlighted issues in the quarter they wanted to tackle, possible solutions, and branches of the government they had to mobilise to reach them.

The third aspect I want to highlight is the ordinary nature of SOS Ballarò's political activism. The public assembly formed after three days of intense non-stop assembly activity in response to acts of intimidatory violence perpetrated by mafia. This initial phase put their lives, and that of the quarter, on hold, similarly to what I described for social movements like #Occupy. After this initial extra-ordinary phase though, the newly born SOS Ballarò decided there would be a weekly assembly for plenary discussions. As for other alterpolitical experiments, initial enthusiasm withered down, with activists experiencing burnout and drops in assembly attendance. SOS decided therefore that "if people won't come to the assembly, the assembly will go to them", as Peppe, a core SOS member put it. Activists started roaming the quarter in their free time, while grocery shopping, or sipping a coffee, and discuss politics in a more organic and casual way, while trying to "give the same importance to whatever and whoever is talking to you [...]. Always listen *as if* it was an assembly, even if you are in the middle of the market and the guy is gutting fish." Following this principle Peppe taught me when I started taking part in weekly assemblies, SOS Ballarò puts on the same level activism, labour, and trivial tasks, combining heightened political activity and people's everyday lives in what Das labels as a "descent into the ordinary" (2007, 7).

In short, through my analysis of the case of SOS Ballarò, I will offer some tentative answers to questions related to the activity of social movements and democratic practices revolving around a public assembly: how does an assembly-centred system come to be? How does it maintain momentum, while reaching out to the population it claims to represent? How can the assembly be simultaneously permanent and public, while avoiding burnout? In other words, how does SOS Ballarò combine its extra-ordinary push for

deep political change to the ordinary life of the quarter? And finally, how does a political subject born outside of mainstream political arenas work *together* with the state? This last question requires further clarity on what this thesis intends the state to be, and what kind of ethnographic and anthropological analysis comes from that interpretation.

6. state, State, State-Power: Fragmentation, Unity, and Performance.

> [State] evasion existed in tension with [state] desire. (Jansen 2015: 115)[13]

In his work on post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, Jansen (2014, 2015) delves into the complex relation his interlocutors have with the state. Considering the so-called libertarian paradigm in anthropology (e.g., Graeber 2007, Scott 2009), Jansen complicates the notion that every form of state evasion is always desirable or welcomed. In fact, his interlocutors tried to replace the sudden disappearance of the state due to the beginning of the conflict with forms of self-organized state-like practices to make the population manageable. Here, the efforts to organize schools, public safety, public health, speak to the desire of some form of organization of society according to state-like dynamics, in the hope that, after the war, the return to normality (comprising the presence of a state-like entity) would recognize these efforts as official. Jansen aims at creating analytical tools allowing anthropology to recognize and consider desires of state presence (and not just state evasion) as something people yearn for. In Ballarò, population does not face the complete disruption of the state as it did in Sarajevo after the 1992-95 conflict; nevertheless, decades of disenfranchisement and marginality have left the quarter underrepresented and unheard. The state, or state-like action, is something SOS Ballarò and the quarter deem necessary, both for reasons linked to resources the state can

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[13] In the original quote, Jansen uses the term *grid* instead of state, when he describes the yearning of post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina citizens for normal lives. Gridding here represents the action the state or other institutions undertake to make a population "legible": infrastructural interventions, census, schooling systems, public health measures etc. (Jansen 2015: 116). In the economy of this section, gridding seems too specific a term, and resorting to a more generic understanding of the state helps me framing my description of the Palermo municipality more effectively.

mobilize and policies it can enact/enforce. Therefore, SOS Ballarò thinks it is not possible to "proceed as if the state does not exist" (Graber 2009: 203), but also that the state has to be directed, and its action mediated and focused, through the legitimate knowledge the assembly produces.

On a different note, literature on the state has also shown how the state is less of a "material object" (Abrams 1988: 75), and more of a complex multiplicity of interdependent offices, structures, officials etc. (Gupta 2006, 2012, Obeid 2015). Moreover, it is perceived by the general public as a performative entity (Obeid 2010, 2015, Rasanayagam, J., Beyer, J., & Reeves, M. 2014) carrying out specific tasks (e.g., taxation or policing) and embodying specific traits. Hence, I will describe my encounter with the state in Palermo through a description of multiple offices, city officials, and decisional bodies; at the same time, I will follow Abrams' suggestion that anthropology should "take the *idea* of the state extremely seriously" (1988:75).

When I started participating in SOS Ballarò's weekly assemblies, the municipality was introduced to me as one of our most important interlocutors. As I mentioned, the first document the assembly ever produced in 2015 clearly showed that every issue had to be understood, a solution envisioned, *and the right office in the city hall mobilised*. The city council, the various joint stock companies providing services to the city, the local health provider, and the national institute for public housing, all were (potential) interlocutors of the assembly. All of them are made of people operating at many levels, in different offices, in different buildings, with varying degrees of political power, and more or less aligned with SOS Ballarò's political ideals. It is therefore important to understand the differences between them, the ways in which SOS mobilized them, both in friendly or confrontational ways, and the ripple effect those interactions had on activists and beyond. As shown by the anthropological literature on the matter (Bonanno 2019, Gupta 2006, 2012, Jansen 2014, 2015, Mitchell 2006, Nuijten 2004, Obeid 2010, 2015, Reeves 2013, Trouillot 2001, Valdivieso 2019) the ethnographer is in a privileged position to investigate the state both in its fragmented configuration and as a performing monolithic entity. During my fieldwork, I was not only able to follow the ways in which the state performs its power, but, through my

activism inside SOS Ballarò, I could participate in the decision-making process involving city officials, while witnessing and being part of the conflicts, both ideological and personal, that that process inevitably sparks, especially behind the closed doors of an office inside city hall. Given the importance of the ethnographic method in investigating the state and of my access to specific situations, I will heavily rely on my ethnographic material to describe how the state interacts with SOS and the general public in Ballarò, and how, in turn, SOS and the general public make sense of it, work around it, try to direct it for their own benefit.

After SOS started the process to regulate the San Saverio market (see chap. 4), members of the assembly asked for the formation of a techno-political roundtable, an institutional space for city officials and representatives of the quarter to discuss specific issues and come up with shared solutions. As stated in the mayoral deliberation n. 81 (21/04/2017), the techno-political roundtable on the San Saverio market was made of 5 *assessori* (mayoral cabinet members), the president of the joint stock company for garbage collection RAP, the chief of the municipal police, and the vice-head of the mayor's cabinet. The group would meet regularly in the office of the vice-head of the mayoral cabinet, Dr Romano, to discuss the matters of the market. During our meetings she would sit at the head of the glass table and listen, seldom expressing opinions while taking notes. At her right would sit Teresa, her liaison officer and the city official who interacted with the assembly the most, becoming with time a de-facto member. *Assessori*, or their designated liaisons, would sit all around the table, together with representatives from RAP, the municipal police, and us. After months of discussions, the group decided we needed the help of another official, somebody form the office for the urban planning of the city centre, given their access to maps, technology, and knowledge on how to intervene in the planning of public spaces. On the 27th of September 2017, Clara, the architect the office assigned to the project, participated in her first meeting of the roundtable. I was keen on establishing a friendly relationship: in my conversation with her at the beginning of the meeting I brought her up to speed, explaining the steps the group had already taken, the policies we wanted to enact and the kind of help we would need from her. Halfway through my explanation, and after many nods of approval

from Clara, Tommaso (a core SOS member and president of the first Palermo municipal district) entered the room, late as usual. He sat down visibly unhappy about the choice to send Clara to the table. As he listened to my efforts to ingratiate yet another city official, he erupted:

> No Clara, this is not the way! You cannot pretend to come here for the first time and waste everybody's time because you didn't do your homework and don't know what we are talking about! It is inadmissible!

Tommaso was shouting. His rant lasted for a good five minutes. Clara was confused and angered. When Tommaso stopped shouting, she leaned back and ostentatiously calmly said: "I'll report on this meeting to my office and ask to be removed from this group, as I do not like the tone [Tommaso] is using."

I was fuming, as all the work we did to bring her on our side was out of the window because Tommaso decided of his own accord to be confrontational. The roundtable at that point had produced little to no documentation to do "homework" on. Tommaso's reaction was over the top and uncalled for. The meeting was over in 40 minutes instead of the usual two hours. After, we went for a coffee to debrief (and for me to take my frustration out on Tommaso):

> Me: Why did you do that? I was sucking up to her, I had worked on it! We need her maps; we need her help! Now we got nothing.
> Tommaso: Now we have her attention, and she knows she's not in charge. You have to trust me and calm down. It's not the first time I work with her. If I let her drive, we end up walking at her pace, which must not be the case. She has to understand the roundtable has authority and dictates the steps.

In the intricate network of relationships represented by the people sitting at the roundtable, activists had to reaffirm SOS Ballarò's position continuously. The assembly had to establish connections that were equal and levelled. Given my inexperience, I was unable to recognize the complex hierarchy

governing the situation in which an official was summoned for her expertise, and stepped in the spotlight without hesitation, diverting everybody's attention and effort. The risk, as Tommaso explained, was to

> disrupt the balance. She has to get in that room and embrace the project, not step in, do her chores, and step out. […] If she could do that, how do you think the others would react after putting months of efforts in?

The relationship between SOS Ballarò and the state was fragmented in a myriad of small connections with different officials, who, at times were simply people with whom we worked, at others represented a specific hierarchical position. As shown above, SOS had to often wedge itself in that hierarchy, either confrontationally or amicably. The rate of success of the levelling of the political playing field by the assembly was remarkable. Mainly thanks to that initial shock by Tommaso, Clara ended up working with the group for months, opening the doors to her office for us in multiple occasions, often unannounced.[14]

One of the reasons for this success rate is that, in June 2017, Palermo had municipal elections, and Tommaso was elected president of the first district of the city, the one comprising Ballarò and the whole city centre. If, on one side, SOS gained considerable legitimacy as a result of Tommaso's win, this turn of events complicated the relationship between SOS Ballarò and the state even more, given that his most active member was now an elected official and the direct counterpart of the assembly. For months, SOS discussed this possible conflict of interest, until a point was made by a member of the assembly:

> A conflict of interest usually has to do with money or other perks that a part guarantees to the other. Here there is no money. [Tommaso's] office has no money to give; SOS hasn't got a cent to spare. What else can this relation bring? The fact that SOS

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[14] Other factors contributed to her availability, like the fact that in a subsequent mayoral note to the deliberation establishing the roundtable mentioned above, her office was included in the list of mandatory attendees (note n. 992137, 06/09/2017).

Ballarò's ideas are pushed forward by the administration? Yes, of course they will be! [Tommaso's] political program was based on [his] activism in SOS! We have the same ideas!

As said before, SOS Ballarò is a fluid non-registered political subject with no legal authority and a multi-layered relationship with the municipal administration, that ended up almost fusing with it, both in formal and informal terms: city officials became embedded in the assembly, and the assembly became electorally represented as a city official.

The second aspect relevant to the context of Ballarò is the *idea* of the State (Abrams 1988). If it is true a State with capital S is "a fiction of the philosophers" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: xxiii *in* Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1950), it is also true that my interlocutors did imagine the State as "a unified, solitary, and personified object" (Rasanayagam, J., Beyer, J., & Reeves, M., 2014: 15) especially when reasoning about its influence at a municipal and national level. The State has a certain magic quality (Aretxaga 2003), the postulated ability to turn one's life on its head, both for the worse and the better, through welfare or domination (Obeid 2010, 2015). It is the one responsible for taxing, sending the police, impeding the *normal* unfolding of lives. At the same time, it is the one that could offer a permanent job, a house, safety, stability. This was particularly true when speaking to vendors in the San Saverio market and marketers in the historical market.

One morning I was having a tense exchange with Dennis, a vendor in San Saverio, about the ways in which the market could change to make the vendors' position more akin to legality and stability. Dennis was a stern defender of his position as a free independent man. He had always taken care of himself and his family and did not want to be controlled by the State, especially through taxation:

Listen here, I never paid taxes in my life, never! Not even a coin! And I don't care about your assembly, it doesn't count at all […]. Taxation is like reversed *pizzo*. You give money to the State, and they do nothing for you. It is legalized pizzo. I never paid pizzo in my life, and so I don't pay taxes. You can forget about us.

In his mind, the State is an overreaching entity, pocketing his money for purposes nobody understands. The equation between taxation and pizzo (extortion money entrepreneurs pay to mafia for private protection) shows how the State is perceived as a violent subject one can face only through avoidance or confrontation.[15] On the other hand, Dennis' family receives benefits and services from the State, but the two things seem disconnected: "of course the State pays for my son's school. Who else should pay? The State owes us the school, the hospital and the rest!" Here too, the State is complex and multi-layered, but also impersonal and whole in each and every function it performs, to the point that Dennis reflects on it on two disentangled levels even though the subject of his reflections is clearly the same.

When the State is not pocketing one's money through taxation, it is at best incapable to impact individual lives. Davide has been a marketer in the historical market all his life, following in his father's footsteps. For him, the fact that the State could give him a job but does not, is a source of continuous frustration and disappointment: "we have this thing, the State, but it doesn't do anything [for me]!" In his mind, the State is either unwilling to change one's life or does not care enough to do so, to the point of him ironically asking me one morning:

> Oh, come on France', why don't you get me one of those municipal jobs? 600 euros, even 500. I would work from 9 to 4 and go back home. Even if I have to collect garbage, which is a bad job but, hey, even them, they do a very important job…

Of course, Davide knew I had no power to find him a job. Nevertheless, his ironic plea revolves around the idea that someone could theoretically activate the State in all its qualities and powers. In Ballarò, this possibility for somebody to embody the State is always present. In an attempt to reason around the unfathomability of the multi-layered and fragmented reality of the state, marketers, vendors, activists etc. tried to identify a broker, a specific

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[15] Dennis' reasoning around pizzo and taxation also turns the discourse on racket and private protection on its head: usually authors and antimafia activists use it to show how pizzo is undesirable and oppressive, while taxation is viewed as the more democratic, equal option. For a through discussion on pizzo see Gambetta (1994, 1996) and Catanzaro (1994).

individual "personally responsible for the distribution" of goods, policies, services etc. (Auyero 1999: 314). As Davide put it, an embodied State allows for the demand of state power to be *performed* (Rasanayagam, J., Beyer, J., & Reeves, M., 2014). This leads to the slippery slope of clientelist dynamics of brokerage (Anand 2011, Auyero 1999, Brković 2015, Graziano 1976, Humphrey 1999, 2012, Li Causi 1975, 1981, 2004). If I had the power to activate channels and perform power to push Davide's request for a municipal job, I would become a broker between the client (Davide) and the patron (the state). SOS Ballarò obviously had a negative opinion of such clientelist dynamics and routinely avoided them, to the point of Tommaso refusing to go to the historical market for some time after he got elected, so that marketers would not ask him for favours, and he would not have to say no. In Ballarò, the performance of (State) power or lack thereof poses an important, if basic, question: if the State struggles to perform power associated with concepts of "manipulation" and "penetration" (Johnson 2001: 215) of a specific territory, and activists do not want/cannot perform State-like power, who or what is going to embody the State? Given that this space of ambiguity is also often recognized as the one where organized crime thrives (Di Piazza 2010, Goldstein 2005, Paoli 2002, Santino 1994b, 2002, 2007, Varese 2001), another question emerges: how should State-like action be performed? According to which logics? Following which ideological principles? In this thesis I will argue that SOS Ballarò works towards creating new body politics (associations, NGOs, pressure groups) able to interact with the fragmented state apparatus as legitimate counterparts and activate it in its parts. At the same time, these new bodies politic are built around the idea of the public assembly, accessible and never-ending, so that the ideological principles that are supposed to drive state action can be the result of democratic processes of consensus building.

In this complex entanglement of State power, state officials, performance, end inclusion/exclusion, SOS Ballarò assumes the role of mediator between the position of those who live in the quarter and experience some forms of marginality, and the state apparatus, which could have a positive impact on those marginal conditions but often does not. Echoing Jansen, and as the conversation I had with Davide shows, people in Ballarò experience some

form of "[state] desire" (2015:15); one of SOS Ballarò's aims is to make sure that, if the S/state is to have an impact on people's lives in the quarter, it should be the closest possible to the one these same people yearn for. This role as mediator of state action, puts SOS in an in-between political space featuring high levels of ambiguity. If, on one side, becoming visible to the State, or being gridded (Jansen 2015), can grant access to forms of power that have a positive impact (welfare provisions, services etc.) it can also have negative repercussions (exposure to immigration laws, forced adaptations to the legal system, policing operations etc.). SOS Ballarò continuously tries to thread the needle between the two, e.g., by sharing or withholding information from the state apparatus, and directing its action as much as possible. This last point is the base for the relationship between the assembly and the S/state: members are well aware of the many forms of State violence (especially in relation to violent revanchist politics, Smith 1996). At the same time and in this context, mediating the position of marginalized communities and that of the S/state allows SOS Ballarò to undertake political action beyond humanitarian and affective labour (Muehlebach 2011, 2012). As I will show in chapter 4, SOS works on a compromise between S/state and quarter, often tipping the scale in favour of the latter: vendors in San Saverio *are asked* to become part of an institutional body politic, therefore become legible; at the same time, the S/state *has to* recognize their impossibility to comply to certain thresholds of legality (Bartoli 2019), *agree* to establish new ones, and make them structural through appropriate legislative and executive action (deliberations, regulations etc.). In short, SOS Ballarò does not have subversive tendencies or deploy subversive strategies. The assembly aims at restructuring the balance between the S/state and marginalized groups in favour of the latter while building obligations for the former. It does so by mediating between the position of the S/state and that of the population of the quarter, so that a reading/gridding of said population can happen according to the needs of the former. As I will show later on (chap. 5 sec. 3.2), SOS Ballarò is not able to direct all S/state action and prevent every form of violent repercussion. Nevertheless, I will argue that SOS is considerably efficient in making the S/state work for the purposes and needs that the quarter expresses on a daily basis.

7. Researcher, Activist, Researcher/Activist.

In this section I will explore my positionality as both a researcher and an active member of SOS Ballarò, the tensions that this initial contradiction created, and how they were solved during the period I spent in Palermo. To do so, it is necessary to briefly mention the ways in which an ethnographer can have an impact on the community they study, and the heated debate this topic fostered, especially in relation to the ethics of one's research and relationships with participants. Moskovitz (2015) highlights three major ways in which an ethnographer can actively contribute to the (political) wellbeing of the community they study: collaboration, advocacy, and knowledge dissemination.

The first consists of a stratified process of knowledge production, during both fieldwork and writing. The key to such processes is a radical redistribution of power between the ethnographer and participants, so that a research strategy aimed at having an impact on the community can be designed together. An example of this strategy is *Esta Es Mi Cara* (This Is My Face, 2018). Here HIV positive men are at the centre of Cabezas Pino's ethnographic documentary, consistently making decisions on how their stories should be told and what the camera should be pointed at. Here, the ethnographer stands in the midst of a group of people and helps out in shaping a specific representation of what they think is important for viewers to see and experience.

The second aspect of an engaged ethnography, advocacy, is maybe the more contested one, as it implies several moral dilemmas (Hale 2006, Hastrup & Elsass 1990, Kirsch 2002, 2018, Moskovitz 2015). Many of the authors engaging in this debate conducted fieldwork in communities suffering blatant human rights violations and brutal violence (Kirsch 2002, Hale 2006, Scheper-Hughes 1993, Das 2007). For this reason, authors believed they had a moral obligation towards these communities and become expert witnesses (Hale 2006) in their struggle for recognition and justice. According to some though, this poses the issue of objectivity. D'Andrade considers Scheper-Hughes work (1995) as an example of how ethnographies produced from a position of advocacy are inherently biased and subjective. In a back and forth

between the two (D'Andrade 1995, Scheper-Hughes 1995) Scheper-Hughes argues her "transformation from "objective" anthropologist to politically and morally engaged *companheira*" (1995: 410. Emphasis in the original), standing as an activist and advocate next to participants to her research, enhanced her ability to conduct ethnographic fieldwork, even though taking sides reduced her access to parts of the society she was investigating. Nevertheless, she argues, participants could not fathom anymore her neutral positionality, especially after she had worked with them as a community-organizer years prior. Taking sides allowed her to build stronger ethnographic partnerships and answer her main question about the ethics of the discipline: "what makes anthropology […] exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and even a political) stand on the working out of historical events?" (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 411) In one word, nothing. D'Andrade's critique of 'taking a stance' concerns the starting position from where this stance is taken. According to him, entering the field as an advocate, a *companheira*, meant that Scheper-Hughes was working with partial information, therefore her advocacy was partial too: how can one advocate and "speak truth to power" if this truth is not discovered through science, what "old-fashioned anthropology does", but through subjectivity and reflection? (D'Andrade 1995: 400) By exploring hegemony and relying on western understandings of positivist knowledge production, D'Andrade offers a critique of what he calls the "moral model", an anthropology devoted to subjectivity and political advocacy, in favour of one revolving around the positivist pursuit of a supposedly universal truth beyond ethnographers' political positions. Furthermore, he hints at the paradox of a moral model sustained by an ethnocentric view of morality itself, while the anthropologist's advocacy comes from the privileged point of view of the accomplished (western) academic.

The third aspect Moskowitz (2015) highlights as part of an engaged ethnography is consequential to the debate about what the ethnographer should discover: how do anthropologists communicate what they find out? Calling for the discipline to become more public, she points at the dilemma stemming from the fact that anthropologists strive to add complexity to our understanding of culture and society, while having to simplify their reasoning

in order to make it accessible to a wider public. Deconstruction and complexification at the heart of anthropological inquiry seem here to "to alienate [anthropologists] from the production of knowledge that goes on in [the] wider sphere" (Moskovitz 2015: 52).

My experience in Ballarò offers some tentative answers to the three points raised by Moskovitz (2015). I will tackle the first one about collaboration and research design in the next section about methodology, while focussing here on the second and third. The conditions of marginality and precarity experienced by people in Ballarò are different from those experienced by the communities investigated by the aforementioned authors. Although enduring disenfranchisement and poverty, nobody in Ballarò consistently faces starvation or brutal state violence like those described by Scheper-Hughes (1993) or Das (2007). In the way the term is defined in the debate (especially by Hale 2006), I never had to advocate for anyone's life or human rights, and I was never asked to do so. On the other hand, though, I often represented the assembly of SOS Ballarò in official events, meetings with city officials, or simply while roaming the quarter. For the first part of my fieldwork, this aspect was a source of discomfort: how could I speak for someone I knew so little about, and who was so different from me? In a sense, D'Andrade's point (1995) on the ethnocentrism of advocacy and the privilege of the academic felt true. In the months I spent in the assembly of SOS Ballarò, other activists helped me navigating this discomfort. My ethnographic intent to investigate the inner workings of the assembly and its relationship to the markets and the municipality, although always present and recognized by participants, became less and less relevant: "you are here to work as part of the assembly […] This thing that you are going to write a thesis about it isn't at all that interesting", as Tommaso jokingly told me many times. In short, advocacy became less of a problem because I was not seen as an advocate, and the assembly made sure I was aware of the fact I was not advocating for them, but for myself, as "Ballarò is now in you. I bet all I have, you'll never leave!" During my fieldwork, the issue of how to create a form of active ethnography was turned inside out by the assembly, as activists helped me crafting myself as an ethnographic activist. My ethnography became the subtext and the opportunity to engage in activism, and not the other way around.

My experience in Ballarò also offers a provisional answer to the moral dilemma of knowledge dissemination. I left Ballarò in January 2018. Nevertheless, and making Tommaso's prediction true, I only *physically* left Ballarò. Thanks to group chats, shared documents, and other forms of communication, I had the possibility to keep working on the many projects described in this thesis. The relative vicinity of the field also meant I had several chances to go back for events, workshops, special moments, even birthdays. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic (and every event becoming virtual) gave me even more chances to participate in the life of the quarter and the assembly from afar. These three aspects offered me a twofold possibility. On one side, as I was writing my thesis, I had the chance to discuss my "wacky theories", as an activist ironically defined them, with many of the participants to this research, vendors, marketers, and SOS Ballarò members alike. On the other, many times I was asked by the assembly to take on the job of telling the story of SOS, of talking about its methods, its activism, and the way the assembly influences city politics. In these events I had the possibility to alleviate core members of some of their responsibilities, given that, as I will show, they feel they never have enough time to fully carry out what they perceive as their duty. I could just take their place and do some valuable work while they kept working on the politics of the quarter in the streets. In these occasions, I discussed my findings with different audiences, made of academics, activists from NGOs, city officials, but also people less politically engaged or in less institutional positions. The period spent with the assembly in Ballarò thought me that complexity can be communicated in many ways, and that a simpler linguistic choice does not "undermine a fundamental tenant of what [anthropology] believes itself to add" (Moskovitz 2015: 52). My experience suggests the opposite: when discussing my research with people in Ballarò through ethnographic examples and anthropological analysis, I was often answered that "hey, that is something *I* told you!" The best example of this is related to the metaphor I use in chapter 5 when discussing *oscillations* as a more nuanced version of *interruptions* in the political discourse as theorized by Li (2019). During a visit in Ballarò after the end of my fieldwork, I discussed with a marketer the concept and he suggested that what I was describing was "a bit like one of those games with

the ball we used to play when we were kids. You know? The one on top of soap bubbles."[16] The metaphor of the game of marble maze and its tilting plain that people in Ballarò are invited to play with is a direct result of that conversation (see chap. 5, Introduction). In a sense, my analytical process aimed at complexifying the anthropological discourse about the politics of urban renewal became even more complex, thanks to the explanatory power granted by the simplicity of the public discourse that is supposed to "undermine a fundamental tenant of what [anthropology] believes itself to add" (Moskovitz 2015: 52). *Oscillation* is now, thanks to that conversation, an easier idea to convey, which adds to the depth and complexity of my and others' understanding of the socio-political context in which I observed this phenomenon in the first place.

8. Ethnographic Methodology and Activist Method(ide)ology.

In this section I will provide some methodological notes on my research, starting from how I was granted access to the field site in Ballarò, both inside and outside of the assembly, to then explore how my methodology became entwined with that of SOS Ballarò, to create peculiar forms of ethnographic investigation linked to my positionality as an ethnographic activist.

When I arrived in Palermo in November 2016, it was my very first visit to the city. I had no pre-existing contacts, let alone a gatekeeper. My choice of the historical market of Ballarò as my field site was simply linked to the fact that the market is open every day, it is a public space, and offers the possibility to move freely thanks to the pretext of doing one's shopping. For the first months in Ballarò I stuck to this choice and went to the market every day, engaging in conversations with marketers and customers, always making sure they knew I was conducting research. Soon enough marketers grew accustomed to my presence and became slightly bored by the fact that I was always reminding them I was "studying the place". One way they made this clear was by starting to call me "the researcher": "What is it that you *research*

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[16] In Italy, soap bubbles come in little containers with a screw cap covered in transparent plastic. In the cap there is a maze carved, and a little metal ball that the player has to get to the end of the maze by swinging and shaking the bottle.

exactly?" one marketer asked one day; "The way to do the least amount of work possible!" Another marketer answered before I could get a word in. My first idea for ethnographic inquiry in Ballarò was to investigate what I imagined as the moral grey zone between the two polar opposites of the heroic mafia victim and the villainous mafia boos, in an attempt to add nuances to the starkly dichotomic distinction between good and evil typical of the literature on Sicily and the South of Italy (Banfield 1958, Fava 2009, Gambetta 1994, 1996, Li Causi 2004, Rakopoulos 2017a, 2020, Renda 1994, Santino 1994a, 2009, Sciarrone 2009, Schneider & Schneider 1976, 2003). To do so, I set foot in the market as the place to research everyday practice and the ways in which moral and ethical reasoning (Sykes 2009, Zigon 2008) unfold in the 'land of mafia'. My initial idea though became less relevant by the day: as I conducted participant observation in the market, I expected people around me to be coy, cautious in talking about mafia and antimafia; instead, they just seemed bored by the topic and more interested in more pressing issues, like the state of the market, their economic struggles, or the fact they were seemingly "abandoned by the state", as marketers put it.

In early February 2017, Patrizio, a fellow sociologist researcher, introduced me to the existence of SOS Ballarò. His advice radically reshaped my ethnographic experience. Patrizio vouched for me with some core members of the assembly he had befriended before, namely Tommaso and Nicolò. When I went to my first assembly, they already knew that I was a PhD student at the University of Manchester, that I was interested in Ballarò, and in questions linked to morality and ethics. All I had to do to be given access to the assembly and permission to conduct my ethnographic investigation was introduce myself in the first assembly in a few words to the 22 people present. A few days later, the whole network of core members, about 50 people, knew of me, who I was, and what my intentions as a researcher were. As I mentioned, at first I was worried about my role in SOS Ballarò, as political activism could have unforeseeable effects on my research, but in that first assembly I also felt the need to create the most balanced possible relationship with the group of activists: at the end of it I threw my name in the hat to help drafting a letter to city officials.

In the economy of my fieldwork, disclosing my intentions and asking for informed consent to activists was much less relevant than being available to carry out work as an activist. In chapter 4 section 3, I will show the complete shift in my positionality as I became more and more involved in SOS Ballarò's activism, and the consequences this had in the way my research took shape in the period between March 2017 and January 2018. What I want to highlight here is how my activism and identity as an SOS member were the key to gain legitimate access to the other two field sites of my research: the San Saverio market and the historical market of Ballarò. Other members helped me becoming recognizable as part of the assembly, always making sure to introduce me as "a researcher from the University of Manchester working with SOS Ballarò". In this simple sentence, Nicolò would remark both my intentions as an ethnographer and the balance between my two different roles, using a theatrical and ironic tone in pronouncing 'Manchester' with the accent on the first 'e' (instead of the 'a' as it is usually pronounced in Italy) and assuming a very serious tone when announcing me as part of the assembly.[17] As a result of activists' introductions and vouching, I never felt the necessity to obtain written consent from marketers and vendors. At the same time, I rarely had to remind my interlocutors about my identity as a researcher, as they would often ask if what they just told me was "going to be in the book". In short, after an initial phase made of my repeated reminders, the intervention and vouching of the assembly made negotiating access or remarking my intentions as a researcher slightly redundant.

My deep involvement in the activities of the assembly as an active member also had effects on my methods of inquiry. When my fieldwork in Palermo started, I was heavily relying on previous ethnographic experiences I made during my undergraduate studies. Then, I employed a classic methodology made of prolonged participant observation and semi-structured interviews to study a parochial community in Tuscany and its relationship with catholic orthodoxy. My first impulse in Ballarò was to replicate that experience, practice participant observation to refine my research questions and gather data, to then explore them through extended interviews with key

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[17] On the importance of gatekeeping in the San Saverio market, see chap. 4 sec. 3. For an example of it in historical market, see chap. 5 sec. 3.2.

participants. My methods were not oriented towards collaborative research, as intended by Moskovitz (2015) and applied by Cabezas Pino (2018) or D'Onofrio (2018) and D'Onofrio and Sjöberg (2020) in their exploration of the ways in which animated film and theatrical performance help to represent people's life stories and imaginations. As for anything else though, my involvement with SOS Ballarò brought me to re-shape my methodology and re-think the way in which I wanted to conduct my ethnographic research. Before becoming part of SOS Ballarò, I would walk the market and struck casual conversations, especially revolving around market activities. I wanted to understand how marketers conduct business, how they set prices, navigate the wholesale market, advertise their products, how they negotiate credit and debit with customers etc. My aim was to learn what kind of moral and ethical dilemmas being a marketer in Ballarò brings to the surface, and how people would reason around them in relation to the so-called mafia-mentality (Arlacchi 1983, Chubb 1996) and what Rakopoulos calls normative antimafia morality (2020).

Once I accessed SOS Ballarò though, this project fell in the background, as I was introduced to *the assembly that never ends* as an activist method(ide)ology. Quickly, this became not only my way of engaging with the quarter as an SOS Ballarò member, but also as an ethnographer. This consisted of three main passages. I started participating in weekly assemblies on Tuesdays with other core members and discuss a specific issue. In the week between two assemblies, I would "take the idea for a walk in the quarter", as Nicolò poetically puts it. I would go around the market(s) and brief people on the discussion the assembly had to collect their opinions and feed them back to the next Tuesday assembly. These two passages allowed me to (almost) simultaneously investigate ways in which SOS Ballarò builds its narrative and shapes ideas on how to improve the quarter, while gathering data on the ways in which such ideas would be re-interpreted and appropriated by marketers outside of the core group. The third passage of what became my routine was the reception of marketers' ideas by the assembly once activists' initial proposition had been "for a walk in the quarter". Here the aim was to make marketers' voices the centrepiece of SOS Ballarò's organic political discourse. An additional aspect of the assembly that never ends is that it was

not necessary for a recognized SOS member (like me) to be present for the political discussion to continue. To clarify, I joined or started conversations among marketers on this or that issue, trying to understand their point of view on the matter to bring it back to the structured assembly. After I left, marketers would, of course, keep their conversation going, so much so that I often needed to be briefed the next time I would go to the market: "France', you have to go and talk to Gianfranco" one marketer would tell me, "yesterday he had a good idea about card payments, and we all agree with him". As a result, I would chase down Gianfranco, and ask him to recollect the discussion that happened without me, therefore investigating ways in which ideas travel around the market, and the principles that drive marketers' reasoning in conjunction with SOS Ballarò's activism.

Another example of how the method(ide)ology of the assembly that never ends combines my intents as an ethnographer and activist is the process to build a cover for the historical market in its central square (Piazza Carmine) in July 2017. SOS Ballarò applied for funding from the EU to build this new infrastructure and, at short notice, it had to come up with, draw on paper, and present a project of how this infrastructure should look like. One question SOS had was: how is this new project going to embody the tradition of the Ballarò market, the oldest marketplace in the city, while projecting it into the future? Ethnographic activism became useful then: I spent weeks asking probing questions to marketers about their life stories and how they intersected with Piazza Carmine and the covered market that was there until the late 1970s. In this period, marketers reminisced the past, painting a nostalgic picture of golden times long gone, while complaining about a present day made of little money and few customers. At the same time, they worked on the project by feeding me their ideas about what the cover should look like, who should get a stall under it, and what they could do together with SOS Ballarò to make the future better than today, while respecting the market's history and upholding the dignity of their trade and expertise.

Through the assembly that never ends, I took part in those conversations neither as a pure activist (as I was gathering data that is now in this thesis), nor as an ethnographer (as my aim was to create the conditions for marketers to have a heavy influence on what the cover would look like). The result of

this is a methodology injected with specific political ideas that I borrowed from the assembly, of which I became a part: in short, the assembly that never ends at the core of SOS Ballarò also became my ethnographic method, while ethnographic probes where at the service of the assembly, to give way to a method(ide)ology that allowed me to both write the present work and contribute to the ongoing political process. When I stepped in the field my research was not intended as a collaborative project. As I stepped out and started writing, it became clear that I am ultimately "unable to determine to what extent my thoughts are part of a collective" (Santos 2014: 23) and to what extent this collective is part of my thoughts.

Another methodological note concerns this aspect of the *collective*. Structured assemblies were never truly formal: there was not a minute taker, there was not a moderator, there was not a list of speakers. Reports of them, when existing, were written following notes scribbled by activists, with one rule: points, ideas, concepts, should not have a name attached, as they were the product of assembly discussion. For this reason, in this thesis, it is sometimes hard to point out who said what in specific circumstances. Even though I took extensive notes during assemblies I started to gradually omit the name of the speaker or the source of an idea. My notes are more precise when marketers and vendors are involved, but even there, towards the end of my stay in Ballarò, *collective* voices started emerging, and it became harder (and a lot less relevant) to trace an idea back to its primary source. In the thesis, I portray SOS Ballarò (and sometimes the San Saverio and Ballarò markets) as a unified subject with its own agency, legitimacy, knowledge, and political weight, in line with the emic perception activists, me included, had of it. The inevitable inconsistencies in the use of the first singular, the first plural, or the third plural person are a direct consequence of this aspect. In the writing process, it was sometimes impossible to determine who exactly was behind a certain action, idea, or reflection in SOS Ballarò, even if I was the one acting as "the ventriloquist" (Santos 2014: 15). Nevertheless, both SOS and the two markets presented internal conflicts, inconsistencies, contradictions, which make them at the same time unified in a collective voice and fragmented in a myriad of cacophonies.

My last methodological point touches on the use of recorded semi-structured interviews. As it will become clear throughout the thesis, participants did not have a lot of time to spare. In my 15 months in Palermo, I conducted three proper interviews, two of which are on tape. This is not due to a particular reluctancy by activists, marketers, vendors, residents, or any other participant to sit down with me and talk on the record, but to the nature of the relationships I established in Ballarò. Conversations about the politics of the quarter would happen as we moved from one place to the next, from an assembly in between two stalls in the markets to one in the swanky fourth floor office of some city official. Heated discussions to confront ideas and points of view happened at bars, pubs, late at night, on the rocks near the sea. These spaces and times were moments to relax and enjoy people's company, to unwind after long days, "not moments to work, otherwise we work all the time!", as Tommaso told me once after I asked him a question a bit too ethnographic for his likings, and right before starting a 15-minute tirade on how the city council was deaf to our requests. I asked Nicolò and Peppe to sit down for an interview for the first time at the end of March 2017. Their recordings are dated 19th and 27th of December, respectively. Even though a staple of ethnographic inquiry, semi-structured interviews did not play a central role in my research, because my method(ide)ology revolved around the practice of the assembly that never ends. Data was gathered on the move, as participants to this research, the collective mentioned by Santos (2014), never stopped walking.

9. Thesis Outline

This thesis is composed of a chapter zero or preamble, three thematic chapters and two chapters revolving around two case studies. In chapter zero, I will retrace the steps that brought me to conduct research in Palermo and Ballarò, with a specific focus on my choice to ethnographically overlook the presence of mafia and antimafia. I will show how their dichotomic opposition can and has overshadowed other topics of inquiry, and how, during my first period in Ballarò, my attention was caught by other political phenomena, especially related to the ordinary lives of participants to this research and far away from

the epic battle between good and evil that the opposition mafia/antimafia is an expression of.

In chapter one I will equip the reader with a roadmap, a compendium necessary to navigate the thesis, touching on its three main topics: SOS Ballarò, the San Saverio market, and the historical market of Ballarò. I will examine SOS Ballarò's internal composition, highlighting strengths and weaknesses of the assembly while introducing some of its core members. I will then offer a thick description of the two markets as total social facts (Mauss 1990, Perricone 2016). My aim is to paint a vibrant picture and highlight contradictions inherent to the markets to build up the necessary complexity to properly introduce the two case studies at the centre of this thesis.

The second chapter revolves around the inner workings of SOS Ballarò, and the way the assembly perceives and interprets democracy. After an overview of the literature on this topic, I will describe how SOS Ballarò came to be, and the ways in which the assembly enacts democratic processes through its *method(ide)ology*. I will show how the assembly produces legitimate knowledge, how it strives to be representative of the whole population of Albergheria, and how it has a direct impact on the urban context through the refurbishment of neglected public spaces. My focus will be specifically on method(ide)ology, with a consequent and purposeful overlook of the political content of discussions happening inside and around the assembly. My main aim in this chapter is to contribute to the literature on democracy and activism by showing how SOS Ballarò's activism and politics are deeply rooted in the quarter's everyday practice, and how, after the initial rupture of SOS Ballarò's constitution, political action in Ballarò descended into the ordinary (Das 2006: 7) and became just another part of people's lives.

In the third chapter I will turn my focus to the political content of SOS Ballarò's activism, especially in relation to gentrification and urban renewal, starting from the diffused perception that Albergheria (and the whole city centre) needs some change to happen in order to improve its inhabitants' living conditions. Through classic literature on gentrification and analyses centred on the Palermitan case, I will inquire if the quarter is already experiencing gentrifying processes, highlighting how the private and public

sector impact and shape urban change. Throughout the chapter, I will point out how SOS Ballarò's presence influences the discussion on urban change in Ballarò, and how this influence creates the conditions for an important shift in the debate, away from gentrification and urban renewal. I will suggest substituting the two concepts with that of urban *re-qualification*, according to which spaces that need to change do not need to be infused with new qualities to positively impact one's living conditions: qualities are already present, and activists have the task to re-discover them and make sure they function for those who have created them in the first place.

In the fourth and fifth chapters I expand on the concept of re-qualification through the description of two projects involving vendors in the San Saverio market and marketers in the historical market of Ballarò. I build on literature about gentrification, and especially concepts like removal/substitution of historical residents (Lees, Slater & Wyly 2008) and revanchist policies (Smith 1996), as I describe the process started in March 2017 to create a legal framework for the San Saverio market, which, up to that point, existed outside of legality and in the midst of serious conflicts between vendors, residents, and the S/state. I discuss how SOS Ballarò intervened in this area to reduce conflicts so that a *field of possibilities for political discussion* could be opened, and the future of the market collectively determined by those impacted by its presence. Using two main concepts, rearguard theory (Santos 2014) and threshold of legality (Bartoli 2019), I will examine how SOS Ballarò applied its method(ide)ology in San Saverio to create a productive political discussion driven by those more marginal (vendors) so that the market could become a new institutional subject with political legitimacy and decision-making abilities to exercise according to new forms of rearguard theory (Santos 2014).

In chapter five, I turn to the historical market of Ballarò. I start from its conditions of border-line illegality and economic fragility, to then explore how SOS Ballarò seized the opportunity to apply for public funding and build a new infrastructure in the central square of the market. This case study helps me outlining how the aforementioned field of possibilities is filled with political ideas by groups and individuals following the principles of rearguard theory and newly established thresholds of legality. Building on the concept

of interruptions in people's political discourse as described by Li (2019), I will add nuance to her argument through a detailed description of the process of *political oscillation* everyone is involved in, be them marketers, activists, or the S/state, to build their ideal picture of how this new infrastructure should look like and who should benefit from it.

This thesis ends with a reflection on its inevitable gaps and limitations, and some final comments on how the assembly that never ends, re-qualification, the field of possibilities, and political oscillation can contribute to future conceptualizations and analyses of activism, especially if applied to urban contexts undergoing processes of deep social and political change.

Chapter Zero
Preamble

The present thesis is the outcome of a long personal reflection started about 15 years ago. When I was in high school and I started participating in the political debate with my peers and teachers, I soon realized that one of the major problems of the Italian national political landscape was (and still is) the presence and influence of organized crime. Many times I ended a discussion with a friend shaking my head in disillusion and disbelief, muttering that "we can't solve any problems if we don't get rid of the mafia first". For the next phase of my life, especially during my undergraduate studies, this idea of fighting against organized crime became stronger, intertwining at every passage with my discovery of anthropology and ethnography. Literature on mafia I was reading at the time gave me two main ideas: authorities (as in the state and police forces) are very aware and knowledgeable when it comes to the history of organized crime, how it operates on the illegal and legal market, and the atrocities that this operating entails at every turn; at the same time academics and activists compiled an extensive history and sociology of antimafia organizations, following the steps of individuals and groups who put their lives on the line (and often died in the process) to guarantee the freedom of their co-nationals. What I could not find in the literature was an understanding of how ordinary people move, operate, behave in between the two polar opposites of the brutally violent mafia boss and the heroically courageous mafia victim.

In his book *I Sommersi e i Salvati* (the Drowned and the Saved), Italian author and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi (2007) reflects on his experience of the concentration camp many years after it happened, exploring in detail his and others' morality as it unfolded in the gruesome circumstances of the lager; he concludes that, apart from very exceptional cases, no one in Auschwitz was either a pure victim or a pure perpetrator, given that, in their day to day biddings, Nazi enforcers performed acts of generosity and prisoners engaged in violent practices to guarantee their survival. The author concludes that the vast majority of the population of the lager can be ascribed

in a moral grey zone, made of circumstantial variations in one's own moral understanding of one's condition.

Following this input, and acknowledging the incredible knowledge production on the two extremes of the moral spectrum highlighted above, I decided to concentrate on the supposed grey zone in between (Di bella 2011, Fava 2008, Rakopoulos 2017a, Riina 2021), and formulate my pre-fieldwork research proposal around the rather generic intention to ethnographically investigate the ethics and moralities of everyday interactions in Palermo, the birthplace of organized crime, on the backdrop of the dichotomy mafia/antimafia, villain/hero, victim/persecutor. My main research question was simple: do people in Palermo think of mafia and antimafia as moral goalposts when they buy shoes or bread or go to the restaurant? In other words, does the 'ordinary Palermitan' think about the morality of their petty actions in terms of the aforementioned dichotomy? The literature on the subject, always worried about furthering the fight against organized crime, affirms times over that they are, or at least that they should. My instinct suggested I should get ready to paint a much more nuanced reality.

As I set foot in Palermo on the 4th of November 2016 for the first time ever, I did what I always dreamt of doing: I started walking around the city centre to the many locations where mafia and antimafia left a historical mark. I did not have to look for long, as Palermo is dotted with plaques, signs, monuments, reminding the observer of its bloodstained history at every turn. It starts even before one arrives in the city: on the way from the airport, about 40 minutes away from the city centre, the taxi or bus passes the point where judges Falcone and Morvillo and their escort lost their lives in a gruesome mafia attack on the 23rd of May 1992. In a sense, the first thing somebody sees of Palermo is two in-memoriam obelisks in honour of two true Italian heroes, killed by the mafia villain par-excellence, Totò Riina, significantly nicknamed the boss of bosses of Cosa Nostra. Still outside the city, the visitor is already submerged in the fight between good and evil.

In the first months of my fieldwork, I drank in the whole narrative of this eternal battle directly from its source. I wandered around Palermo, and I wept in front of Falcone's tombstone. I had to kneel under the weight of the inescapability of general Dalla Chiesa's death. I seeped the most bitter coffee

in the very same bar where police inspector Boris Giuliano was gunned down by Leoluca Bagarella in broad daylight. I walked on the stones where innocent blood flowed like a river during the first and second mafia wars of the 1960s and 1980s.

During these months of exercise of (nationalistic) pride for my heroes and anger at my oppressors, I was often flabbergasted by how little of this extraordinary narrative trickled into my ordinary practice. I tried very hard to strike a conversation with my daily interlocutors, the butcher, the greengrocer, the bartender, about mafia related topics. I have no recollection of these conversations ever getting anybody's interest. My fieldnotes are fairly clear: "I don't think they [the daily interlocutors] are afraid to talk about it or don't want to. I think they are just bored." People simply were not interested in talking to me about the 1980s in terms of mafia war, or about the 1990s as the season of terror. They were interested in telling me the story of their shops, or their families, or how they got to Palermo "in 1981 from the countryside with a bike and a pocket full of coins". On the other hand, they wanted to discuss their present situation, the hardship of making ends meet in the 2010s, with the economic crisis still looming dangerously on businesses undermined by the crash of 2008.

The same day to day scarce weight my interlocutors in Ballarò attributed to mafia per-se can be extended to antimafia activism.[18] Antimafia was not an attractive topic of conversation, neither in the heroism of those who died in the name of freedom and legality, nor in the daily actions of those who are fighting today. A good example of this lack of day-to-day interest is the Addiopizzo committee. On the 29th of August 2004 Palermo woke up plastered with flyers reading "an entire people who pays *pizzo* is a people without dignity". Five students decided to raise their voices against the practice of paying extortion money for private protection to mafia. Since then, the committee has grown significantly, and is now a recognized political subject, whose members work tirelessly against extortion and racket. Shops

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[18] Antimafia, in the Italian public discourse, is an umbrella term for any kind of activity designed to further the fight against organized crime in any way possible. Its scope goes from children taking a school trip to the site of the killing of one of the heroes and reading a poem, passing through a group of volunteers taking over a plot of land to produce wine named after a victim of mafia violence, all the way up to the vastest police operation.

who adhere to the initiative have to pass an interview and a background check, as well as commit to never pay *pizzo*. They then become part of the network and are given a sign to put in their window. In Ballarò, I found it hard to discuss this initiative or individual memberships even with those exposing the sign. When my research had already morphed into something different, I found myself in the position of asking one of the main participants to this ethnography about his Addiopizzo membership:

> Me: What does it mean to you to have the Addiopizzo sign? How did you get to the point of getting it?
>
> Nicolò: I have to tell you. When I got it, I had already been doing [antimafia activity] for quite a long time. I went to the interview, and it was long. They did a good job, don't get me wrong. They checked my books and asked me questions about my past and the story of [my company]. It was fine, but at the end, when I 'passed it' the guy interviewing me asked what it means for me to have the sign, what has changed. I answered sincerely: not much…I was still the same Nicolò and [the company] was still the same [company].

Antimafia, in the case of Nicolò, was ordinary, no matter how extraordinary his interlocutors wanted to make it, me included.

If, as shown, the two extremes of mafia and antimafia were absent from my ordinary conversations or people's reflections, they were not absent from the daily life of Ballarò. This specific part of Palermo city centre is a well-known hub of the drug market. In two different instances during my stay, the two groups competing for that market, one Nigerian and the other Sicilian, came to violent confrontations culminating in an hour-long brawl with pipes, knives, bottles, and the rest. There were at least two intimidatory acts, the second involving the use of a home-made bomb that totalled a car. SOS Ballarò was born after an intimidatory act against a group of entrepreneurs trying to open a pub in a shop confiscated from a mafia boss. Mafia was not absent. It was very much present, and it would be wrong to say otherwise. It

was not the main character though. It was frequently side-lined when discussing other issues, even the one of drug pushing and consumption: once, after a two-hour discussion on the topic with some fellow activists, Margherita felt the need to tell the 15 people sitting in circle that "we should also keep in mind the problem of mafia…" Mafia is, in the context I will describe in the next chapters, not so central in its morality or in its history; mafia is one amongst the many problems activists want to tackle. One might say, it is a symptom of these problems and not the cause:

> The fact that mafia is in Ballarò is undeniable. I don't care about that though. I care about the fact that it is appealing. I don't want to fight the mafia; I want to fight the reasons why a 15-year-old is more attracted to mafia than to opening shop in the market. What makes Ballarò *fertile ground* for Cosa Nostra? That's my problem!

Tommaso, another of the main participants to this research, used words like these so many times that in my notes I started writing simply "discourse on fertile ground".

When preparing for my fieldwork at the University of Manchester, I had many discussions on my eventual role as an activist in Palermo. As said before, the literature on the south of Italy and Sicily is laser focused on mafia and antimafia. One consequence of this is that whenever authors speak of Sicilian activism (Dalla Chiesa 2014, Rakopoulos 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2019, 2020, Santino 2002, 2009, Schneider & Schneider 2003) they tend to refer to antimafia activism, like the one Addiopizzo carries out. In my mind then, it was impossible to be an activist in Palermo without being an antimafia one. Given that I set out to explore the intermediate moral dimension between mafia and antimafia, I took an a priori decision to not get involved in any movement or political activism that would constitute a potential bias in my analysis of the moral grey zone mentioned above. How could I depict a grey morality if I were involved in a polarizing narrative of heroism and battle against evil? To my great surprise, one of the first ethnographic facts I

encountered is that activism in Ballarò and Palermo (like in any other place) takes many forms. Ballarò sees the presence of countless associations, NGOs, cooperatives etc. none of which are specifically engaging in antimafia activism. At the same time, as Nicolò argued,

> of course, we are doing antimafia! Fighting poverty in all its forms, working for people to not be left behind or overlooked IS antimafia.
>
> Me: Why not giving birth to another Libera[19] then? SOS Ballarò brings together other associations: why not making your own Libera?
>
> Nicolò: Because that would be…not enough, reductive. When I was younger, I did that kind of activism, I felt like a knight in a shining armour. Ballarò changed my opinion though. I love the guys of Addiopizzo, Don Ciotti [President of Libera] is one of my heroes, but I am not him, I wanted to do something else. We wanted to create a network that would bring light in every corner of the quarter, without distinction. If it is a kid that doesn't have the books to go to school, I don't want to feel like that's not what I do. Do you understand me? I don't want to just carry a flag around.

 I think I did understand him.

To conclude, this thesis is the product of a long personal reflection, sparked by the century long history of the battle between the Italian people and what I believe is its worst enemy. In an attempt to add nuance and complexity to this dichotomic discourse through ethnographic practice and a study of moral grey zones, I ended up sideling mafia activity and antimafia activism, following the everyday practice of my interlocutors, while tracing their steps on a myriad of different paths for activism in Palermo and Ballarò, ultimately

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[19] Libera is an umbrella NGO grouping many associations active in antimafia action across the spectrum. It is the largest Italian antimafia NGO, responsible amongst countless things to have successfully lobbied the parliament for the introduction of legislation on seizing and re-purposing illegally obtained goods and real estate (law 109-96 of the Italian penal code).

becoming an activist myself, deeply engaged in the understanding and changing of the complexion of the aforementioned *fertile ground*. For these reasons, this thesis will not provide an in-depth analysis of mafia activities, or of mafia impact, or of mafia influence in Ballarò. At the same time, it will not extensively focus on antimafia activism, or antimafia initiatives, or antimafia narratives. All these things were present, all the time, one way or the other. If I were to concentrate on them alone though, I would not be able to describe and analyse all the other lenses through which SOS Ballarò and the people part of this ethnography understand their quarter and its issues, as well as the many ways they come up with to try and tackle them. Throughout the thesis I will refrain from dedicating too much space to the two polar extremes; I will not write a comprehensive historical overlook of mafia or antimafia. Even the two words will feature but a handful of times. This is not just the product of my initial choices and the way this research was born and developed before I arrived in Palermo, but also of the way in which politically active people in Ballarò reason around their politics and activism. In the next pages I will describe and analyse the *fertile ground* on which mafia influence flourishes, and the way people active in SOS Ballarò and beyond try to challenge the idea that that ground is fertile *just* for mafia influence. This is an ethnography of a group of people trying to reclaim that ground and build the political power to decide what should or should not grow on it.

Chapter One
The Roadmap

In this first chapter I will provide a compendium for the reader to navigate the thesis. As said in the introduction, the four chapters will explore in detail the assembly of SOS Ballarò (chapter 2), processes of urban re-qualification (chapter 3), the San Saverio market (chapter 4), and the historical market of Ballarò (chapter 5). These four phenomena are complex and stratified and happen in an urban context intricate and ever-changing. To help the reader understand the context in which they happen, I will provide three descriptions aimed at painting a colourful picture, one the reader can ideally walk through. Mimicking my everyday practice as an ethnographic activist, I will walk through the quarter (both literally and figuratively) and unpack the content of my daily routine made of multiple encounters in the alleys of Ballarò and amongst the stalls of the two markets. As I said, this first chapter can be used as a compendium: here, the reader will find basic information on the people populating any given chapter, as well as an idea of the geography of the area, its economic and political landscape, the intricacies of its cultural and social specificities. On the other hand, I hope to provide a sense of the (metaphorical and literal) space, its colours, smells, soundscapes etc.

This operation is necessary for two reasons. On a more practical side, the reader will be introduced to characters and places in a more organic way, allowing me to avoid repetitions at the beginning of every analysis having to explain in detail who a specific person is or what role they have in that context. On the other side, a thick description of the protagonists of my account and the places where my ethnography happened will help the reader in capturing the sense of space Ballarò is capable to convey, the *uniqueness* its inhabitants are so proud of. In doing so, I also hope to transmit the sense of deep processual complexity in which my ethnography happened: nothing in Ballarò was ever still, easy to capture, one and the same for long stretches of time and space. As I will show, in Ballarò garbage is next to delicacy, the smallest alley ends in the biggest square, the most progressive idea sits hands in hands with racism or misogyny, love and conflict feature in everyone's relation with everyone else. Through a thick multi-layered description that

the reader can use in any way they deem necessary, I hope to give back the deep sense of possibility that permeates the quarter, and to lay the foundation to conclude that it is exactly thanks to this apparently chaotic cluttering of features that an informal, unregistered group of people like SOS Ballarò is able to sit next to the State Institution and drive its action.

1. SOS Ballarò: Breaking Down the Assembly.

As I mentioned, when I arrived in Palermo my idea for an ethnography did not involve any activism or association of any sort. I had the feeling all the activism one could imagine here had to relate to antimafia. I deemed the risk to develop a biased opinion on the ethics of living in Ballarò too high to take. Therefore, in the first months of my experience, I stayed away from associations, NGOs, and the like. I tried to immerse myself in a routine that would not include words like cooperative, committee, collective, society…it was not hard to notice though how common these words were in Albergheria: in a few hundred metres, one stumbles upon

1) Circolo Arci Porco Rosso, a space dedicated to assisting migrant communities;
2) Cooperativa Turistica Terradamare, a group of tourist guides offering alternative tours of the city centre and Albergheria in particular;
3) Complesso Santa Chiara, the series of buildings from where the Salesian society addresses nutritional and education poverty in the quarter;
4) ALAB, a network of artisans/artists and upcyclers;
5) Handala, an association working on street education and the housing crisis;
6) Moltivolti, a coworking space/restaurant offering desks to smaller NGOs to operate and network, while addressing a wide range of political issues;

The list goes on, especially considering that Moltivolti is a hub offering 14 independent workstations to just as many associations that usually stick around for a year or so, until they become too big to work form a single desk and move out, only to be promptly replaced by a new-born NGO. I was taken aback by the sheer numbers, and by the fact none of them were explicitly

working on mafia and antimafia. My ethnographic project though, completely shifted when I learnt about another political subject that looked different from the get-go (for more on this shift, see Introduction, sec. 7-8). Patrizio, a fellow researcher conducting ethnographic research in Palermo since mid-2016, told me about this "public assembly", SOS Ballarò, meeting weekly and trying to tackle issues related to the Albergheria following a principle of "horizontal democracy". I was enticed by the idea, given my past as an activist during my undergraduate studies in Bologna (north of Italy) in the #Occupy movement. Even so, as a result of that experience and the lack of tangible political outcomes I reckon it had, I was coy about the possibility for me to feel invested in a similar political project. I was nevertheless curious, if anything from an ethnographic standpoint: "they are very active and present, I don't think you can leave them out of an ethnography of Ballarò", Patrizio told me in one of our conversations. I followed his advice to "check them out, it's going to be fun!" In the following months, SOS Ballarò became my home, and the undisputed protagonist of my ethnography and my thesis. Some of its core members are heavily featured in this thesis and became my political family in Palermo. As I will show, SOS Ballarò has no leader, spokesperson, chairperson, or board. The only label I will use throughout the thesis is that of core member. By this I mean the handful of people that were present from the very first SOS assembly and more heavily featured in our weekly discussions. Some of these, like Tommaso and Nicolò (see below), were also more present in the public eye, the former becoming an elected official during my fieldwork, and the latter spearheading many of the projects and events happening in Ballarò. Nevertheless, inside the assembly they did not enjoy any particular decisional power, and, if Tommaso was a vocal and passionate activist, Nicolò very seldom expressed his opinion in the discussion, preferring a more practical (and silent) approach. To expand on these dynamics and following the opinion of many of the participants to this research, there is only one way to get properly introduced to SOS Ballarò, and

that is to sit in assembly, listen, speak, and learn from the others. With this in mind, let's meet them.[20]

It is six o'clock, Tuesday afternoon. I am sitting on the smooth marble stairs in front of the portal of the Santa Chiara church[21], one of the baroque jewels in the Ballarò crown and the most important political/religious institution in Albergheria. Waiting for the others to arrive, I am scribbling notes from a previous conversation, listening to some music, smoking a cigarette. In the half hour that takes SOS members to arrive to the assembly, I gather my thoughts, decompress, and mentally prepare for the two-hours-plus discussion ahead of me. Peppe, Giorgio, and Sara arrive and sit with me for a laugh on the stairs, to then enter the Santa Chiara complex and prepare a room for our assembly. As people continue to arrive, we sit in a circle of chairs, rarely more than 20. Some members are always present, and the assembly does not start, or starts very slowly, if they are not there. Participants outside of this core group are never exactly the same ones.

When everyone is ready, Nicolò, one of the core members, opens the discussion by reading the agenda he circulated in the weekly email to call for the assembly. Usually two or three rather generic points, the agenda is more of an icebreaker than anything else: we very rarely follow it or discuss all the points or even take it into any consideration: "I know we said we were going to talk about [this or that topic] but we first have to discuss what happened this morning, when we went to talk to the city council about [a third topic]". Usually, Nicolò intervenes once or twice in an assembly. As he says, "I am not really a talker, I am a doer". In the economy of SOS Ballarò he is in charge of logistics. If SOS organizes an event, Nicolò knows where the sound system, the barbecue, the gardening tools etc. can be found, who to borrow them from, where to return them once it is all over. He is the president of the Cooperative Terradamare, and works endless hours walking mainly

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[20] The vignette about my very first assembly can be found in chapter 2, section 2.1. The following description results from the many others I was a part of in the year I spent as a member of SOS Ballarò.

[21] Santa Chiara is a religious complex cared for by the homonymous Salesian society in the heart of Ballarò. Alongside the Baroque church, the complex is made of several other buildings, meeting rooms, an auditorium, two playgrounds, a theatre, and, in its basement, the remains of the Punic wall erected in the XII century.

Palermitan and Italian tourists around Ballarò to show them the "crumbs of beauty that people think are insignificant", because "beauty, in a place like Ballarò, has to be nurtured everywhere you can find it". He is in his early forties, married with two children, and has lived in the quarter since 2008. He has been politically active for a long time: before SOS Ballarò he was part of catholic associations and societies (like the Salesians), and worked mainly on issues of disenfranchisement of impoverished populations. In 2015, during the first SOS assembly he was present and vocal and angry and determined: mafia had just set a pub on fire right next to his office. He was sitting to the right of another SOS core member and protagonist of this thesis: Tommaso.

SOS Ballarò has no established hierarchy; formally, it does not have a president, a spokesperson, a committee, a board; it is not registered as an NGO, an association, a foundation. Nevertheless, some members are more present and prominent than others, especially in the public eye. Tommaso is one of these core members. Given his rhetoric ability and long political experience, the assembly often asks him to speak with the media or work out the language for an official letter. His acumen and presence in the public discourse were the springboard to convince him to run for office as the president of the first district of the city of Palermo, the one comprising Albergheria and the whole city centre, in June 2017. His role as an SOS member shifted as a result of him winning that election, mainly because of his reflection on possible conflicts of interest between the positions of activist and that of elected official. Tommaso has a "long political past", as he would say, spent in the student movement when he was at university, and in the movement for housing rights (among other initiatives) after his student life:

> I was always trying to work horizontally, in the most democratic
> way possible. If you were to ask me in those years, I'd have told
> you I was a Marxist, an autonomist maybe.[22] Genoa 2001: I
> believed in that project very much […] I would have never

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[22] *Autonomia* is a form of political activism specific to Italy, born in the 1960s and based on Gramscian theory. It has affinities also to Spanish anarcho-syndicalism from the early XX century. For more, see Grindon (2007) and Mitropoulos (2007).

imagined I would become an elected official. I think I would have slapped whoever would have told me!

Between his 'radical' past and his 'official' present, he experienced SOS Ballarò. The best way to understand the effects of his activism in SOS is to refer to what he told me late one night, at the end of a ferocious argument we had on some initiative the assembly decided to take, in his mind too radical and politically insensitive of the work the institutions were doing for and with us. After I called him a moderate (intended as an offense) and told him I thought he, as my "political father", should never argue against a radical decision taken by an assembly, he answered that

> SOS Ballarò is a method France'. It's not a question of moderate or radical. It's a question of doing something the whole assembly can embrace and push forward. You cannot walk three steps in front of everybody else because, in doing so, you'll arrive maybe first, but you'll be alone there. Believe me, I made that mistake many times. Do you think I didn't go through the same process when we started? I did. SOS is a learning method.

In the year I spent in SOS I had to learn this lesson many times over, virtually in each and every assembly. I saw radical thinkers, Marxists and anarchists, organize a procession for the saint protector of the city or an event to sustain the works of the local parish. At the same time, I saw the priest, together with members of the Catholic Action, respond in radical anti-fascist or anti-capitalist terms to acts of racism or the enactment of new austerity measures by the government. In short, in the years they spent in SOS Ballarò next to each other, Nicolò moved to the left and learnt to raise his voice to speak truth to power, while Tommaso learnt to slow down and commensurate his political action to the one of those around him. In a conversation I had with both, and in an almost synchronized guru fashion, they told me "SOS works because it decided it can only walk as fast as the slowest of its members".

The level of conflict in the weekly assembly is usually very low. Members tend to listen to each other very carefully, interrupting the least possible, to

allow for one of the basic rules SOS gave itself to completely unfold: "no matter who is talking, or what he's saying, it is important. Even if it makes you angry, even if it's wrong. You listen, then try to answer." Peppe is another core member coming from catholic activism. He is always focused on the quarter and its politics more than politics in general and works hard so that SOS discussions are always grounded and focused on specific issues. I heard him say many times how he is not interested in political ideals or the chief world systems, but in that specific manhole that does not work and makes the street flood. This does not mean that, in the assembly, he would refrain from reasoning that "the city government has cut the budget of [the company responsible for sewage] for the past ten years to give the money to corrupt entrepreneurs. What else can we expect?" On the contrary, it suggests that SOS gladly avoids a political discussion unless it sees its immediate value in terms of neighbourhood politics. During my research I only once had a discussion with Tommaso and Carlo, an older activist with a strong entrepreneurial mindset, about political ideologies per-se. For half an hour, we discussed if SOS was a socialist, Marxist, anarchist project, trying to delve into the facets of political philosophy and determine once and for all which of them was the right label for us. Carlo listened and participated in the discussion, bringing his knowledge of the bible and his many years of experience as a capitalist businessman. Me and Tommaso contributed with our textbook knowledge and experiences in the NoGlobal and #Occupy movements. The conversation ended when Carlo played the wisdom card: "I like discussing with you about these topics, you two are interesting. My question is though: what does it do for Ballarò if we say that SOS is socialist or that anarchy is our ideal?" Me and Tommaso had no rebuttal. In the political economy of the quarter, there were few other things which would matter less than defining SOS according to canons of political theory.

To sum up, SOS Ballarò is a method, a learning experience, made of assembly discussion and pragmatism linked to a specific territory. Its politics are linked to its method(ide)ology and its territory more than to a general project on the whole of society. This way, the priest sits next to the anarchist, and they share an almost unimaginable level of political and ethical coherence. I will

examine in detail SOS method and politics in chapter 2: here I deem necessary to break the spell and show some of the critical points and conflicts the assembly faces on a daily basis. The first is linked to internal conflict, and how it affects assembly procedures and decision-making processes. The other two are linked to its composition: the assembly 1) is overwhelmingly white and 2) has a substantial male majority.

In this thesis, I will often refer to the assembly as a unified subject featuring low degrees of internal conflict. If this is largely based on my ethnographic experience, it is also an effect of my deep involvement as an activist. This hybrid positionality affected my fieldwork by e.g., overlooking or brushing aside moments of conflict or dissident ideas to push forward a specific action or project. Nevertheless, moments of conflict were an integral part of assembly practices. During my time in Palermo, the assembly lost at least two regular participants: Eddy and Margherita. I will touch on the reasons that brought the former to cut his relationship with the assembly later on. Margherita was a central figure in the process to establish a partnership between SOS, the local healthcare provider, and the municipality on the issue of drug consumption in Ballarò (for more see chap. 2 sec. 3.1). When she learnt that SOS was tackling the issue (late July 2017), she started attending assemblies and working on writings, events, and meetings to involve the institutions and set up an agenda together. I was also working on the issue, and we were mainly left alone by the rest of the group to take care of all the aspects of this process. Margherita complained multiple times to the rest of the assembly that we needed help in managing the politics of this partnership and the myriad of meetings it brought along, especially when SOS decided to organize a conference on the theme in late October. Despite being contrary to the event, Margherita worked on it tirelessly for two weeks, always making clear to other members how necessary their help was. We managed to set up the conference, and, in the restitution assembly the day after, she voiced her anger to the surprise of those in the room and proclaimed she would never participate in SOS again.

What Margherita's episode shows is that a politically consistent environment like SOS Ballarò has moment of high levels of conflict that cannot be solved, even if conflict management is one of the stated purposes

of the group. Here, conflict arose from an unbalanced distribution of workload amongst members, with Margherita (and me with her) experiencing significant activist burnout (Gorski 2019).[23] Given the inability of other members to significantly help out on the matter, Margherita felt "unheard and alone", as she told me many times, and left the group: "I've already done so much [for SOS]! I don't know what they want more…Some blood maybe?"

Activist burnout is the major source of conflict inside SOS. It has major repercussions on how activists relate to each other, creating fractures and ruptures that are almost always impossible to solve. In the case above, Tommaso, Nicolò, Peppe, could not help in any major way, being already involved in many other projects and having their own jobs and family lives. Nevertheless, conflict was not managed and disrupted the internal balance for weeks.

The case of ideological conflicts is different. As I will analyse in depth later on (chap. 2 sec. 2), difference in ideas is treated differently from what I described above. The assembly adopts a consensus building process aimed at ironing out differences in ideas, "until one ends up with something everyone can live with" and strive for (Graeber 2004: 84). By this I do not mean that conflicting views on a certain theme were discussed in an assembly until there was consensus, but that an assembly could feature ideological conflicts that members would discuss after, maybe in small groups, maybe for the full week until the next meeting, in the process that I label as the 'assembly that never ends' (chap 2 sec. 3.2.), until consensus was reached and differences put aside.

The other member that left SOS during my fieldwork is Eddy. He is a man in his 30s from Mali, who has lived in palermo since the late 1990s. During my fieldwork he went from being a stable presence in the assembly to breaking up its political ties (but not the relationships tout-court) with other members. He lamented may times how SOS was unable to reach migrant communities, of which Ballarò has many. As a member, I felt the absence of migrant communities in the assembly as a failure, and so did the others. At

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[23] The only reason why I did not experience burnout at the same level of Margherita is that she had another job as an educator for special needs children, while my full time job was that of researcher/activist.

the same time, we always felt swamped in the series of projects we were pushing, citing it as the reason why we were unable to work on the relationship between different communities. On one side, this is another example of activist burnout (Gorski 2019). On the other it shows how the assembly was unable to significantly tackle issues of race and implicit bias. Eddy was told many times to take over the issue of outreach. Delegating responsibility to Eddy, the only black person consistently participating in the assembly shows other members' inability to admit our faults and dedicate significant time and labour to the issue of race and inclusion. Migrant communities were present and active during events SOS organized but were not involved in the discussion leading to such events.

On the other hand, the lack of a focus on gender dynamics is a gap of my analysis. The markets, both in the marketers and customers, are overwhelmingly male; city officials in Palermo are mainly men; SOS members, especially those who more heavily feature in this thesis are white middle-aged heterosexual men. Due to limitations of access and my inability to thoroughly investigate gender dynamics, women are often in the background of my ethnographic account. Hence, it becomes fundamental to say that women are present in SOS Ballarò, and, although most have relations to the male members (Patrizia was Tommaso's partner, Carla is in a relationship with another activist, etc.), their political work is in no way defined by these relationships and is focused more often than not on gender inequality. Patrizia works with women in Santa Chiara, organizing laboratories, safe spaces to discuss gender violence, talks on unpaid labour and domestic care. On the other hand, women are central to every action the assembly takes. For example, Carla is the engine of every major project undertaken by SOS Ballarò. When SOS decided to organize a buskers festival in the quarter, Carla set it up from scratch; when a network of associations decided to buy a boat to start rescue missions in the Mediterranean sea, Carla was in charge of logistics;[24] when, during the COVID-19 pandemic, SOS decided to distribute goods of first necessity to impoverished families, Carla

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[24] For more https://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/details/ships/shipid:283058/mmsi:247536 000/imo:7222669/ve ssel:MARE JONIO. Accessed 10/06/2020.

and Patrizia set up an operation involving about 80 volunteers and serving almost 200 families a week for three months.

Despite my inability to follow gender dynamics and properly analyse them, women's contribution to the politics of SOS Ballarò is fundamental, even though their presence in the assembly discussion is often underrepresented, both in my writing and in reality.

2. The San Saverio Market: How to Make the Ethnographer Speechless.

> Patrizio: Fra', come on, today I'll show you a very cool thing. We go to the barter market in Ballarò.
> Me: What's that?
> P.: It's a thing that happens on Saturdays and Sundays: people from all over the place come down to Ballarò to sell whatever. It's completely illegal, nobody knows much about it, actually, but if something gets stolen from you, you should totally go there and check. I've been there once, there is a lot of stuff, used, new, counterfeit, stolen. It's very interesting. Even ethnographically!
> M: Wow, all right, I'll get ready then, maybe I'll find a new project.
> P.: Yeah, don't get your hopes up too much. People there do not like to be asked questions and even less to give answers. I don't think you can gain access and do ethnography there. Oh, and leave your wallet home.

It was a sunny Sunday morning of early November 2016. I was at the very beginning of my fieldwork, still crushing on Patrizio's couch and looking for an apartment of my own. Patrizio is a fellow researcher, sociologist with a penchant for qualitative research. At that point he was half-way through his fieldwork in Palermo and helped me set up my project in many ways, one of which involved this visit to the barter market, or, as I will call it from now on, San Saverio.

Given that "you have to get there early, the market starts at 5 in the morning", we woke up as early as we could, and started walking in the tepid

sun towards Ballarò. To get to San Saverio, in the western part of the Albergheria, we had to first walk the quarter's intricate alleys, right, left, dodge that corner, step over an abandoned washing machine, say good morning to a group of people having coffee on their doorstep, to then enter Piazza Carmine. This is the largest square in the whole Albergheria, and the epicentre of the historical market (see chap. 1 sec. 3). Even though Piazza Carmine was crowded and noisy, I could still grasp and understand the situation around me: I had seen the historical market before, and I had a sense of how business was conducted there. My perception and presence of mind shifted immediately once we walked out of the square to the western part of Albergheria. The crowd of customers became massive; we could hardly walk. The street was flanked by tables of counterfeit and used shoes: Adidas, Nike, Puma, all for 5 to 15 € a pair, sitting in perfect lines one shoe over the other to display all the angles. African guys in their twenties were advertising their merchandize, while haggling with customers over price or quantity. A few steps ahead a Sicilian man in his seventies was slowly packing eggs in an old newspaper under the shadow of a faded beach umbrella, his customer looking absent-mindedly to the packs of flour and the cheap olive oil next to the pile of egg cartons. A few inches ahead, in the tiny space between two parked cars, a guy was discussing with a man in his fifties the properties of some power tools laying on the ground.

The spine of the San Saverio market is Via Grasso, a 250 m stretch of road starting from Piazza Carmine and finishing at the San Saverio church, a Jesuit baroque complex with a tall cupola visible all the way from Ballarò. The cupola offers a sharp contrast between the anthill-like situation happening at street level and the solidity and precision of its profile against the sharp blue sky. My eyes kept going back and forth between the array of objects and humanity in motion, and the stillness of the silver dome: a welcomed sight, offering a moment of peace amidst the incomprehensibly busy spectacle in front of me.

On the right side of the street, a handful of vendors were using small garage-like buildings as a warehouse/shop, while sitting on a chair behind a table with their goods on display. Some others had a table and a beach umbrella, or even a gazebo: their merchandise was in order and protected

from the sun, divided in categories using bowls, crates, boxes. Some vendors seemed to bother less: they had a table, but all their stuff was in no apparent order, just piles of different things customers had to rummage through to find a bargain. Some others used a cloth or a plastic tarp on the asphalt or the sidewalk, especially for shoes, clothes, kitchenware, etc. To display their wares, some were using the curb, a little cement step surrounding a green area, a bench, the hood of a car, a series of prams. Clothes were hanging from improvised racks, a nail in the wall, a pipe, a window grill, or the fence of the museum of natural history. Some vendors did not have a cloth or a table or anything else: their goods simply laid on the asphalt.

Baffled by the sheer amount of 'things' happening around me, I just wandered for a few hours. My main purpose was to simply wrap my head around the phenomenon of a market that sells nearly everything in any plausible fashion. Smells, noises, the crowd not allowing me to move freely, vendors shouting to each other and to customers about their products, the Neapolitan music blaring in the background: I was consistently overwhelmed for the whole duration of our visit. The thing that kept me alert the most was the variety of goods on sale. Power tools here, clothes there. Canned food and a set of wrenches. A stack of used shoes next to cutlery. A table covered in porn DVDs and pirated CDs. Hi-fi sets, TVs, videogames, phones, tablets, laptops. An old electric organ from the 1970s needing "just a bit of a fix", a typewriter in perfect conditions, a complete collection of comic books spanning 20 years. Furniture of all sorts. Puppies, live rabbits, bread, endangered birds, a packet of sliced cheese that "expired only yesterday!" Contraband cigarettes next to football teams' jerseys and memorabilia. A delicate watercolour painting of a woman sitting on the grass.

Then I had to stop for a minute, questioning what I was actually witnessing. On a tabletop laid a big salad bowl full of spare keys. Hundreds of them, I reckoned. Of all shapes and colours, from the little ones to open a cheap padlock, to the sturdy ones with a long neck and a complicated head to open a security door. My first question (that I kept for myself) was: why? Who goes to a second-hand market to buy a spare key? What is the reasoning behind it? If you lost your keys the night before you could come to San Saverio and look if they were in this bowl? Was I being naïve or experiencing

cultural shock? Was every Palermitan aware of this bowl? I never saw it again in my months in San Saverio: I guess I will just never know what was behind that ephemeral presence. Next to the big bowl of spare keys, a smaller one, full of digital token generators, the little plastic things the bank issues for the customer to get a unique code to access their finances. And the swirl of questions started again…

At first sight nothing there made any sense whatsoever.

Luckily, I was able to take a second, a third, and a millionth look at the San Saverio market during my stay in Palermo. Contrary to Patrizio's well-justified opinion, the market became accessible for ethnographic investigation thanks to SOS Ballarò's ability to establish relationships and set up a process to better the conditions of all those touched by the phenomenon (for more see chap. 4). In the months I spent in the market, I could push away some of the confusion I experienced during my first visit: my daily presence allowed me to discern between vendors, stalls, merchandize, seasons. I learnt that the market is not just a weekend affair but happens every day; that it is a very poor affair, with vendors struggling to put together a few euros a day; that, yes, there are stolen objects on sale there, but vendors mainly scavenge the garbage bins around the city or recycle goods from house moves or garage/attic clean-ups.

Dissipating my foggy confusion meant substituting it with inherent complexity and layering. Nine months of ethnographic inquiry uncovered a series of contradictions, juxtapositions, kaleidoscopic levels of internal changeability. My focus on vendors and residents in the area of the market revealed a variety of political systems, intra and interrelationships, conflicts, and understandings hard to summarize. In chapter 4 I will analyse in detail how SOS tried to tackle them to foster a process of regulation of the area, and the constitution of a body politics made of vendors responsible for the management of the market. Here it is important to give an idea of the intricacy of threads forming the tapestry adorning this part of Albergheria, starting

from the politics governing the urban space, often characterized by (potential) violence and racism.

Via Majali runs parallel to via Grasso, the main street of the market. Here vendors occupy the sidewalk 24/7, as they do not remove their objects at night but just cover them with tarps. A couple of Palermitans uses a 20 m long stretch for their furniture. Next to them, a family of Romanians sell mainly clothes. The way the Palermitan husband manages the space is made clear to me during our first encounter:

> I don't care at all: first Italians, then everybody else! Isn't it true Carmela [his wife]? [without pause] Yes, it is. We have to feed our kids. If one morning I find my space taken, I'll make them move, one way or the other, I don't care. They are gipsies, they can't do anything. Here, it is mine. It is mine here, isn't it? [Asks loudly]

Here, decisional power comes from the ability the husband has to exercise psychological violence, spreading ideas of physical violence he could resort to, if necessary. Slurs and machismo fuel his oppression, and keep nearby population contained and obedient. After the interaction above, I moved on to talk to the object of his rants, the family of Romanians selling clothes. As soon as we started talking, my interlocutors asked me to move out of sight and have our conversation out of the husband's earshot. We talked for a while, until they stopped me and summoned a man in his seventies from a nearby stall. The elderly man asked me to repeat everything I said to the others, carefully listened to the political project SOS Ballarò wanted to implement in San Saverio and reassured me SOS had the support of "this side of the market", denoting his power to speak for the Romanian community active in via Majali.

In piazza Colajanni, not 100 m away, racial politics were starkly different. Kamal, a Tunisian man in his fifties, was worried about the violence exercised by a Romanian family (for more, see chap. 4, sec 5.2), guaranteeing them vast control over one side of the square. At the same time, Marta, a Palermitan

woman in her sixties, took it upon herself to act as the mother of everyone "independently of where they are from. White, black, gipsy, even from *Sperone* [another quarter of the city, laughs], even Gaetano! They are all my children!". People would go to her to talk about their problems in the market, at home, having to do with poverty or altercations with other vendors or residents, and she would do what she could to solve them or offer comfort.[25] On one side then, managing the urban space of the market often entails tackling a certain degree of violence, physical or psychological alike.[26]

This does not mean vendors do not also exercise compassion and solidarity. The market is primarily a "framework in which hardship can be addressed" (Das & Randeira 2015: S5). Specifically for this reason

> if you come here to *vuscarit' u pani* [earn your bread], for you and your kids, we can always find a little space for you to settle and sell what you have. The market is for everybody who needs it. How can I say to someone they can't set up stall? Who am I to do that? We shrink a bit, and we make space.

Gaetano, a middle-aged Palermitan vendor and Marta's 'nemesis', expresses the idea that the market is nobody's and everybody's property at the same time, and one can access it if in need, "even you France', if you're in dire straits we'll make a space for you! [laughs]". I witnessed many times this attitude in vendors, which in turn fostered SOS framing of the market as a "public good" and a safety net, maybe "the only safety net in this part of Albergheria".

Another layer of contradictions and complexity is added by residents in the area. They, too, participate in the carousel of potential violence: especially in their use of language, they are maybe the most violent group in this context. Frustration for the continuous presence of hundreds of vendors ran rampant:

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[25] Exactly for these reasons Marta is today (June 2021) the president of the newly born association of vendors *Sbaratto*, tasked with the management of the market.
[26] During my stay in San Saverio, I never witnessed physical violence. Stories of flying slaps, punches, the occasional knife-pulling were nevertheless very common. Many of the vendors carry a pocketknife, or have a stick or a pipe somewhere near, and would show it to me to drive the point across, when I would try to minimize the violent aspect of their job.

You see them France', they are totally illegal, they are thieves, they pee and shit everywhere. And the garbage! Umph, the garbage they leave behind! […] If one day I go down [on the street] with a steel pipe and brake someone's back you'll know why!

Marco manages a small restaurant at the end of via Grasso. He is only one of the many residents who threatened the use of extreme violence against marketers: a plank, a stick, a tank of gasoline, a machine gun, are some of the things that residents told me they would use, both against vendors and the State which "is incapable of doing anything!". They feel abandoned, and maybe they are, as SOS activists recognized. Residents were worried, had security concerns, could not sleep at night, had to continuously confront vendors to exit their buildings or move their parked cars. Their friends would not come to their place to visit, as "it is frankly disgusting, and dangerous. I understand them, I stopped inviting people altogether". On the other hand, in my months of conversations with them, residents never failed to acknowledge the hardship the vast majority of vendors had to face, having to make ends meet with 5-10 euros a day, working endless hours, living in complete precarity "under the sun or the rain alike". I was often touched by the stark contrast between the beginning of my conversations, featuring imaginary machine guns mowing down people, and their end, with an account of that time something warm to eat or drink was offered, alongside a word of comfort.

The final stroke necessary to paint the picture of the San Saverio market defines the contour of a big pile of garbage. The area where the market happens is not equipped for it: there are only 10 garbage containers and one scheduled collection per week. 500 daily vendors in an already densely populated area produce a lot of trash that overflows the bins and invades sidewalks and parts of the streets. Garbage collection is sometimes done at night via bulldozer and takes hours to carry out. Everybody complains about it, while passing responsibility onto someone else. Vendors would tell me they clean their space before setting up stall and after closing. They would

put the stuff they could not sell in the bins every day. They would pay Gino 1 euro each, a man in his seventies tasked with swiping the entire area of the market every afternoon.[27] This was generally true, as it was true that many vendors, alongside other people, would go to the bins after the market closed and fetch out stuff to check if someone threw away something that could still make them a coin. Of course, nobody put garbage back in the bins after this gigantic recycling operation.

Once again, the loudest complaints about garbage came from residents: "it is impossible to walk around here, you are always stepping on something, there's always something gross on the ground!". If this was true, it was also true that residents took advantage of the situation in any way possible, from participating in the recycling process of emptying the bins and getting a good-enough object for free, to abandoning their trash on the sidewalk:

> Me: [shouting] Mrs Pina! Really? You told me this morning about
> how garbage here is everywhere and disgusts you!
> Mrs Pina: Eeehhh France', I know, but what can I do? I am a bit
> old, it's not like I can go around with garbage…

During this exchange, Mrs Pina was throwing garbage bags on to the street. From her second-floor balcony.

> Me: This is not ok. Please try not to do this, be more careful. Ah,
> and tell that to your husband too, I saw him the other night leaving
> a sofa on the curb…

Palermo is not a clean city. The municipality is continuously overwhelmed by garbage collection operations, especially big objects like furniture or appliances abandoned in every corner. San Saverio is maybe one of the major examples of this, thanks to one of its internal contradictions: everyone hates garbage on the street; everyone contributes to its presence. This reputation brings people from all over the city to come to the market at night and just

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[27] I would like to remember Gino and thank him for the huge help and support he gave me and SOS during my fieldwork. Gino passed away in early 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I agree with you Gino, "the 5-star movement is a piece of garbage not even [you] could brush away."

empty their truck after a move or a clearance of sort. The area is the proverbial sinkhole, where all the dirt converges only to clog up the system.

Ultimately, San Saverio is a complex, contradictory, multi-faceted space, where poverty, violence, racism, and marginality mix at every turn with solidarity, understanding, and care. Thanks to this apparently inextricable mess, SOS Ballarò was able to propose to vendors, residents, municipality, and anybody else interested, a solution involving the rethinking of the market as a proper site for free exchange, as an alternative to politics of removal of the market altogether and relegation of marginal population to an even more marginal part of the urban territory.

3. The Historical Market of Ballarò: a Thousand Years in the Making.

The historical market of Ballarò is the pulsating heart of the quarter: it is the main economic resource in the area, it is the biggest employer, it attracts the most tourists and the most Palermitans, who come here to both do their shopping and enjoy the peculiar atmosphere of the oldest market in the city. Ballarò is the main socio-economic factor in the neighbourhood, and the object of much of the assembly's focus. In the mind of activists (and anybody else), the market needs a revamp to lead the quarter in the process of urban re-qualification everyone deems necessary (see chap. 3). In this sense, the process of re-qualification SOS envisioned for the market is not significantly different from the process to overhaul the rest of the quarter. The historical market can be thought of as a focal point where all the issues and solutions of the area converge, a scale model representing the whole socio-cultural context of the quarter: activists' perception of Ballarò is similar to the most classic descriptions of marketplaces in anthropological literature (Geertz 1978, Geertz, Geertz, & Rosen 1979, Gell 1982), especially Gell's reading of the Dhorai market in central India as a map to understand the way social relations combine and intersect. The result of his ethnography is a modular thick description of the market as a wheel revolving around a banyan tree as its hub: with this in mind, Gell helps the reader in navigating relationships

between different villages in the area, the way in which economic power is exercised, the unfolding of the caste system in India etc.

Even if Gell does not use the notion of total social fact to describe the Dhorai market, his approach to the marketplace as an ethnographic object recalls the way in which Mauss defines a total social fact in two paragraphs of The Gift (1990: 100-101). To carve out a definition of total social fact that is at the same time as broad as possible and operational, Mauss discusses many examples of what he believes to be total social facts, using a plethora of adjectives, nouns, and verbs; he brings to the fore all the institutions he can identify in every instance he considers (economics, religion, politics, kinship etc.); he hints at inherent structural values, morphologies, ways in which a single action (like gift-giving) that endlessly repeats itself incapsulates the totality of society, and ultimately contributes to its reproduction as a whole. His intent is to convey the message that some facts have to be treated as an all-encompassing entity and investigated as such. A total social fact is an event that is only chaotic in its appearance, but is governed by precise laws and customs, which has a precise morphology and an exquisite aesthetics. Hence, a description of a total social fact should "consider[…] the whole entity [so that we can] perceive what is essential, the way everything moves, the living aspect, the fleeting moment when society […] become[s] sentimentally aware" of itself (Mauss, 1990: 102). When speaking about the markets in Palermo, some authors (Bronzini 1996, Perricone 2016) deploy the definition of total social fact, given that the market/square "contains, in its accomplishment, the entire society" (Perricone 2016: 25. My translation). On the other hand, they tend not to draw a distinction between the marketplace and the actions that individuals undertake *inside* the marketplace, conflating the two scales, and often overlooking the latter. The marketplace becomes the sole centre of analysis, a seemingly indivisible unit of analysis. My aim here is to offer a description of the historical market of Ballarò and of what happens inside it, treating both as total social facts, given that I consider both the whole Ballarò market *and* the single actions people undertake inside it as that "fleeting moment when society […] become[s] sentimentally aware" of itself (Mauss, 1990: 102). Thus, in my attempt to present the marketplace, I will offer an understandable and reusable snapshot

of its layered reality, given that it is the locus of repetition, of established routines and continuing relationships (Geertz 1978, Geertz, Geertz, & Rosen 1979, Gell 1982). On the other hand, the marketplace can be hardly considered a fact to be investigated synchronically: its space and time are specific, extraordinary (Goldstein 2016); it can incapsulate processes of societal-wide change (Liu 2007, Spector 2008); it displays the myriad of small modifications and adjustments in the everyday practice (Goldstein 2016, Stoller 2002). Ultimately, the marketplace leaves the writer juggling with the idea that no person steps in the same river twice, even though the person and the river are seemingly always the same. Ballarò is not unique in this sense: it offers the possibility for a snapshot, a representation of society at large, without ever standing still. It has been the same market since the 12th century, if not more (Balistreri & Pollaci 2008, La Duca 1994, Perricone 2016); yet, it was completely different only yesterday, two hours, and five minutes ago.

Following this conundrum, in the next pages I will attempt a description that is at the same time synchronic and diachronic, moving through the space where Ballarò happens and standing still in its midst. In an attempt to capture all these aspects, I will try to take snapshots like the photographer, as well as keep the camera rolling and the editing process ongoing like the filmmaker, while constricted by the medium of writing. To do so, I propose we go for a walk in Ballarò.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I rented an apartment a hundred metres away from the southern entrance of the market, just outside Albergheria. In my daily routine, I would go to the market to do my shopping, while timidly building my ethnographic material and making acquaintances amongst marketers. The southern entrance of the market on Corso Tukory felt like a threshold: the many cars roaring down the Corso would disappear, substituted by the polyphony of marketers' voices and customers' chattering. The wide tarmacked street, flanked by three or four stories high buildings was filled with smells, noises, colours, leaving me punctually amazed. As a newbie in Ballarò, I struggled to understand the cramming of stalls, seemingly spilling one on to the next. Fish, meat, houseware, garments, contraband cigarettes.

At a second look though, the apparent chaos would fade away. I was always struck by the careful and methodical way in which produce was distributed and displayed on the countertops: fruit and vegetables appeared colourful and fragrant, all arranged by hues in perfect pyramids. Red and yellow fruit framed green, purple, white vegetables. The artichoke with his long neck stood up in the middle of the bright green cauliflower, surrounded by oranges, apples, and pears, to create the shock from green to red and shade it back to green again.

> Me: Guido, do you have a moment? Can I ask you a question?
>
> Guido: Don't know if I can answer though…
>
> M: How do you decide how to display the produce? It looks so beautiful!
>
> G: Ah, this is how the owner wants it to be, but it's the way his father did it before him. It basically is the best way to put stuff down to show it all, show all the colours while making so that the client knows everything is fresh and abundant.
>
> M: Are you telling me it's marketing strategy?
>
> G: Yeah! I mean, I'm not sure, I haven't studied it…But I know that if there are two bunches of lettuce, I don't sell any. If there are 15 well-arranged ones, I sell 10.
>
> M: And the colours?
>
> G: For that you have to ask Lollo, he knows everything. He even goes around the market to do arrangements for other stalls: that's how good he is!

Guido and Lollo manage a stall together and sold me produce almost every day for a year. I often wondered why I would find Lollo arranging produce behind other stalls. As Guido told me, he has the specific knowledge and taste to do that, acquired through practice and the teachings of his employer, who, in turn, learnt it from his father. In a circle of generational knowledge production Ballarò is very proud of, Lollo was the vessel of the "proper way to do business". In exquisite tautological fashion, Ballarò marketers would

often say that "we do things this way because this is the way you do things properly in Ballarò".

After my transaction with Guido, I would leave my bags with him, to retrieve them on my way home after having done the rest of my shopping. Strolling down this first part of the market, I had to brace myself for the sudden change in scenery. The second part of the market is very different, and it greets you with a slap in the face: the 'pungent' smell of salted and dried fish coming out of a stall on the corner forms an impenetrable if invisible cloud capable to make any eyes watery. Here, the tall buildings allow little to no sunlight to reach the street level, now made of stones instead of tarmac; stones that are infamously and continuously slippery because of the water spilling on the ground from the countertops. The road is no more than 3-4 metres wide, with stalls pressed against the walls, using one of the ground-floor rooms as storage space. Merchants are trapped behind their counters. The impression left in me was that marketers would arrive at 6 am and the road would be empty. They would open their shutters and start setting up stall pivoting around a single point, imprisoning themselves until 8 pm, when they would pivot the other way around and dismantle everything, finally setting themselves free.

Franco would greet me with a resounding call: "Aaahhh *aviemu u Pisanu* [the one from Pisa is here]" he would shout, sharpening his butcher knife to cut me some meat. His refrigerated counter, at least six metres long sits on the sidewalk, close to the building behind him, an open ground floor room hosting his refrigerators and all the machinery a butcher needs to prepare ready-to-cook delicacies. His counter always looked lavish: skewers, cutlets, sausages, all lined up, side by side beef, pork, chicken, turkey, in a seemingly endless parade of succulence. Medium size carcasses hang from the ceiling, pierced by shiny hooks. The narrow and crowded street left me no choice but to smell, almost taste, the products hanging at eye/nose level.

> Me: [mockingly] Come on, Franco, when are you going to make
> a proper shop, put the counter inside, set up some doors and
> become a proper butcher?

Franco: Aaahhh I can see in Pisa you have no proper butcher then! The counter in Ballarò stays outside, on the sidewalk! You can see me work, there is no "behind the scenes"! You can look at me, you can smell my meats, you can see them, you could even touch if I had a say on it! Here, taste a bit of my sausage, the best in Ballarò!

M: You [butchers] all say that Franco…

F: Yes, but I am no liar…Do you want a bit more for lunch?

M: Of course I do! It's the best sausage in Ballarò…

Franco, with his loud and jaunty demeanour, embodies the idea of the Ballarò marketer. He knows all his clients by name, he knows their habits, he tries to prevent and guide their decisions based on "what is best for me *and* them": he wants to sell the best he has, but also what he *needs* to sell. I would often go home with the freshest slice of beef and some sausages he made yesterday, paying them a bit less than usual.

In the first months of fieldwork, I would usually stop after this second stretch of the market, as I knew very few people in the last two parts, Piazza Carmine and Via Ballarò, and I usually had all my shopping done by then. As my fieldwork progressed though, both my stroll in Ballarò and its main purpose changed. Working as an SOS member to promote an infrastructural intervention in the market (see chap. 5), I ventured in the last two parts more and more, both to do my shopping and carry out my duty as an activist, vastly broadening my ethnographic horizon.

After the borderline-claustrophobic experience of the second stretch of the market, there is another sudden change in scenery, as the street finishes in the vastest space of the whole Albergheria: Piazza Carmine. Roughly shaped like an eye, Piazza Carmine is a chaotic space, divided in two sections by an electricity turret and a set of wheeled bins, the first a horrible slab of white concrete, the second diffusing their 'aroma' in the whole square. At the same time, the stalls here are the most famous in the market. The square is loud, colourful, redolent; a sensorial experience able to leave Palermitans and tourists delighted, dazed, and confused. On one side of the square, buildings

crumble under the years of disrepair, even though now some are being refurbished. On the other side, the church of Carmine Maggiore, dating back to the XIII century, stands in all its beauty, while lending its fence to the marketers as they hook merchandise to it or pile up empty crates. The first times I walked in Piazza Carmine I discovered its fishmongers: active from early morning to early afternoon, they would advertise their products constantly, in a singsong fashion and in a dialect even Palermitans struggle to understand. The language of *abbanniata,* this specific form of shouted advertisement, is relentless in creating a melody able to capture attention *beyond* meaning. Under the spring sun or in the refreshing shadow of the tarps covering the stalls, cradled by the modal sound of the abbanniata, looking at the bright red meat of the tuna or the gushing clam, the customer is asked to make a choice. The eye wonders between the freshest seafood salad, the coral red shrimp, the seabass held in darting motion by an invisible thread. In this spectacle of freshness, breathing in the scent of the sea, I would be attracted by the long sword of the swordfish:

> Fishmonger: What can I give you? I have them all! [proceeds to shout a list of delicacies]
> Me: How is that swordfish? Fresh?
> F: Of course it is! You want the best one? You have to go for the bigger one! I know it costs some coins more, but it's worth it!
> M: Well, you know what? Give me a slice of the bigger one and make me happy!

In my justified enthusiasm for what was about to come once I had cooked the bright pink fish, I would pay, take my bag, and go home to open it and find a slice of the *smallest* swordfish the fishmonger had on display. I had been tricked. Loosing focus in Piazza Carmine can have dire consequences, especially for somebody lacking the cultural capital to understand what is going on, or the social capital to be introduced to a fishmonger (or marketers in general) by somebody vouching for you:

> Me: Mario told me if I wanted some good fish, I should come to you. Am I in the right place?

Fishmonger: Aaahhh well done Mario bringing in new clients! Of course, you are in the right place! What can I serve you?

[…]

F: And don't forget to tell Mario how I treated you!

Piazza Carmine is the epicentre of the market, a concentration of all that the market is. Here, one can observe and experience the good and the bad, the beauty and the ugliness, the fresh and the rotten. The church, patrimony of UNESCO, sits next to ruins from the bombardments of 1943; the sweetest strawberry is three metres away from garbage; a fully licensed stall shares a side with a contraband-cigarettes vendor. In Piazza Carmine marketers cut, chop, boil, stew, deep fry, roast. The tourist finds a pret-a-mangér glass of diced fruit, while the local enjoys his plate of stewed cow intestines. The stones on the ground are the smoothest: they make your stride feel like you are floating. They are also always wet, a feature that ruined a lot of people's days, as they fell flat on their bottoms.

The influence of touristic presence becomes central in the last stretch of the market: Via Ballarò. Commercial activities here are slightly different, catering for customers who stay around a few minutes, maybe hours, and leave to never come back. Marketers either re-directed their activity to meet tourists' needs or re-designed it completely. This is why here one can find the souvenir and the gadget, or the vacuum-sealed small bag of curated produce perfect for an in-flight hand luggage. As tourists enjoy the idea of buying a Godfather-themed t-shirt, they are also enticed by the smell of freshly made pastries and coffee, as the bar on the other side of the road sends scents down the street. Restaurants at the end of via Ballarò advertise in three languages, as the waiters try to convince passers-by to stop for a bite. Here I would meet fellow activists, usually sitting at Rosa's bar, in front of a graffiti painted by the kids of the neighbourhood. If it always feels like this stretch of the market is thriving busy with tourists, there is more than meets the eye:

I know, it looks like we are doing well, but if you pay attention, we are not. Count the shutters that never open. I remember when

next to our bar in the 1980s, the 1990s, there were three butchers, two grocers, a bakery… [lists family and shop names], all of them closed between 2008 and 2012. The crisis here hit hard. And thank God we have the tourists, they save our lives every day, but I'd love for there to be more Palermitans around, guys like you who come every other day.

Rosa is the daughter of the couple who opened the bar in 1948. Their bar is an institution in the quarter, and fully employs Rosa's family, plus an errand boy who changes pretty often. Nevertheless, they feel weak, worn down by the constant struggle to make ends meet in a commercial field that is ever-changing and "is going to die anyway. People want to go to the mall, not to the market." A mixture of anger and sadness would pervade her words every time she uttered the market's death sentence.

Via Ballarò (and the market) ends in Piazza Ballarò, where commerce takes a different form. Here the main business is illegal: drug pushing. Small quantities of weed and cocaine, occasionally crack cocaine, rarely heroin, are sold by young men between 18 and 35. In a similar fashion to the marketers, they advertise their products continuously: after months of going up and down the market, being known as an activist, a friend of those who oppose their drug traffic, I would still hear

Pusher: [whistles] Hey boss, hey! Yes you. Everything all right? Need anything? Let me know if you do…
Me: No thanks, I'm ok, I don't need anything.
P: [whistles again] Are you sure boss? Hey, ginger, are you sure? I'm here all day.
M: Come on man, you know who I am, you know who I walk with [as in 'who my friends are']. Isn't it time to stop calling on me?
P: That's ok, I know, but I still have to do my job…

This interaction, if the least confrontational and most polite I had in Piazza Ballarò, was also ordinary. Tourists and Palermitans alike mainly enter the

market from Piazza Ballarò and are all asked if they are ok after a sharp whistle. Coexistence between marketers and pushers is usually pacific, even though at times activists make sure marketers remember who is on the right side of the barricade, and who should be able to enjoy the benefits of the market and its reputation. As Don Mario, the director of Santa Chiara's Salesian society (see chap. 1 sec. 1 and chap. 4 sec. 3), once said to marketers in the middle of Via Ballarò:

> You know what the problem of this area [of the market] is! Don't look at me like that! I know you all! [Pointing his finger towards the pushers] They are the problem. They are the lid that pushes down the market. They are what a tourist has to walk through to come to you! Can you imagine what Ballarò could be if there wasn't that lid?

Mario here is taking a strong stance in the middle of the road, almost shouting, against the drug traffic and, even more importantly, organized crime, who manages that traffic in a capillary way, from sourcing to refinement to distribution. Although Mario never mentioned it by name, he was reminding marketers of the possibility to push mafia out of *their* market, out of *their* quarter.

What I ultimately learnt during my fieldwork is that the historical market of Ballarò is coherent and chaotic. Beautiful and ugly. It smells delicious and as foul as it could. It goes from sunny and heart-warming to gloomy and depressing in the blink of an eye. It is poor but not broke. It is rich but it has no money. It offers the experience of a true market transaction, made of warm sociality, while tricking you shamelessly. When my grandmother fell ill, right in the middle of fieldwork, marketers asked about her health at every turn, right before selling me five pears one of which rotten. Ballarò serves the delicacy and the scam, both literal and metaphorical, and both on a silver platter.

My description of the historical market of Ballarò as a total social fact, and also as a constellation of exchanges and enterprises treated as total social facts

in and of themselves, allowed me to give an idea of how stratified and complex Albergheria, viewed as the locus where different institutions meet and deflagrate, can be. SOS Ballarò operates in this environment on a daily basis. Even if levels of engagement by the assembly are sometimes inconsistent, activists have to confront, navigate, and understand this context, especially if they want to have an impact as they say they do. In the next chapter I will explore the ways in which SOS Ballarò approaches the quarter in its daily activism to show how the assembly acts upon the principle that understanding what is "the proper way to do things in Ballarò" is of vital importance when establishing what is the proper way to do *politics* in Ballarò.

Chapter Two
The Assembly Never Ends: Democracy and the Everyday.

Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the concept of the assembly that never ends. With this notion, I intend the practice SOS Ballarò regularly deploys to tackle any issue that arises in the quarter. As it will become clearer, SOS Ballarò is founded on the principle that those who experience a problem first-hand also possess knowledge necessary to solve it. Through the descriptions of the two markets in chapter 1 (sec. 3-4), I conveyed the sense of complexity and stratification of the socio-cultural context in some parts of Albergheria. In order to tackle this complexity and gather ideas, activists decided that SOS Ballarò should employ a methodology able to work across the multiple levels of activities, demands, expectations and conflict in the quarter. From its very inception, activists decided that, to make sense to marketers, vendors, and residents, SOS Ballarò's method of work had to be constructed from the bottom up, so that all those involved in (or affected by) the decision-making process could contribute to solve complex issues with composite and multi-layered solutions. This preliminary choice is also a result of many of the core members' past. As I mentioned (chap.1 sec.1), before becoming part of SOS, some of them had been activists in student collectives, the NoGlobal movement, the Catholic Action, or the Salesian society. All activists shared ideas of horizontality and direct democratic participation. In short, and from its very beginning, democracy was at the heart of SOS Ballarò's main tool of action: the public assembly.

Through my ethnographic material, I will show how SOS Ballarò came to be and how its genesis sparked from peculiar historical and social conditions, to then describe how the assembly worked towards the creation of a new political subject tasked with representing the quarter in city politics. In its attempt to be representative, legitimate, and impactful, SOS established methods and practices, like knowledge production, extending the meaning of

assembly from a meeting with a start and an end to a never-ending discussion, and organizing direct interventions on the territory to improve the quality of life in Ballarò. A detailed analysis of these practices will highlight one of SOS Ballarò's main features: its ordinary nature. I will argue SOS is enmeshed in the everyday life of the quarter, carrying out its political action without suspending any ordinary activity, but just as another part of everyone's everyday life.

Before I unpack the work of the assembly, I will situate it in a brief discussion about democracy, intended as a mode of political participation and a set of practices shaping the decision-making process. Considering the vastness of the literature on this subject, my analysis will focus on three main aspects: 1) how an assembly creates political guidelines, 2) how these guidelines impact reality outside the assembly, especially in relation to the S/state, and 3) how the assembly can be representative of those it claims to represent. I will argue that, given the many ways in which democracy has been theorized, it is often arduous for scholars to capture all three aspects at once, and that my positionality as an ethnographic activist put me in a privileged position to do so.

1. Dissecting Democracy: an Object Too Big to Tackle?

Democracy has been an object of scientific analysis for a long time, resulting in the creation of a multiplicity of labels, classifications, and interpretative frameworks. However, a considerable portion of this debate depends on the scale each author considers. From the international stage to a state-centred perspective, from different levels of government or deliberation to the smallest of communities, authors adapt their definitions and theories of democracy accordingly. The brief overview of this debate I am about to present serves the purpose of better locating my future analysis, especially in relation to the fact that I intend democracy as a set of practices that are better investigated ethnographically, especially in the case of SOS Ballarò and the ordinary nature of its work.

Lucardie (2014), Holland et al. (2007), Fontana, Nederman, and Remer (2004), Starr (1990) and Dunn (2005), carefully describe democratic systems

and processes, alternatively defining them as assembly-centred (Lucardie 2014, Dunn 2005, Starr 1990), bounded-delegate and sortitionist (Lucardie 2014), participatory (Holland et al. 2007), rhetorical, deliberative, or auditory (Fontana, Nederman, and Remer 2004). In the case-study I am about to describe the defining features of the ways SOS Ballarò sees itself and its democratic practice are a strict link between the assembly and a specific territory (the quarter of Ballarò Albergheria) and small numbers of participants (the core group involved in the process is usually made of 10-20 people). For these reasons, I will consider only two of the categories listed above: assembly-centred democracy and participatory democracy. I will then consider the possible effects ethnographical and anthropological approaches have on the analysis of democracy and show how my ethnographic material points at a specific way of defining and participating in democracy at a small-scale level (Paley 2008).

Assembly-centred democracy, as described by Lucardie (2014), entails the strong presence of an assembly of citizens with not only advisory or lobbying functions, but also decisional and legislative ones. In his analysis, Lucardie walks two different paths, one theoretical, the other practical. A theoretical approach to the matter allows the author to recount Bookchin's utopian vision of a libertarian municipalist society (, based on values of ecology, autonomy, and freedom of choice (Lucardie 2014: 37). Drawing from anarchist theory (Lucardie 2014: 34) Bookchin describes municipalities as small-scale communities living in a more or less autarchic regime of production, in which the popular assembly decides what and how much the community should produce, if and to whom to sell it, in exchange of what etc. The same assembly defines identity politics, basic rights, distribution of services etc. In this case, legislative, executive, and juridical powers seem to lie in the hands of the assembly, or parts of it, on the model of the ancient Athenian *ekklésia* (Starr 1990). In this sense, Bookchin's libertarian municipalism is modelled on the ancient Greek experience, while adding a closer link between municipalities through the institution of confederacies able to pressure one of their members into action, while lacking a proper superintendent federal organ. Lucardie extensively documents critiques of such vision, like drops in assembly attendance, decisional deadlock in case of unclear majorities, demagogy,

racial or intolerant shifts etc. (2014: 40-43). He nevertheless holds dear the idea of an all-encompassing, ever-involved assembly made of the vast majority of citizens of a given community deciding their own destiny.

If Bookchin never directly addressed critiques to his utopian view (Lucardie 2014: 43) Lucardie attempts to clarify how an assembly-centred system would work through the description of some cases where an assembly of people/citizens contributes to the decisional process, driving the community and its elected officials. Here, I will consider one of Lucardie's examples, town meetings in New England in the USA, mainly because of the strict link between them and a circumscribed territory. In towns in New England, communities meet annually to discuss and drive governmental action in their area. Lucardie, as Bryan (2004) before him, is concerned in determining how much is a town meeting representative of the overall community, delving into quantitative data about attendance, composition of the audience, how many attendees talk etc. concluding a town meeting usually sees the active participation of an average of 20.5% of registered voters (Bryan 2004: 57). In Bryan's detailed account it is hard to understand how town meetings influence decision making processes for two main reasons: 1) the author is more focused on their representativeness than their impact, and 2) town meetings are at the centre of a complex special district-based taxation system, in which a single citizen can be embedded in multiple units, each dedicated to a single or a bundle of issues (school, water distribution, fire prevention etc.), and pays taxes to each. Every district holds its public meetings, thus diluting the kind of impact a single participant can have on legislative matters and decision-making processes.

To better clarify how people's involvement in local politics impacts legislation and governance, I will now consider the study of specific groups of citizens like neighbourhood committees and associations, which are similar in nuce to town meetings (given their democratic inner workings) but interact with local governments as external subjects. Holland et al. (2007) consider different democratic experiences in North Carolina, and the ways in which those create a new way of influencing, working within, or in opposition to, the American political system. In one of their case-studies, two motivated citizens gave birth to the Broughton Road Improvement Association (BRIA).

Their basic aim was to change the conditions people experienced in the area around Broughton road, Fayetteville. In their opinion, the African American population of the area had been overlooked for too long, with the result of a structural lack of services, public investments, policing etc. In decades of activity, BRIA became a structured non-for-profit organization, a pressure group able to influence city council decisions and investments, to the point of becoming a loud voice in the development of a HUD (Housing and Urban Development) project in their community (Holland et al. 2007). By working both inside their community and inside the government, BRIA was, not without frustration and missteps, able to successfully pressure local and federal government into action in what the authors deem as a "do-it-yourself neighborhood revitalization program" while becoming "an effective political voice for the community in municipal venues" (Holland et al. 2007: 206). At the same time, and given the basic racial and class-related features of the area, BRIA significantly contributed to the constitution of its members' political conscience, scaling up from the issues of a small African American community to questions about identity politics and the strong connection between race and class in city planning, management, eco-management etc. (Holland et al. 2007: 206-207).

According to this literature, assembly-centred systems operate and influence their surroundings. In every analysis I considered though, there are some missing pieces I deem necessary to aptly understand and describe such political systems in detail. In Bookchin's utopia, municipalities seem rather disconnected, and it is hard to understand how they interact with each other at a federal level in an all-encompassing world-wide network of autonomous communities like the author postulates (Lucardie 2014: 40). The methodological shift from utopia to reality sheds some light in these black corners: town meetings work in an intricate network of local, district, state, and federal agencies. They do so through a complex structure of chairpeople, secretaries, timekeepers etc. tasked with the responsibility to transmit the meeting's message to competent authorities.[28] It is the intricacy of this system

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[28] Bryan (2004) never fully describes what tasks a chairperson or a minute taker has in a town meeting. This could be because of the scarce relevance he attributes to this aspect for the

that makes it difficult to understand how decisions go from a gathering in an adapted fire station in rural Vermont to the desk of a school board member, a city councillor, or a state legislator. In this sense, BRIA helps us understand how a group of people becomes the voice of a community and acts in its favour through sitting in meetings, pressuring local government, and creating a legitimate voice in the political landscape. Here though, Holland et al. (2007) do not describe how political guidelines are discussed and decided upon *inside* BRIA: how do they decide if and how a certain idea about their community should be brought in front of the city council or HUD? In other words, how do they build their platform and determine if it is actually representative of what people want and need?

What all these examples show is how authors tend to focus on one or the other aspect of democratic processes, often failing to give an all-round description and analysis of how an assembly-centred political system works, how it strives to be representative of a community, and how it enters and impacts the formal political structure. Nevertheless, they all pose the accent on relevant issues any analysis of democratic processes has to consider: the scope of the decision-making process, the practicalities of meetings and assembly discussions, their consequent impact, and the way these different subjects envision themselves. In the case I am about to describe, I will start from the methods SOS Ballarò adopts (and why it does so) to define its guidelines, political ideals, and strategies to make an impact on reality, while showing how this method is the epicentre of SOS Ballarò's reflection on itself. In this chapter, I will not focus on the content of assembly discussions per sé (this will be the theme of the next three chapters). This carefully reflects the emic perspective of the assembly, of understanding SOS Ballarò as "a learning method, a process" before anything else, as I was told by core members countless times. To fully show how central SOS reflection on its own assembly methods and democratic practices is, I will now turn to its inception and the ways in which a group of active citizens led to the formation of a new political subject in the cityscape of Palermo and Albergheria.

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purpose of his argument, or to the fact that, in the vastness of his data, there are no fixed structures from a meeting to the next.

2. SOS Ballarò: Genesis.

17th September 2015. During the night, somebody set a pub on fire in the heart of Ballarò. The pub was almost ready for inauguration night. It was a symbol more than a business opportunity: previously owned by a local mafioso it was seized and confiscated by the police and assigned to a co-operative of anti-racket entrepreneurs willing to invest in the area. The arson was the third of a series of intimidating actions: in less than two weeks, some outdoor lights and four fridges were destroyed.[29] The fire was the last and decisive attack mafia moved against the project, and it was successful. To date, shutters are down, still slightly blackened. Just like the pub opening was a message more than anything else, the fire seemed to carry a strong, if unuttered, warning: 'do not try to erode mafia control over Ballarò'. Unlike other parts of the city though, Ballarò featured the strong presence of associations, co-operatives, GROs (GrassRoots organizations) and NGOs, tackling many issues, from asylum seekers' legal uncertainty to touristic and cultural promotion passing through groups addressing educational and nutritional poverty. This escalation in violence was the proverbial straw breaking the camel's back and brought many activists to wonder how it was possible for such an event to occur on their doorstep given their constant and gigantic effort to erode mafia power and make the quarter a better, safer, nicer place for its residents and all those who wanted to experience it. In the days after the arson, activists started discussing the matter and concluded what they were doing as individuals or single associations was not enough, or at least poorly aimed, if mafia could carry out such an intimidation. They quickly made up their minds: the quarter and the associations active in the area had to come together and take a hard look at their present conditions and activities. In a couple of months, the political network in the quarter came together, and planned the first Ballarò public assembly for the 30th of November 2015 (Giubilaro 2019):

> We had worked on the quarter for years at that moment, but still
> we had to witness [the intimidating act]. Something in our

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[29]
http://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/09/17/news/fiamme_al_pub_di_ballaro_sequestra to_al_boss_nicchi-123052441/. Accessed 06/08/2018.

approach was wrong. We decided we had to take a few steps back, abandon some certainties, and start all over again all together.

Tommaso was a street educator, at the time member of a social enterprise based in Ballarò but active in many parts of the city in projects financed mainly by the EU. He was also a member of the opposition party in the first district council, the smallest branch of municipal government responsible for the four quarters of the city centre. He moved to Ballarò from the periphery in 2005, when his partner got pregnant with their first child, and, although active in the whole city, he holds the quarter dear: "[Ballarò] gets me excited, I can't help it." He sat in that first assembly as one of the leaders of the community, with political baggage accumulated in student collectives, the NoGlobal movement, and grassroots autonomist activism, focused mainly on housing rights. Next to him sat Nicolò, another active citizen coming from outside Ballarò. He moved in from the city outskirt in the early 2000s, as housing prices were lower here, and he could live closer to his job: he is the president of a touristic co-operative based in a XIII century civic tower next to the burnt-down pub. Terradamare (the co-operative's name) moves from the principle that Ballarò needs to be re-discovered, first of all by Palermitans: in a space like this, every corner is a thousand years old and can be observed and enjoyed as a crumb of history and beauty adding to the flavour of an already incredibly reach city centre. Nicolò has a totally different political background from Tommaso's: he has been part of catholic associations for all his early life, especially those of Salesian orientation.[30]

Tommaso and Nicolò, long-time friends and active in the same territory following different principles and ideals, represent a good example of the composition of that first assembly: leftists, Catholics, liberalists,

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[30] The Salesian Society organizes many activities tailored especially for minors and those living in poverty. It is devoted to the education to "moral, professional and social responsibilities"(https://www.donboscosanto.eu/oe/regole_o_costituzionidella_societa_di_s_francesco_di_sales.php My translation), and founded on the preventive principles and methods developed and systematized by Don Bosco in the XIX century. Salesians orient their efforts towards younger generations, considered to be extremely fragile, especially if living in poverty, but also the main reserve of hope and improvement for society. Through pedagogical activities and prayer, Salesians try to provide youth with the necessary tools to face their future, following the idea that, if a young boy or girl is part of a stable community providing them with love, inclusion, affect, behavioural principles, etc. they will be able to better dodge or face issues in their post-adolescent life.

conservatives, activists, priests, entrepreneurs, professionals. Nicolò is very clear and echoes Tommaso in his account of that day:

> In that assembly […] the only things we shared were the love for Ballarò, its people, and the historical market […] and the awareness of having to work together to make it flourish again. […] We were working like crazy, but still, the market was in bad shape, people were living in 20sqm garages, and they burnt a place next to my office. How is that possible? You tell me…

Between 150 and 200 people sat in the Santa Chiara auditorium that day with these ideas in mind. They discussed the violent event, and everything else, for hours. Then a decision was made: "It was important to consider everything, not just the attack, not the market, not this or that". Tommaso recounts the moment the assembly split in working groups, each with a different focus, to write a comprehensive 'grid of critical points'. This would represent the main document the group would then present to the municipality in an attempt to start a productive cooperation.

The original grid (as of June 2021 in its third version) is made of 21 sections and 53 subsections going from major infrastructural improvements (like the cover in Piazza Carmine, see chap. 5) to the smallest of interventions: maintaining water fountains, fixing potholes, setting up signage for tourist etc. For each intervention, groups had to work out possible actions to take, which branch of the administration to involve in the process, and monitoring activities. At the end of a two-day workshop, groups were ready to present their work to the general assembly. The grid was discussed, amended, and approved unanimously, alongside the status and name of this new subject: it would be an informal and non-registered 'public assembly' and its name would be SOS Ballarò (*Storia*, *Orgoglio e Sostenibilità* or History, Pride, and Sustainability).

What the origin story presented here shows is how the concept of a horizontal assembly represented the starting point to involve activists and general public alike in a deeply political discussion about their lives and their quarter. The

choice of maintaining 'assembly' in the definition of the subject perfectly mirrors what Nicolò told me: the possibility to sit down, speak up, and have a clear voice in structuring the kind of political discourse Ballarò decided to engage in, is what convinced, and still does, many activists and non-activists to participate, respect, or at least consider what SOS proposes as a significant intervention. From that day in 2015 on, the assembly would congregate with impressive regularity: once a week, on Tuesdays, with some longer intervals during holiday seasons and the summer, only to resume regular conversations in January or September. To enforce the equality principle of the assembly and its official lack of structure, meetings never entail fixed or designated positions, such as chairperson, minute taker, or spokesperson. Usually, and only for larger meetings, the assembly would have a moderator, not with the function to silence or cut speeches short, but to make a list of speakers and maintain order in the discussion. The other key feature of the assembly is the absence of voting procedures: there was no voting on the 30th of September 2015 or in any other occasion during my stay but one (more on this in chapter 4 sec. 4). SOS Ballarò was committed since its inception to reaching the point of unanimous consensus. Echoing Graeber (2004), SOS and its internal diversity resulted in a 'consensus process', which, in this case as in the Seattle movement the author describes, does not mean to "convert others to one's overall point of view", hence alienating or imposing ideas on the minority, but work and rework proposals "until one ends up with something everyone can live with" and strive for (Graeber 2004: 84). During my year with them, Tommaso often had to moderate his point of view, while Nicolò was radicalizing his, and other activists (e.g., me) could build their own from scratch. Diversity, horizontality, more or less pacific discussion, unanimity, and the assembly as a form of encounter, always were the fulcrum of SOS activities, to the point of exporting them when meeting or discussing with other institutional subjects like the municipality. In this sense, SOS does not have a fixed ideology of *a priori* political guidelines, but "the democratic practice [it] developed *is* [the movement's] ideology" (Graeber 2009: 11. Emphasis in the original).

This method(ide)ology entails a huge effort to create fruitful cooperation between participants, and to mediate their different ideas and positions. From

an assembly to the next, participants were not always the same ones, and often not consistent in their ideas (and I with them) as turns of events created doubts, drawbacks, anger, sadness etc. Emotional turmoil as much as personal reflection and analysis created the need to start many assemblies by taking a step back and look at the overall SOS Ballarò project, both in relation to its functions, to a single issue, or to the overarching idea behind it: "A step back to take two forward", Tommaso would tell me when I complained about the assembly being slow and not as efficient as I would like it to be. I came to realize how central this process of *political oscillation* was to the method and content of the debate themselves in the year I spent as a member of the assembly (for more on oscillation see chap. 5, intro.). If slow and sometimes frustrating, this continuous self-reflexivity leads to a form of shared morality to put side by side one's own: SOS Ballarò has its own approach when responding to certain situations according to the principles set by the assembly. Far from being formalized or codified or written, participants learn these principles through the experience of sitting in countless assemblies.[31] As it will become clearer (see below sec. 2.3), SOS activists hold dear two basic ideas: 1) dialogue is always the best option, and 2) everybody's words must be taken seriously. These two basic if vague principles are the notions a newcomer will learn during their first assembly and re-learn each time they sit in that circle of chairs: "Basically this is SOS Ballarò, the method: learning to listen to everyone the same way". The consequence of this is that experienced members can respond to different situations (a quarrel between residents, being asked to give an interview for a newspaper, a debate in another public forum) with high degrees of consistency without having to necessarily ask the rest of the assembly for suggestions or guidance. In my year as an SOS member, I became aware of the fact that the more time I spent as a member, the more I was certain that my response was appropriate and in

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[31] Although informal and ever-changing, SOS Ballarò's ideas are somewhat systematized in the 'About us' section of its website and in a petition that members are ideally called to subscribe. Both were written in October 2016, and never fully revised or updated. Here the authors stress once again methods before content: "ours is a project that is not crystallized in what we produced up to now, but articulates in open working groups, which produced some proposals and will continue to keep the analysis going, while trying to involve residents even more." (my translation. http://www.sosballaro.it/chi-siamo/ Accessed 14/09/2018)

line with the demeanour of the assembly.[32] In the next section I will describe how I came to learn those principles in relation to another key aspect of SOS inner workings, the creation of legitimacy, the fundamental pre-requisite of any of its political stances.

3. Building Legitimacy Little by Little: SOS Ballarò's Method(ide)ology.

SOS Ballarò is a non-registered informal subject. In the eye of the law, it does not exist. Differently from many of the associations represented in it, it does not have a fiscal or juridical recognizable position. If this feature offers multiple advantages that I will discuss further on, it also creates an issue of legitimacy: how are SOS members able to go around the quarter and talk to people if they do not represent a legal entity? Why do marketers, entrepreneurs, or residents listen to them? What kind of authority do they exercise? At the same time, I could turn the questions around and ask with what kind of authority members enter offices in the city hall and talk to city officials. To answer these questions, I will now turn to the processes, actions, and methods SOS continuously reproduces to build its legitimacy. I will consider three focal points: 1) the systematic production of knowledge, allowing members to state without too many doubts that they know what they are talking about when they talk about Ballarò; 2) the inclusion of the highest possible number of people in its overall reasoning, creating a sense of first-person involvement and importance in non-members to (partially) solve the issue of representativeness; 3) the do-it-yourself approach, which brings every member to get their hands dirty, building up legitimacy in eyes of the residents of Ballarò, while refurbishing public spaces to give them back to the community.

I will show how these three aspects do not stand alone but are interlinked in the method(ide)ology at the core of the public assembly, and how they guarantee legitimacy to a bunch of people who, without a deeper insight, seem

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[32] My experience remained relevant even after I left, as the assembly asked me to participate in events and alleviate the core group of some of their responsibilities. This became true especially in 2020 during the months of lockdown due to Covid-19: the assembly started a massive program to distribute food bags to families in need that deployed every single activist, while I filled in remotely in any event that needed SOS Ballarò's presence.

to be walking around pontificating on what is the best future everybody in Ballarò should hope for.

Before an analysis of the process though, it becomes necessary to offer some key pointers about who makes up the assembly, as this is a point of contention SOS members have to continuously ponder. As I will show in chapter 3, the assembly opposes processes of pure gentrification resulting in substitution of historical residents for new ones. Nevertheless, most SOS members, and especially some of the more present ones, come from outside the city centre. Tommaso is Sicilian and moved to Ballarò in 2004; Patrizia is from the north of Italy; Nicolò was born just outside the city and worked in Ballarò since 2002, to move there in 2005; Eddy is from Mali and came to Palermo in 1999. On the other hand, some core members were born in Ballarò and lived there al their lives, like Peppe or Carlo. What brings them together is how attached they feel to this specific territory, and, as I will show, how much they worked to know it inside out. Another important point to mention is how politically heterogeneous the group is. Some members come from decades of activism in anarchist endeavours. Tommaso helped set up and manage an occupied social centre in Palermo for almost ten years, together with Patrizia, Eddy and another couple of members. Carla organized independent artist festivals for decades as a part of collectives and associations alike. Paolo has been a trade unionist and an advocate for workers' rights all his life. Meanwhile, Nicolò has been a part of the Salesian society and other religious entities for most of his life, while being a part of antimafia associations. Carlo has a firm belief in entrepreneurship and the idea of sustainable development. Don Mario is a priest, and maybe the most radical thinker of the whole assembly. In short, SOS Ballarò is a mixed bag of ages, political origin stories, ideals, and methods to push them forward. In the next paragraphs, I will show how this feature consistently becomes a resource more than an issue, even though conflict and conflict management was always a part of assembly practices.

3.1. Knowledge Production.

On the 17th of January 2017, I sat in my first ever SOS Ballarò assembly. I received an email calling for the meeting at 6pm. I arrived a bit early, not

considering the usual half hour delay Palermitans never refuse to have. When I arrived only a couple of people seemed to be there for our meeting. I sat down and ordered a coffee, while discussing daily events with some friends. I saw Nicolò and Tommaso come in: at this point I had talked to them just a couple of times about why I was in Ballarò and what my intentions were. They seemed very keen to have a researcher in their area. More than anything though, they were thrilled by the idea of implementing participation in the assembly and have another pair of helping hands. I was enthusiastic about having such a pass, resulting in easy access to a field I had so little knowledge of. At the back of my mind though, I was still wrestling with the implications my activism in Palermo might have on my research, especially in relation to antimafia (for more see Introduction sec. 6-7 and chap. 0). Nevertheless, I sensed something different about this opportunity and wanted to get involved in the political discussion.

The email said we were going to discuss the drug epidemic crippling Ballarò, and that the assembly would host two guests from Opera Don Calabria, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the rehabilitation of drug addicts. I was sceptical to say the least: I've seen some drug epidemics, like the one in Bologna during my undergraduate studies, or the one in Pisa when I was a teenager. Ballarò seemed nothing like it. Surely there were some young people clearly addicted to crack cocaine squatting in the quarter, but they were just a handful. Nothing if compared to the hundreds I've seen in other places. I sat down at a round table with my notebook and my bias, that I-know-better feeling, ready to fend off easy scares or emergency rhetoric.

I was one of 22 very attentive people sitting in a comfortable room. We listened to the two experts for about an hour. They proposed we take immediate action through a 'street unit', a group of well-trained operators to roam Ballarò and talk to youngsters to bring them closer to SerT.[33] The picture they painted was pretty grim:

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[33] SerT stands for Servizio Tossicodipendenze, or service for addictions, the branch of the provincial healthcare service (ASP) dedicated to guide addicts through the process of facing their addictions.

I don't usually come to Ballarò, this is not my area, but in the short walk to come here I saw many faces tainted by crack or heroin […]. You have a real problem, and if you don't address it now, it's going to get a lot worse very quickly.

The psychologist from Opera Don Calabria did not mince words; I grew more sceptical: was I blind? I had roamed Ballarò for three and a half months at that point, and I had seen no clear sign of a drug epidemic. Were my eyes shut or were these people overreacting? I raised my hand to voice my concern. It was the first time the assembly ever saw me. They knew only three things about me from a round of introductions at the beginning: I was not from Ballarò; I was working as a researcher for a foreign university; I would work in Palermo for the next year. They could have addressed my concern and scepticism about what I perceived as alarmism by simply telling me to shut up and learn. Instead, they all listened carefully, and then:

What you have to understand Francesco is that here we are not in a normal place. In Ballarò we have seen many drug epidemics: the heroin explosion in the seventies and eighties, coke in the nineties, crack now. A warning sign in Ballarò has to be taken seriously, no matter how small, because a match lights a fire here that takes decades to put out.

Tommaso was clear. There seemed to be more than meets the eye, corners I did not see that people sitting around me observed every day. I shut up and started learning.

At this point, the assembly became a space to collect information to add to the expertise of the two guests. One after the other, activists shared their knowledge and concerns about this guy, that girl, this square, those steps, that alley. Especially Eddy, a Malian guy in his late thirties living in Palermo since 1999, told many stories and mapped out the quarter drug market, spaces for consumption, squatted houses, etc. Many were taking notes: Eddy's knowledge seemed to be of extreme value for other members, who were not

able to navigate the quarter as he did, given their age, class, ethnicity, race, or gender.[34]

After two hours of intense dark dialogue the air in the room was gloomy. The topic created anguish, followed by frustration. We brought to light gruesome stories of teenagers exploiting their parents' good will to pay for their addiction, selling their phone, offering sexual favours to buy crack cocaine. Somebody warned about the fact the drug market is entering the school yards (or already has). We were able to establish the fact that many young consumers were not from Ballarò, but came from better-off parts of the city, where they would rarely return to during their daily routine of purchase and consumption. At the same time, many of the sellers were from Ballarò: the assembly knew them, knew their families, and sometimes had seen them grow up. We analysed the reasons why the quarter was not reacting to the drug market; we recalled how illegal economies create opportunities marketers could not refuse to seize in the daily economic hardship they go through: "Some are selling small pieces of tinfoil for one euro. How are they supposed to say no when in a roll there are a thousand pieces, and it costs them sixty cents? The profit exceeds the morals." Even my anthropological knowledge became valuable, as I reported about pacification operations in Rio de Janeiro, and how removing drug traffickers without any follow-up intervention by the State created economic stagnation and ultimately nostalgia for the days when drug guaranteed at least a small income to many merchants and families (Arias 2006, Penglase 2014). Social, cultural, moral, criminal, economic, and political implications were at our disposal then. It was time to reflect and decide the next move:

> I have to confess I am super depressed. This situation totally kills me. Law enforcement is not responding to our requests for more patrols. They just send two Carabinieri on motorcycles once a day and that's it. No arrests, no permanent presence.[35] At the same

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[34] In this assembly and many others, Eddy was the only person of colour present, further reaffirming the difficulty the assembly had in addressing issues of race, while trying to include migrant communities in its daily activities (for more see chap. 1 sec. 1).

[35] In the year I spent in Ballarò, even though the day-to-day police operations did not change much, it became clear law enforcement was following vaster networks, and arresting drug

time our youth is losing the spark, they look empty, zombies roaming the streets. Fourteen-year-olds are already elbow-deep in heroin […] this is madness! We need to do something at the media level: we need to raise a fuss!

Tommaso's gaze went from hollow to angry. He called for a confrontational approach: naming the city council and law enforcement on newspapers would allow SOS to raise concerns and denounce the disenfranchisement to which the quarter was subjected. Even though everybody in the room was furious too, reflection soon replaced animosity. The assembly smoothed sharp edges in what I would eventually come to know as its basic approach:

> Isn't it better to create some form of dialogue with the institutions? Confrontation is good, but we risk alienating our whole project. We have many open queries at the moment running quite well. The city council is on our side across the board. Shouldn't we try and tackle [the drug epidemic] like the other issues, through dialogue instead of protest?

Nicolò voiced what many knew to be true, with the primary effect of calming Tommaso down and easing our emotional discomfort. We decided for a private letter to the mayor, aiming at opening up the dialogue and having all the subjects taking care of addictions (primarily ASP, the provincial healthcare service) and tackling drug trafficking (law enforcement) sitting at a table to discuss the matter. I offered myself to write the letter and in less than two months SOS members, city officials, ASP management, and Opera Don Calabria were all sitting in the beautiful office of the ASP director to discuss the next steps in the fight against drug trafficking and substance abuse in Ballarò.[36]

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dealers, sometimes in parts of the quarter we did not know were a locus for traffic or production of crack cocaine.

[36] Law enforcement was unfortunately not present at this meeting. During my year in Palermo SOS Ballarò faced many times the structural impossibility to include them in open public dialogues, given their reticence to divulge plans, strategies, even opinions about events happening in the city. For more on the detachment between law enforcement and SOS Ballarò modi operandi, see chap. 5 sec. 3.2.

As I understood with time, SOS Ballarò was willing to do everything in its power to transpose its method(ide)ology to this meeting with public institutions, and to the subsequent myriad of meetings on the drug epidemic. The only acceptable form of collaboration between the different subjects involved was for all of them to sit at the table as equals, with different forms of knowledge to share, equally valuable in structuring a series of interventions on a delicate topic in a delicate territory: ASP and Opera Don Calabria knew about drug epidemics and rehabilitation techniques; the municipality mobilised their social services branch and their expertise in community work; we knew about the quarter and how to access it. If in a first moment, the other subjects (especially ASP) saw our knowledge as marginal, considering us as a pool of interested citizens to turn into volunteers, soon they realized this was not the case. SOS Ballarò had no desire to work voluntarily on this project for two reasons: 1) we had little to no-time to volunteer, as the drug epidemic was hardly the only problem we were tackling, and 2) our knowledge of the quarter was as valuable to the project as that of a trained psychiatrist of addiction and recovery. Ultimately, we did not want our expertise to be downgraded: "If they can teach us how to reach young addicts and convince them to quit, we can teach them how to walk these streets without passing for *sbirri* [cops]". In an endless circle of production and reproduction of knowledge through dialogue and education, we started moving meetings inside the quarter, forcing ASP management to physically reach the territory they said they wanted to reach. Our sociological and anthropological awareness of the quarter, a specific know-how made of continuous presence, observation, and action, went hand in hand with the other forms of knowledge, giving way to a new long-lasting understanding of the drug epidemic, both for us activists and (I hope) for ASP, the municipality and all the subjects included in this project. To put it in Bourdieusian terms, during this long series of meetings, we were trading cultural capital about a specific territory at an equal value with cultural capital about medical and policy-making knowledge, while implying the fact that the resulting form of enhanced capital could be the source of social capital to be spent in reaching young drug addicts and other individuals touched by the drug epidemic. In short, assembly methods based on information sharing, equality, and lack of

representative structure, allowed SOS Ballarò (not without hard work, frustration, and stern enforcement) to disrupt the hierarchy present in the group, given the disparity in prestige and responsibility coming from job titles and wages.

One question arises at this point. A core group of activists share knowledge amongst themselves about the quarter and present it with an aura of uncontested legitimacy to outside subjects like municipal institutions or local healthcare providers to establish equal footing in the political debate and decision-making process. If this core group is so small though (the 22-people-strong assembly described above is in line with any other SOS assembly I participated in) can we say that the knowledge they possess is actually legitimate and comprehensive? Do they have the authority to speak for the quarter, or is this a right they are claiming for themselves? In short, and as some of the authors mentioned in section 1 would put it, are they representative of the people for whom they claim to speak?

3.2. The Assembly that Never Ends.

In this section I will address what the literature on democracy poses as a central focus for the analysis of democratic objects and practices: representativeness. As we saw, Bryan (2004), Starr (1990), and Lucardie (2014) among others, invest great energy in determining how a democratic process accurately represents 'the people' it is supposed to govern by definition. This obligation assumes two different forms: (potential) direct participation to decision-making (e.g. in Bryan 2004), and election of representatives and officials (e.g. in Coles 2008). If, as I highlighted, SOS Ballarò is involved in electoral democracy through the fact that Tommaso became a city official while being a prominent SOS member, I am here more concerned with the first aspect of 'representation'. I will try to answer two basic questions: 1) how did SOS Ballarò make it possible for Ballarò residents to have a voice in the city political landscape? 2) What consequences does the strive for representativeness have in terms of legitimacy?

SOS considers its action as having an impact on the whole Albergheria and not just Ballarò; therefore, it strives to be representative of this whole portion

of the city. The data on the population of this area is patchy at best: the latest national census is from 2011. Analyses based on registered voters (Boscaino & Giambalvo 2006) are also slightly outdated. Moreover, neither of these consider population residing in Albergheria illegally, migrant communities, or people who go there to work but live somewhere else in Palermo. Hence, it is hard to establish the number of people SOS tries to represent. Nevertheless, activists make the hypothesis that there are about 3000 people living, working, or simply hovering around Ballarò Albergheria. Independently from how accurate this figure is, how is it possible for an assembly that rarely counts more than 20 participants to claim it represents the whole quarter? How is the claim realistic for the 50 people present in the private Facebook group, SOS main means of internal communication? Again, assembly method(ide)ology comes into play.

SOS Ballarò would call for a public assembly once a week, usually on Tuesday. The call would go out through a mailing list of roughly 1000 people, all warmly invited to participate, not all of whom live in the quarter. Only a small minority would come though, a group of 10-20 members, hardly ever the same faces. We would discuss for two hours different topics, rarely sticking to the agenda or being able to go through all of it. We took minutes anonymously and not all the time. Apart from me, few other members would have words matching a speaker in their notes, or even take notes at all. Writing down just content instead of speaker plus content allowed the assembly to have a single voice out of a multiplicity of views, while trying to avoid personalism or leaderism. After the assembly was over, a report was sent to all the absentees: usually a few political or organizational points on how to move forward on this or that issue. This twofold passage of discussion and report created shared information within a group of about 100 members. Nevertheless, even if these members are omnipresent in the quarter and cumulatively know everybody working, living, or just hovering around Ballarò, they are still far from being quantitatively representative of the overall population.

The next passage is what, I believe, solved some of the issues linked to a political subject claiming they are not only internally but also externally democratic. Closing the assembly did not mean it was over: from Wednesday

mornings on, all those present, and all those who read the report or were informed on the proceedings of the assembly, would start roaming the quarter to bring those ideas around and feed the political discussion. As the active member of the assembly with the most time available, given that I did not have a 9-5 job like many of the others, I was continuously enmeshed in these conversations for most of my days. This feature, guaranteed by my position as an ethnographic activist, gave me the possibility to follow how ideas and discussions travelled and mutated from a day to the next, recording the process ethnographically to then feed it back to the core group of SOS members. In practice, if the point made in the assembly was on the historical market, I would go out and talk to marketers about it. I would inform them while they were working, sometimes individually, sometimes in groups depending on our relationship, their schedule, their and my comfort in discussing politics together. After a briefing on the latest SOS meeting, I would again shut up and listen carefully to their take on the original idea and put it in a pot to bring back to the next 'official' assembly to form the new base for our discussion.

This point links tightly to the one above about production of legitimate knowledge (see above sec. 3.1). Nevertheless, it takes the concept a step further: if on one side it allows SOS to significantly broaden its base of available opinions and knowledges, it also allows to reach a greater number of people, collect their ideas, and rework them in the voice of the assembly. I reckon this way the assembly was able to consistently reach about a thousand people. For reasons of time and availability of core members, not all those thousand people were always consulted on each and every problem, but, depending on the theme and according to activists' judgement, different categories of population were included in different discussions.

This seems to solve, at least in part, the representativeness issue coming from SOS democratic propensity: it is true that SOS is far from reaching every person potentially impacted by one or more of its projects or interventions; on the other hand, through a continuous effort, SOS strives to consult and allow many underrepresented individuals to have an impact on political matters and involve them in decision-making processes. During my fieldwork, I saw many people invest their time in political discussions about

SOS, the city council, this city official or that public investment: I would go and talk to marketers or residents on a given day to collect their ideas; If I would talk to the same people or people living and working nearby a couple of days later, I would notice how ideas I collected the first time would be different, sometimes even obsolete, outdated. A discussion ensued after I left the first time; people would refine their ideas, re-work them, and present me with a different picture.

The 'official' assembly would finish on Tuesdays only to start again with one SOS member and other people. I would leave, but the assembly would stay and keep on starting and finishing according to working schedules, possibility to discuss, daily events, random encounters. I would go back and find the assembly still going. I would join, listen, and speak trying to enforce SOS method(ide)ology of equality of ideas and people. I would leave again and go to the assembly on Tuesdays, loaded with everybody's comments and opinions. The group of 10-20 activists would respond, make those ideas their own and keep going. In the year I worked following this method, I was able to gain access to more people than I could possibly imagine. It was almost impossible to follow every ethnographic (or indeed political) thread, but I could experience how being an SOS member meant walking around the quarter as the embodiment of a group of people (an assembly) and a bundle of ideas. Marketers from the historical market, vendors from the San Saverio market, residents, felt invested in the process and looked for me or other members to express their ideas and participate. Through this constant action, SOS was able to partly solve scarce assembly attendance simply by extending the discussion to any possible moment, deflagrating and scattering the idea of meeting. Many times, I had the impression that, whoever was talking politics, especially community politics, was talking about SOS, sometimes as if they were part of it sometimes not, but always with the assembly in mind. I would say SOS Ballarò was at least partially successful in involving the highest possible number of people in the democratic project of defining political guidelines for the decision-making process.

To sum up, SOS Ballarò uses assemblies in a twofold manner: on one side, 'official' meetings on Tuesdays in Santa Chiara serve the purpose of sharing knowledge amongst core activists, while creating a shared morality that

results in consistency of methods and opinions; on the other, SOS deflagrates the concept of meeting, extending it to any plausible moment, in order to add to its knowledge base in the most inclusive way possible: "assemblies never end", as Nicolò told me many times. If both these method(ide)ologies work when gathering and sharing legitimate knowledge, they are rarely deemed enough by activists. Some parts of the quarter appear (and often are) more difficult to reach just by going there and talking to some residents or waiting for the assembly to reach them organically. To spread the conversation and involve as many people as possible, SOS employs a more direct approach, involving not just talking politics, but "doing politics".

3.3. Get Your Hands Dirty!

> If everyone is equal, when someone says, "Let's get together, a group of us, to build this irrigation canal. Let's do it, all of us, united", then people work together. This is democracy. People [are willing to] do this because they know that when everyone is equal, working together helps everyone. [Silvestre Rodriguez Goivín, May 11, 1983] (Nugent 2008, 34. Additions in brackets in the original)

It was sunny and warm, even though it was 8.30 am on the 4th of February 2017. I was roaming the city centre still half asleep, looking for working gloves to protect my hands from the hard day in front of me. A nice guy in a hardware store gave me a discount when I told him why I needed them: "Oh, that's beautiful! Ballarò always does stuff like that. We should start here at the Kalsa too."[37] I headed back to Ballarò, precisely Vicolo Gallo; I was all geared up to clean up a beautiful space in awful conditions and give it back to the community living around it (and to myself). Vicolo Gallo is a small *villetta*, a garden nestled between ruins from WWII and private homes. 8x10 metres of concrete; in its centre, 4x2 metres of ground and a lonely, if beautiful, 'false pepper' tree (*schinus molle*). At one end, a few steps separate the plane from the road and the biggest parking lot in Ballarò. A water

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[37] Kalsa is another of the four quarters composing Palermo's city centre.

fountain stands on the left, broken and rusty. At the other end there are some steps on which somebody roughly laid some concrete to form a ramp, allowing one to reach the ground floor of bombed buildings, now serving as storage space, with carts and strollers full of stuff.

When I arrived there, Patrizio (my fellow researcher) and Tommaso were sipping a coffee, trying to get mentally ready to face the challenge ahead of us. Half the area was covered in rubbish of all sorts: broken glass, empty bottles, rubble, metal, wood, some parts of what appeared to be a washing machine... We moved one of the wheelie bins from the parking lot next to the stairs. A shovel, a brush and a shopping cart were all the tools we had. We brushed, filled the cart, went down the stairs and emptied it in the bin. A million times over, I reckon.

Around ten, there were about 15 people with us: other activists, but also residents from the buildings facing the Vicolo, and their children. We started working with pallets to build two flower beds/benches. In order to protect the non-concrete heart of the space, we collected some old "marvellous" wooden beams from Santa Chiara. Tommaso insisted at length on their beauty more to convince himself than us. They were full of big rusty nails, varnished in white paint that started peeling many years ago. We picked the best ones, as some were rotten or too short for our purpose. One of the residents offered his sander to get rid of the paint and "bring the wood back to life". I removed the nails, he worked the sander, Tommaso was at the circular saw, and everybody else was doing their best to hoe the ground and prepare it to host some plants a plant nursery had gifted us. The image everyone had in mind was that of a clean space where one could sit down, where kids could play, and plants could grow freely, protected by a short wooden fence.

At lunchtime we were far from finished but "hey, nobody is leaving until it's done, and then we party!" Music was playing in the background; a few bottles of beer went around with some sandwiches, while we discussed the best way to transform those old beams in a fence; a coffee, a cigarette and we went back to work. We started setting up the fence and, three hours later, we were still at the starting point. We had no idea how to make it stand, or how to connect the beams to go around the hoed ground. Luckily, a friend of ours, 'the master' as everybody calls him ("don't touch my hammer, please"), came

around a corner. He worked as a carpenter all his life, and, even if he retired some years before, he had a small job at someone's house to carry out. He swore he would come back as soon as he could, with his tools and some more coffee for everyone. With his help, the fence was up and holding in no time. In the meantime, a group of scouts interested in our intervention on Vicolo Gallo showed up to help. Some placed the plants all around the false pepper tree, some others helped with the fence, some were even repairing a part of a wall with bricks and cement.

The sun started to set. We were exhausted, sweaty, and dirty. But Vicolo Gallo looked like a million bucks: two colourful flower beds/benches, a 20cm tall fence made of beautiful beams (which also worked as a bench) enclosed the small rectangle of soil, filled with small plants, and dominated by the false pepper tree. Everything looked clean and tidy. The look on people's faces was that of accomplished satisfaction (alongside utter exhaustion); the kids were running around knowing that brick or this plant were there thanks to their effort. As tools started to disappear, a grill came out. Some loudspeakers started blaring Neapolitan trashy music. About fifty people enjoyed food light-heartedly together. We sang and danced, ate and drank, patting our backs for the good job. Some days later, on the wall on the right side of the stairs to Vicolo Gallo, a friend hung a tile; on it, a blue/grey figure states humbly: this square did not exist before.

Vicolo Gallo is the third public space SOS Ballarò recovered from garbage and neglect and gave back to the community. Before Vicolo Gallo, SOS cleaned up and embellished two other spaces: Piazzetta Ecce Homo and Piazza Mediterraneo. These three spaces (and especially Piazza Mediterraneo being the larger one) soon became symbols of SOS Ballarò practices and impact, hubs of our activities: in other parts of the city, as in newspapers and on Facebook, SOS Ballarò is 'the guys who clean up squares'.

Even though SOS Ballarò has in its primal aims the diffusion of democratic practices based on assemblies, the collaboration with city institutions to change or write legislation, and the diffusion of political ideas concerning the bettering of the quarter, getting ones' hands dirty always remained at its core.

Walking to a place in force, maybe asking for RAP[38] to send a vehicle for garbage collection and start swiping or shovelling or building/repairing something, had a twofold effect: on members, it offered the possibility to spend time together and the joy of manual labour after weeks or months of political discussions or bureaucratic battles; in the eyes of other Ballarò residents, it brought activists down to earth. Marketers especially, told me many times about how the fact "you do stuff around here to make it better is good. You're not preachers, and that, I like." Even though SOS promoted leftist political ideals and was not entirely detached from party politics, manual labour and 'direct action' significantly contributed to scrub off the image of leftist elitist activists preaching Marx or Bakunin to the ignorant masses in their polished leather shoes and tailored suits. The quarter showed me many times over, especially during the electoral campaign for mayor in June 2017 and the general elections in March 2018, how they hated characters, both on the left and right, who came to the market just to "get our votes and speak down to us". That is why, when Tommaso was running to become president of the first district with a left leaning party, he decided together with SOS members and especially Nicolò (who was also running as councillor) to hold his rally inside the market standing on empty beer creates with a megaphone, "like they did in the seventies! We go back to the origins!". He won his election with the strong support of the market, coming, I reckon, from his smudged hands and that specific choice.[39] SOS Ballarò has in its practice a do-it-yourself approach, similar to the one described above for BRIA in North Carolina (Holland et al. 2007). Taking matters in one's own hands allowed SOS to carry out important tasks (like cleaning and giving back a space to the community) while making political points ("we have to re-establish and give value to the beauty that is Ballarò"). Lobbying the city council or RAP for such interventions surely was an option. Members would

[38] RAP spa (*Risorse Ambiente Palermo* or Palermo environmental resources) is a joint stock company, managed by both the private and public sector. Its main role is garbage collection and, even though it is responsible for many other activities in Palermo, here it will always be referenced as the garbage collection service.
[39] Here Tommaso refers to the practice of leaders of the communist party or unions in the 1970s, when rallies were usually held with little to no amplification (sometimes impromptu) in public squares or in front of factories, especially in the case of elections or strikes (Santino 2009).

have kept their hands clean and their backs straight and rested; it would have taken time though, much more than that to go out, buy a pair of gloves and simply clean up. In this sense, SOS was more worried about having a direct impact on its surroundings than saving energy. The more effort activists put in their 'direct action', the more legitimacy through reputation and impact they gained in the eyes of both Ballarò residents/workers, and city officials.

The use I make of the phrase 'direct action' here is practical more than theoretical. In anarchist literature, as Graeber describes in detail (2009), Direct Action refers to the practice groups or individuals undertake to change their political and social surroundings instead, despite, or completely ignoring the state and its apparatus: "[o]ne does not solicit the state. One does not even make a grand gesture of defiance. Insofar as one is capable, one proceeds as if the state does not exist." If direct action is thusly defined and strictly relates to the ability one has to act on their immediate surroundings without seeking "to pressure the government to institute reforms […nor] to seize that power for themselves" (Graber 2009: 203), then SOS Ballarò is far from direct actionist. As stated above, on some occasions SOS asked the city council for logistical help, like the presence of a garbage collection vehicle and maybe some operators, alongside a more long-term action to pressure the city council to spend money in those spaces for e.g., street furniture. Even more, SOS directly expressed a candidate for an election, which, in the eyes of an anarchist, is the least anarchist move possible. On the other hand, SOS Ballarò never defined itself or its practices as anarchist, or even democratic. The only emic definition SOS gave of itself is that of public assembly, entailing the encapsulation of democratic forms and participatory methods, and equality and horizontality of people and ideas.

Graeber (2009: 210) concludes his definition of direct action recognizing it "represents a certain ideal–in its purest form probably unattainable", especially if one does not have the will to attain it like in the case of SOS Ballarò. On the other hand, the author recognizes the value of certain actions as direct when "means and ends become, effectively, indistinguishable; [when they are] a way of actively engaging with the world to bring about change, in which the form of the action […] is itself a model for change one wishes to bring about". In this sense, I would say SOS Ballarò engages in

some sort of direct action: the sociality it contributes to create during such events, alongside refurbishing and cleaning, is one of its main means and ends, a method(ide)ology:

> When we go to a square to do stuff, people start looking at us: suspiciously at first, then a bit insecure about our ability to carry out our task. In the end, they pick up a shovel and start working! Those are the ones who will take care of that space [in the future].

Nicolò has seen this series of attitudes unfold countless times: children in Vicolo Gallo were a perfect example: they were with us that day in February, and they kept *their* garden clean for months, until it needed another round of heavy refurbishment.

By getting their hands dirty, SOS Ballarò directly contributed to enact social forms of cooperation and cohabitation of public spaces aiming at making them actually *res publica*, cared for by everybody, through caring for them all together. The implications and effects of this sort of operations though go beyond cleaning up a public space. As I will show in more detail in the next chapter, SOS Ballarò carried out these initiatives keeping in mind the socio-cultural features of the area where they took place. On one side, it was clear that Vicolo Gallo needed a clean-up, and presented the opportunity for the assembly to reach another group of residents to involve them in its inner workings, to jump-start a conversation that was otherwise hard to get going. On the other, SOS Ballarò did not go to Vicolo Gallo out of nowhere. As it became clear to me in the weeks after the event, activists had been speaking with residents around the *villetta* for some time to understand their needs and act upon the ideas they had for the space. Creating legitimate knowledge about a specific spot and its users, and react accordingly to that knowledge, brought activists to intervene quickly, get their hands dirty and build even more legitimacy, this time in the eyes of residents, to eventually involve them in the never-ending assembly. This way, SOS could broaden its knowledge base and produce legitimacy, while promoting its method(ide)ology and shared morality.

In the next and final section, I will address one more aspect of SOS Ballarò and its activities: its ultimate purpose. In an attempt to go beyond its stated ones connected to the improvement of livelihoods of those who live in the quarter, I will take a step back from the ethnographic material I presented above, centred on direct action and assembly practices, with the specific aim to answer one question: what does SOS Ballarò aim to achieve?

4. Political Timeframes and Everyday Practice.

> I think, the daily action of the door-to-door kind one does in the street is more valuable than a demonstration or [waiving] the flags (Nicolò).

> Much social theory *assumes* a fundamental break between everyday life (a time of passivity) and times of heightened intensities (as during street protests and revolutions) (Das & Randeira 2015: S5. My emphasis).

In Ballarò, life flows seamlessly from one day to the next. Even on days when disruptive events occur (police operations, violent acts etc.), the quarter seems to bounce back to normal with a simplicity hard to grasp: "We have stuff to do, we don't have much time to worry", as I was told on many occasions. The quarter seems to absorb bothers of any sort in its daily activities; it just keeps going on. The historical market still has to open and operate; vendors in the San Saverio market still have to provide for themselves; even drug dealers have to do their job. In the same fashion, SOS Ballarò has to carry out its political activities: after all, "assemblies never end". This aspect of pronounced continuity allows me to answer one of the main questions about the assembly: what is the ultimate goal of SOS Ballarò? I argue its ultimate goal is to become obsolete.

Apart from a handful of occasions in my 15 months of fieldwork, political activism in Ballarò was part of the everyday, always entailing the same routinized practices and craftly bypassing mediatic events with

nonchalance.[40] Activists never directly sought out mediatic platforms to comment or weigh in on the political debate at the city or national level, even when this touched upon themes dear to the assembly, like migration, welfare state, urban renewal etc. This, I argue, is due to the fact that SOS Ballarò's activities are deeply rooted in the everyday. In her *Texture of the Ordinary* Das provides a loose definition (given its "elusive character" 2020: 93) of everyday life, based on the works of Berlant (2007) and Povinelli (2011) as being "in contrast with the radical or spectacular event". The two authors, and Das with them, link the quotidian to the slow but relentless violence their subjects experience on a daily basis, causing conditions of "slow death" (Berlant 2007) or "abandonment" (Povinelli 2011).[41] For the purpose of my argument, I will downplay violence as an ordinary occurrence in the lives of people in Ballarò (activists included), not because it does not exist, but because here I am more concerned with the timeframe of political activism than its content, with a special attention to the idea that the everyday is not the space or time for "the spectacular event" (Das 2020: 93). SOS Ballarò continuously tried not to be spectacular. Alongside members' daily activities, made of casual conversations, and weekly occurrences like meetings, the assembly organized several 'events', like the one described in section 3.3, but was always careful in presenting them as normal, as Peppe, a core member told me on the day of the renovation of Vicolo Gallo:

> Cleaning a square, organizing a barbecue, even calling the mayor
> to come to Ballarò, are just things we do. There's no need for
> publicity or press conferences. It's just our way of doing things.

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[40] Only twice, SOS Ballarò halted its activities completely for a few days, and organized a response to two acts of extreme violence: the shooting of a Gambian man by a local mafioso in 2016 (https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/04/04/news/rissa_con_sparatoria_tra_a_giovani_di_ballaro_e_del_gambia_un_fermato-136868284/), and the assault and battery of another Gambian man in 2019 (https://livesicilia.it/2019/09/02/giovane-gambiano-picchiato-laggressione-a-ballaro/?fbclid=IwAR3FI4SqNpBbur8KFg4FnHQQDRNvoewel1wdZ6kS35alrWODtYBecqy0RoI). Both events sparked demonstrations and moments of reflection on the topic of racism and violent conflict between ethnic groups. Also, both events happened technically outside of the time period I spent in Palermo, although I was visiting during the second occurrence in 2019.

[41] In a similar vein to Povinelli, Biehl (2007) speaks about social abandonment when recounting the experience of slow disappearance Catarina, his main informant and sanctioned patient in a psychiatric hospital, is continuously facing.

The mayor on the other hand, if he comes, he brings his own publicity…

A notable exception to this principle, as described in section 2, is the way in which SOS was born in 2015. People from around the quarter responded to a sensational series of violent intimidations in an unprecedented manner (especially in Ballarò), with the specific purpose of changing things in the quarter for good. They organized the first round of assemblies and workshops wanting to create a ripple effect. They called journalists, politicians, scholars. The soon-to-be SOS assembly aimed at creating a political climate "consisting of a series of occurrences that can sometimes generate moments of historical rupture" (Chertish, Holbraad, & Tassi 2020: 6). In their work *Anthropologies of Revolutions*, the three authors use the concept of historical rupture (in conjuncture with linear understandings of history typical of contemporary Europe) to describe how a revolution can be read in parallel to rites of passage, as interpreted by Turner (1969). Once society has reached a breaking point, we witness the birth of new "political behaviours from below" (Thomassen 2012: 684). It is at this point, authors explain, that society brakes pre-existing institutional orders and enters a "time […] of radical social transition, when society itself seems to be moving from one fixed state to another" (Turner 1969: 133). In this period of separation from the previous system, rules can be redefined, so that a new set of political actions can be put to the test and create the premise for the new emergent system "as the extraordinary moment is channelled back into an ordered and structured social situation" (Thomassen 2012: 684).

My intent here is not to discuss if SOS Ballarò's genesis is the revolutionary consequence of a historical rupture, especially given that activists in Ballarò never expressed their politics as revolutionary. Nevertheless, exploring the concept of liminality in all its extra-ordinary characteristics, allows me to reflect on the contrast between analyses of moments of heightened political activity and SOS Ballarò's daily practice. In the examples used by Chertish, Holbraad, and Tassi (2020, Iranian revolution, Cuban revolution, the Shining Path in Peru, EZLN in Mexico etc.) we can always notice how normality is suspended, to leave space to practices of

subversion of the current order, often through violence and uprising. Following a classic understanding of rites of passage (Van Gennep 2019), society experiences a schism and a breaking of the narrative of the ordinary, to enter a phase of experimentation, and give way to a new structure for itself, in which "power can no longer be *fundamentally* questioned" (Thomassen 2012: 684. Emphasis in the original). As the author reminds us, all these stages "take highly theatrical forms" (*ibid*.).

The theatricality of the revolutionary process can also be found in reflections about the NoGlobal movement of the early 2000s, as well as in literature about the #Occupy movement of 2011. In his *Direct Action* (2009), Graeber compiles a densely evenemential account of the series of actions that brought anarchist groups together in Seattle (and beyond) to protest the G8. His analysis sparks from singular events (protests, marches, demonstrations etc.) and how they were organized through meetings and action plans etc. Every part of this process is extra-ordinary and finalized to events or "action[s] which are in a sense performances, in a sense rituals, but at the same time nothing if not immediately efficacious in the world" (Graeber 2009: 359). Actions then suspend reality, as they set the stage for performative or ritualistic time, to have an *immediate* effect on the context in which they happen. The same extra-ordinary and spectacular character can be found in the preparatory meetings Graeber describes. On one hand, activists are constantly (and rightfully) worried about police infiltrators, spies, using their real names, or being singled out by the authorities (2009). Certain parts of the book read like a spy or an investigative novel, where everyone looks over their shoulder (Graeber included) and is worried about their safety. On the other hand, "meetings are pure zones of social experiment" (Graeber 2009: 287) where activists can start enacting "something of the social world they wish to bring out" (*ibid*.). In both cases, from the terrifying prospect of getting arrested to the ability to enact the world one wants to become true, the ordinary is far back removed. The life of an activist during liminal periods that they interpret as revolutionary action is critically different from that before or after this same period.

The same can be said for participants to the #Occupy movement. The main mode of protest of #Occupy was the continuous presence in highly

recognizable public spaces reconfigured as locus for permanent assemblies (e.g., Razsa & Kurnik 2012). Activists organized with tents, sleeping bags, mattresses, to not leave squares and public parks for months, and radically transform the urban landscape in a political forum, stretching the time for debate, critical thinking, world-making etc. to its maximum. When politics were not being discussed, the square would remain extra-ordinary, thanks to impromptu performances, shared meals, singing and playing (Bianchi 2018). As mentioned in much of the literature (see Nugent 2012 amongst many), when reflecting on the #Occupy movement, "one is struck by the sense of rupture that pervades [it]. What stands out is a sense of the new, the unprecedented" (Nugent 2012: 281). This was true for those participating in it as well. As a member of the group resoundingly named ItalianRevolution, I camped out in the central square in Bologna for 21 days in June 2011. The sense of the unprecedented Nugent (2012) mentions was not only linked to the practice of permanent assembly and world-making, but also to the set of experiences I made, especially sleeping outside. In that period of liminality, I put my undergraduate studies on hold for almost six months, called my family or friends outside of the movement very rarely, went home only every 3-4 days al. In short, my life was suspended in favour of the immediate efficacy of the movement (Jansen 2018), and my everyday practice changed from one day to the next in the most radical fashion: "Sorry for the inconvenience, we are changing the world", as one of our banners in Bologna read. Nevertheless, the period of liminality I experienced in 2011 came to a screeching halt, after a demonstration in Rome on the 15th of October turned violent. Even though this experience had some long-lasting effects, I can pinpoint with precision the moments when my ordinary life became extra-ordinary (as in different) and went back to ordinary again. The liminal period of the #Occupy movement changed my perception of political activism, but not my everyday life, or, one might argue, everyday life in general.

The case of SOS Ballarò appears to be different. As mentioned above, there is a moment of rupture in its genesis, and a consequent three-day interruption of the ordinary to give way to the first assembly and workshops. This can (and should) be interpreted as the liminal phase in the ritual that saw the birth of SOS Ballarò. What happened next though, is neither ascribable to

a return to the ordinary as it was before, nor to the constitution of a new structured reality. In this sense, SOS Ballarò was neither a botched nor a completed revolution, but an addition to the everyday of those touched by it. Das, in her *Life and Words* (2007), explores how traumatic events give way to new linguistic forms that are not only finalized to remember or work through those traumas, but weave them in relationships, constituting just another thread in people's everyday lives: "My engagement with [my informants] showed me that life was recovered not through some grand gestures in the realm of the transcendent but through a descent into the ordinary" (2007: 7). People in Ballarò did not have to endure the same trauma survivors of the Indian partition had to endure; nevertheless, they experienced poverty, disenfranchisement, mafia presence, overall neglect by the State, drug epidemics etc. Their reaction, similar to the long-term effects of the riots Das describes, was rooted in the everyday, in the fact that the market has to operate, that vendors in San Saverio need to survive, and drug dealers to do their job. During my fieldwork, SOS Ballarò and its assembly that never ends, were just another one of those things happening in the quarter, part of the everyday life of all those involved, to the point that events like police operations or spikes in violence "interrupt[ed] the ordinary but [were] still part of the everyday" (Das 2007:7) so activists walked around them and got back to their action, adjusting it to this new thread in the political tapestry of Ballarò.

The main intended outcome of this is, in the mind of activists, that one day the SOS Ballarò banner will no longer be necessary. Its "descent into the ordinary" (Das 2007: 7) will be so thorough, that all who walk the quarter will feel like a part of it. The assembly, deflagrated, and scattered in every conversation, will just be *the same as* Ballarò and the quarter will simply politically represent itself with legitimacy. This attitude towards the future of the assembly was almost always tacit, unuttered, but fully enacted. SOS Ballarò renewed Vicolo Gallo and left it to the care of residents. As we will see, SOS created the conditions for the regulation of the San Saverio market (chap. 4) to put it in the capable hands of vendors so that they could self-manage it. In chapter 5 I will show how SOS presence in the historical market was aimed at creating strong forms of cooperation among marketers so that

they could interact directly with the municipality without power imbalances. In short, SOS Ballarò established a method(ide)ology for political activism deeply rooted in the everyday, uneventful, ordinary life of the quarter, to then start percolating into it to give way to new forms of political and institutional power based on the knowledge and skills available on the territory. The last passage of this program is for SOS to be entirely absorbed and ultimately be unrecognizable. To do so, they selected the method of the assembly that never ends as a form of particular and intense practice of democracy aimed at capillary participation in the decision-making process by those most affected by it. In the next chapter, I will combine this aspect of democratic participation to the issue of gentrification to show how SOS Ballarò interpreted the debate on urban renewal and ideas of re-qualification.

Chapter Three

'A Bit of Gentrification Was Needed Though': Sitting on the Fence of Urban Re-qualification.

Introduction

"A bit of gentrification was needed though": this sentence was uttered during a public seminar I was invited to as a commenter to a master thesis about Ballarò's urban geography and economics. My presence at this event, organized by a grassroot organization active in another quarter of Palermo city centre, was linked to the fact that I had worked alongside Prestileo, the presenter that day, in the San Saverio market during my fieldwork (see chap.4).[42] The audience was a group of about 25 well-educated left-leaning people, willing to discuss if and how Ballarò is changing (or already has). In this case as in many other debates on urban renewal, *Gentrification*, with its consequential high housing prices, evictions, and displacement/replacement phenomena, represented the enemy Ballarò and Palermo had to avoid at all costs. At the same time, Ballarò and the city centre are considered to be in very bad shape, especially when it comes to housing conditions for the poorer, and economic stagnation resulting in unemployment or informal (illegal) labour.

In this sense, the quote addresses the necessity for significant change able to create a serious improvement of livelihoods in the central quarters of the city. The urban planner who said it was conscious of the implications and wanted to provoke debate (which she did) on how, not only we describe changes occurred in the quarter in the last 10 years, but also on how we envision changes to come. To spice up the debate even further, I answered positively: Ballarò needs a bit of gentrification (as in change); this was in fact one of the primal forces leading to the birth of SOS Ballarò. As many told me over and over, "Ballarò cannot stay like this". On the one hand, buildings are crumbling, there are dumpsters in public spaces and alleys, the infrastructure

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[42] The researcher in question is Federico Prestileo, whose work I will use later on, when discussing if and how gentrification is impacting Palermo (see sec. 3).

(roads, power lines, water supply etc.) is decrepit and dysfunctional, housing units are in poor conditions or overcrowded; at the same time, the economic situation is precarious, the main sources of employment in the quarter (the historical market and the San Saverio market) are largely unregulated, while many make a living through illegal activities like running unlicensed businesses or selling drugs. On the other hand, "the quarter doesn't need much to be the treasure it's supposed to be", as someone said during the seminar mentioned above. After all, the historical market is the most economically active market in the city centre, Ballarò is the home of some of the most important artistic and museal patrimony of the city, and its inhabitants enjoy a reputation of impressive resiliency in the face of hardship, and an ability to take initiative to make ends meet second to none. According to SOS Ballarò, "the quarter has all it takes to change for the better on its own. We only need to make it work." Some sort of change then is widely deemed necessary. During the event, many highlighted this necessity over and over, mentioning improvements to the smallest and biggest of things, from a single pothole to a complete overhaul of the quarter. The question many were also posing and trying to answer was: who gets to decide what this change should look like? Who should be in charge of reshaping Ballarò and Albergheria for the next generation? The S/state? The Market? The population? SOS Ballarò? All those in attendance, me, Prestileo, the chair, and the moderator included, did not have a definite answer.

In this chapter I will address the strong need for change expressed above, together with SOS Ballarò's perception that the quarter has all it takes to improve on its conditions. To do so, I will first focus on a multi-faceted question linked to phenomena of urban renewal: who produces them? I will consider the actions of both the private and public sector. I intend the former as both private capital/enterprise and private citizens' initiative. Through the literature on gentrification, especially production and consumption theories, I will describe causes and effects that gentrifying phenomena have on post-industrial neighbourhoods in the global north. I will then turn to the Palermitan context and the main set of questions animating the academic debate on urban renewal about the city: is Palermo city centre gentrifying already? If so, to what effect? And lastly, who should drive the next wave of

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urban renewal? To answer these questions, it will be necessary to introduce the role that the public sector, intended as the municipal government, has had in producing urban change in Palermo. A brief historical overview of Palermo city planning will give a sense of the impact that state intervention (or lack thereof) had on the conditions Ballarò was experiencing during my fieldwork.

By conjugating these two different aspects of private and public influence on urban change, I will introduce the role that SOS Ballarò plays in this ongoing debate, firstly in relation to the private, and the consequences that the existence of the assembly has on movements of capital and people in Ballarò; secondly, I will explore a series of interactions the assembly had with the municipality to show how plausibility of intervention on the urban context is heavily influenced by Ballarò's long history of marginality. I will then turn to the ways in which SOS answers to specific questions about change in the quarter: how should it happen? Who should be driving the process? On what principles should it be based? To answer these questions, I will discuss the concept of resistance to gentrification in the literature, to then show how SOS Ballarò's approach to urban re-qualification is more proactive than reactive and organized on the principle that the quarter is not an empty 'place' (De Certeau 1984) to design from scratch, but a 'space' (*ibid*.) with specific qualities that need to be re-discovered. I argue this approach to urban change as re-qualification allows for alternative readings of phenomena of urban renewal different from the fatalistic outcomes of eviction, displacement, and replacement of historical residents or lower classes described in the literature about gentrification.

1. Gentrification: Grounding a Fleeting Concept.

The term 'gentrification' was first used by sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe the process of a new *gentry* arriving in some of London's most deprived inner-city neighbourhoods. As Hamnett notices (2003), Glass's use of the term is rather ironic, intended to "make fun of the snobbish pretensions of affluent middle-class households" (Lees, Slater & Wyly 2008: 5). If its first use was ironic, gentrification soon became a heavily loaded term, describing a phenomenon full of economic, social, and political consequences. From the

late 1960s on, urban geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, all felt the need to explore and describe it, carefully looking for causes and effects, alongside indicators of the fact that it is, it will, or already has happened in a given area.

Through a meticulous investigation and the constant accent scholars posed on its relevance, gentrification became part of the public discourse too, becoming shorthand for a certain kind of urban renewal of impoverished areas, especially in post-industrial contexts where working-class neighbourhoods experiencing disrepair and decay would see the arrival of a new class of wealthier, better-educated, middle-class citizens. The main consequences of this first 'pioneering gentrification' (Lees, Slater & Wyly 2008) were a significant increase in pro-capita wealth, and a shift from a housing market based on rent to one based on property. Housing refurbishment and increase in commercial activities brought around new services, and renovated attention from central or city governments, which proceeded to redesign services to the community (de facto decreasing the level of neighbourhood disenfranchisement), and offering incentives for investors, private citizens and companies alike, to buy and renovate properties. As a result of increased housing costs, pre-gentrification residents were, in the best-case scenario, not able to afford to live in gentrified areas anymore and had to relocate; in the worst-case scenario, they were forced to leave their homes by developers or landowners through dubious tactics, from bribes to nigh-time demolitions of parts of their homes (Lees, Slater & Wyly 2008: 14).

Obviously, this short step-by-step summary of a gentrifying process is far from comprehensive and implies a level of generalization hard to sustain in this debate: gentrification assumes many forms, very different one from the other both in causes and effects. What this overview does though is provide a set of questions every account on the process should attempt to answer: what creates the conditions to gentrify a neighbourhood? What happens to a neighbourhood in the midst of a gentrifying process? What are the effects of such process? I will first answer these questions highlighting key concepts in the literature, to then relate them to Ballarò and the change some say *is*

happening, some say *should* happen, some *feel* is already wearing out the quarter.

1.1. Production Theory: Gentrification and Capital.

Theories on how gentrification starts can be divided in two macro-approaches: production and consumption theories. Both fields of inquiry are extremely complex and stratified, comprising of various theoretical explanations about why and how a neighbourhood starts experiencing renewal; also, both use mixed methodologies, even though production theories are more interested in quantitative analysis, while consumption ones focus more on qualitative data. The basic difference is that the former refers to conditions of the market and capital movements as the real fertile ground where gentrification flourishes; the latter is more concerned in explaining what social dynamics and needs push towards neighbourhood renovation. Both sets of theories are here related to the first phases of gentrification.[43]

Production-theory-based enquiries derive from Marxist approaches to the study of the rent gap, intended as "the disparity between the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use" (Smith 1979: 545). In other words, Smith wants to determine the difference between the value of a given plot of land if it was used to its full potential, and the actual value it expresses in its present use. According to Smith, the real movement characterizing gentrification is the injection of capital in the inner city, as opposed to that of people from the peripheries to the city centre (Smith 1979). The rent gap and the ways in which it is closed, are here the real indicators of gentrification. To concisely convey this complex research protocol, we can imagine a plot of land in a strategic position (in relation to services, governmental or commercial activities, etc.). Housing built on this plot of land is in disrepair, due to lack of maintenance or interest by the landowner: a situation resulting in low rents, affordable for working-class households. Revenues from this plot of land are therefore significantly lower

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[43] I purposely do not consider literature on rural or super gentrification because, as I will show further on (see sec. 2.) Ballarò is considered to be in the early stages of the process, or at least in the midst of what some call 'patchwork gentrification'. I would like to thank Angela Solaro and Federico Prestileo for this useful definition (and the effort they put in to make me understand it) of how Palermo's city centre is renovating.

than if the landowner would refurbish, build high-end housing, and sell or rent it to newcomers. Hence, the landowner starts renewing their property, investing to increase its market value. We have to imagine other landowners (or companies) start doing the same in nearby plots of land, contributing to reshaping the neighbourhood, its inhabitants, and its services. At this point 'potential ground rent level' and 'rent capitalized under present use' are closer than they were at the beginning, and the rent gap is virtually bridged. This injection of capital to renew infrastructures and housing to raise the value and revenue are what Smith sees as the core of the gentrifying process (1979).[44]

Even though Smith pays very close attention to the rent gap theory, he is also aware of the fact that it "is not that gentrification occurs in some deterministic fashion where housing costs are lowest […] but that it is most likely to occur in areas experiencing a sufficiently large gap between actual and potential land values". In other words, rent gap is the main of many factors at play. In fact,

> [s]ome economic opportunities remain unexploited and specific local conditions may discourage the process. Areas with the deepest rent gap may not be the first to experience [gentrification]; despite the perception of large rent gaps in some black neighborhoods, for example, the process has often been relatively slow because of a mixture of fear and racism among both individual whites and the institutions of the land and housing markets (Smith 1987: 464).

Social and cultural factors are here all at play side by side movements of capital, theories of land value, economic opportunism, and speculation. Consumption theories of gentrification explore exactly those social and cultural factors.[45]

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[44] The discussion on the rent gap is very complex and involves debates over key definitions (e.g. the difference between value and price, Smith 1987: 463) and variables to take into account when calculating it (Lees, Slater & Wyly 2008: 61-71).

[45] Production theories and quantitative analyses tend to mention but often overlook socio-cultural factors, given the nature of the data they use. At the same time, consumption theories tend to acknowledge Marxist readings of rent gap or land value, while focusing on social composition or cultural needs. Again, the qualitative nature of the data they use could be an explanation for this lack of a comprehensive analysis.

1.2. Consumption Theory: Cultural Needs and the 'New Classes'.

While Smith and others are working at the rent gap theory as a way to explain gentrification, Ley (1992, 1996) starts his inquiry on Vancouver and other Canadian cities from a different premise. Keeping in mind Marxist theories of gentrification, he also focuses on a different starting point: changes in how society produces wealth and the kind of shifts they create. Very influential to his reasoning is Bell's idea of a post-industrial society (Bell 1976). In the mid-1970s, Bell observes that a shrinking blue collar working class is giving way to an ever-growing service industry. Semi-skilled workers working on the assembly-line are less requested than they were before, while highly educated professionals are rising in numbers. In a society in which "[e]nergy has replaced raw muscle [in providing] the power that is the basis of productivity […] life becomes a game between persons. What counts is not raw muscle power […]; what counts is information" (Bell 1979: 576). For this reason, Bell argues, workforce in fields like research and development, data-processing, management and the like is growing as quickly as blue-collar sectors are shrinking: "Not only are we [becoming] a white-collar society, we're quite definitely a middle-class society", he inescapably concludes (Bell 1976: 577).[46] Critiques on Bell's predictions immediately start to flow, deeming the idea of a post-industrial society as a "rather broad and vacuous set of generalizations" based on an "empiricist approach to social history" incapable of taking into account "causal mechanisms or structural relations" (Walker & Greenberg 1982: 17-18 *in* Lees, Slater & Wyly 2008: 91-92). Nevertheless, nowadays it is hard to not give Bell any credit for his foreseeing abilities. Ley proposes a study of gentrification stemming from the "alternative urbanism to suburbanization" that this new class of affluent, well-educated, middle-class professionals is asking for and imagining (Ley 1996: 15).

The disenfranchised city centre of the western metropolis offers this new class of pioneer gentrifiers the 'vibrant' space to express their desire for a new

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[46] All the quantitative data Bell provides to back up his claims and the emergence of the post-industrial society are about the USA (Bell 1979).

way of inhabiting the world. In this sense, a disenfranchised post-industrial neighbourhood in disrepair has two key features: affordable prices and a *laissez-faire* approach by the state. A neighbourhood where factories are now empty relics offers the possibility to, for example, the artist to buy a former sweatshop and transform it in a large work-living space, the loft. In the 1970s "artists' living habits became a cultural model for the middle class [and] old factories became a means of expression of a 'post-industrial' civilization": former factories in disrepair became an attraction for the new artistic archetype who wanted to relocate in the city centre, far from the boring normative suburban life (Zukin 1989, 14-15).

A second key aspect consumption theories highlight derives from state negligence: deprived neighbourhoods holding little to no electoral or economic value are of scarce interest for the state apparatus. This status quo usually results in lower or inefficient policing and high levels of criminality.[47] Pioneer gentrifiers interpret this feature as the possibility for a space of freedom of expression, far from the conservative oversight and normativity typical of suburban areas or small urban centres. Lees, Slater and Wyly (2008) pinpoint many examples of this phenomenon, giving way to spaces of inclusivity based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. Cases like San Francisco perfectly exemplify this process: "It was the spatial concentration of gays which made it possible for the gay liberation movement in that city (and elsewhere) to gain momentum" (Lees, Slater & Wyly 2008: 103); if the authors acknowledge the fact this vibrant and politically consequential community is a direct result of gentrifying processes, they tend to overlook the relationship between newcomers and historical residents.[48] Nevertheless, they tend to criticize ideas of trickle-down benefits for old residents as a direct consequence of pioneer gentrification: according to some, having a stronger middle class presence in a neighbourhood "will help create a better social balance in the structure of the community, and the professional expertise of the articulate few will benefit the underprivileged population" (Pitt, 1977: 1,

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[47] Emblematic in this sense is Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn, today in one of the most gentrified areas in NYC, known in the 1970s as Murder Avenue.

[48] Lees, Slater & Wyly are less likely to overlook this relationship in relation to class and racial disparities between new and old residents (Lees, Slater & Wyly 2008: 19-24)

Freeman 2006). In short, gentrifiers would be able to turn undereducated and underdeveloped neighbourhoods in furnaces of progressive and inclusive ideas, all the while creating and spreading new expertise and skill to be spent on the labour market. This colonizing view of intellectual elites educating the masses created some foreseeable frictions between new and old residents, as in this example about ethnic minorities: "[…pioneer gentrifiers] moved in and started preaching to us we shouldn't be prejudiced and should love the blacks and then the b-----ds turned right round and kicked them out and then us after" (Power 1972 *in* Lees, Slater & Wyly 2008: 19).

The vision of gentrification as a means of resistance to institutionalised constrictions, as a "liberating experience" for all the subjects involved (Lees, Slater & Wyly 2008: 209, Caulfield 1994) needs to be critically scrutinized and problematized, especially in a context like Ballarò, where, one could say, the emersion of a group of activists on average better educated and slightly better off than the historical population of the quarter, started a political process based on ideas of empowerment, equality, and tolerance. In the next section, I will explore this aspect in detail, following the two strands of literature on gentrification, while answering three questions: 1) can we identify a significant rent gap in Ballarò? 2) Is there a significant influx of newcomers in the quarter giving way to a new gentry? And most importantly, 3) how much and following which logic has Ballarò changed since the emersion of SOS Ballarò as a significant factor in the political landscape of the quarter?

2. Ballarò Today: the Spectre of Gentrification.

Is Ballarò changing? Has it changed already? As the ethnographic nugget at the beginning of this chapter suggests, this kind of questions are often discussed among activists and academics around the city.[49] One way to try to give an answer is through the prism of gentrification. Both Federico Prestileo (2017) and Angela Solaro (forthcoming)[50] were present at the event I

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[49] On different terms, with different purposes, marketers, vendors, and residents are asking the same questions too.

[50] Prestileo and Solaro are two young scholars active in the academic community in Palermo. During my fieldwork, I had several occasions to interact with other authors, especially

described at the beginning of the chapter: the former in the role of speaker, the latter as chairwoman. One of the aims of their research is to determine if two of the quarters in the city centre, respectively Albergheria and Kalsa, are gentrified or in the process of being gentrified. Following both production and consumption theories and mixed methodologies, they try to pinpoint the stage of gentrifying processes in the two areas following two similar approaches: the main variables they use to determine if a quarter is gentrified are population increase, per-capita income, level of education, and housing prices. They undertake a careful analysis of multiple sets of data coming from the city council statistics office, national censuses, and private companies (e.g. real estate agencies, Solaro forthcoming). The period they are mostly interested in goes from 2000 to nowadays.[51] They highlight how, in this timeframe, both Albergheria and Kalsa experienced an increase in population, income, and educational levels; at the same time, they show how real estate prices increased steadily until the economic crisis in 2008, when they dropped coherently with the rest of the world, to then start to hesitantly raise again.[52] Nevertheless, they are inclined to argue neither Albergheria nor Kalsa are gentrified: comparisons with the rest of the city highlight how the trends they noticed in the two areas are generally coherent with Palermo as a whole (and beyond). The parallel they draw eloquently shows the non-exceptionality of the two cases in the city context: according to their data the two quarters are not gentrified yet but are simply experiencing a more generalized trend that sees the overall population of the city getting slightly wealthier, therefore able to afford higher renting or buying costs for real estate.

If the analysis suggests Ballarò and Kalsa are not gentrified, why did Prestileo and Solaro feel the urge to carry out their research? One reason is that the two authors are Palermitans; they work or live in the city centre; here

architects and urban planners, from the university of Palermo interested in gentrifying processes in the city, like Prof. Lecardane, Prof. Carta, Prof. Picone, Dr. Gallitano, Dr. La Scala etc. I decided here to focus on Solaro and Prestileo not just because of the quality of their work, but because they also became active participants in my ethnographic fieldwork, granting me an even deeper insight into their academic writings.

[51] This methodological choice is justifiable both in terms of availability of precise data sets and the perception of when the two quarters started to change or renovate (Prestileo 2017, Solaro forthcoming)

[52] The data on the real estate market refers to both renting and buying. Also, they both consider not only housing prices but real estate for commercial and industrial use, as well as prices for bare land.

they spend most of their time. Having walked through Albergheria and Kalsa for decades, they felt compelled to combine their quantitative methods to a more qualitative approach, given that, in the words of Solaro, "it's not out of this world to say that Kalsa is very different from what it was when I was a child!" Even if the numbers seem to point in a different direction, they agree (together with all participants to this ethnography) that the city centre in Palermo is experiencing some sort of ongoing and fundamental change. How can we then explain the rift between the results of data-analysis and their perception? What brings the two authors to perceive this change?

In the mid-1990s, both quarters were deprived and on the verge of abandonment; residents were flowing out to relocate in high-density peripheral areas. As I will show in the next sections, the state of disrepair and decay of the city centre is considered a direct consequence of decades of negligence and botched urban interventions by the state, accompanied by foggy regulation and (almost maliciously) unclear urban planning (Lo Piccolo, Rossi-Doria & Schilleci 2006). Considering all this alongside its central positions, next to governmental offices, touristic attractions, and services of all kinds, one might dare to make the case for the emergence of a rent gap: land in Albergheria and Kalsa does not produce the same value it could if it would be used to its full potential.[53]

Nevertheless, as we saw earlier (sec. 1.1), gentrification does not "occur in some deterministic fashion where housing costs are lowest" (Smith 1987: 464). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, city centre low housing costs, combined with an ever-growing migration from North and sub-Saharan Africa, gave way to an ethnically mixed series of neighbourhoods, especially in Albergheria (for quantitative data on migrant population, see Prestileo 2017: 30-31).[54] At the beginning of the 2010s Albergheria and Kalsa are then two inner city quarters with low housing costs, next to services of all kind,

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[53] To calculate the rent gap, or conduct a rent-gap-based analysis, I should consider a set of data going back several decades and comprising a large set of variables, to then relate them in a complex explanatory system. I do not have the data nor the ability to carry out this kind of analysis. Nevertheless, my perception, alongside those of Prestileo and Solaro, is that land in the city centre has a high value it is far from fully generating on the market.

[54] The "official" data is that "in Ballarò there are more than 35 communities speaking 37 languages." This sentence is uttered by many of my participants with utmost certainty, although I have no way to fact check it or ideas on where these oddly specific numbers come from.

with a conspicuous migrant population, and deprived or abandoned pockets. They are also largely overlooked by the city government, all the while conserving in more or less good conditions a large portion of the artistic and archaeological patrimony of the city. If a rent gap hypothesis was hazardous, it is easier to apply consumption theories. Albergheria and Kalsa conform to descriptions by Lees, Slater and Wyly of vibrant urban spaces offering to "idealistic, unprejudiced, adventurous and energetic" people the possibility to thrive and reinvent their lives: in sum, they are fertile ground for pioneering gentrification (2008: 24).

It is at this point that the two quarters start walking different pathways. In Kalsa, newcomers create mainly nightlife and food-related activities, or small artisanal workshops. As a result of almost ten years of change, some parts of Kalsa, and especially its main streets and squares are punctuated with elegant restaurants and wineries, alongside less expensive pubs and literary cafes, giving way to a lively *movida*.[55] During the day, many of the shutters in the same areas are up, with young artisans working on artefacts and ornaments, especially jewellery and house decorations. An independent printing shop runs a monthly training on bookbinding and printing by hand. In a small independent bookstore, one can find poetry from local artists next to rare manga or comic books from around the world. Quarter users are mainly middle-class, with a high incidence of university students. To quote Lees, Slater and Wyly again, "[the] neighbourhood has a certain 'feel' to it, a certain look, a landscape of conspicuous consumption that makes [gentrification] readily identifiable" (2008: 113). Angela Solaro though is careful to extend this 'feel to it' to the whole quarter: gentrification aesthetic (Jager 1986) is here patchy; it goes as far as the street corner, to leave space to a pile of garbage, an abandoned mattress, laundry put to dry, in short, a more 'down-to-earth' popular aesthetic. Kalsa is maybe in the process of gentrifying, but

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[55] *Movida* in Palermo has both positive and negative connotations: on one side younger people appreciate how many possibilities the Palermitan night has to offer; on the other, residents complain about the impossibility to sleep at night because of the loud music, and the bad conditions of the streets during the day given the trash nightlife leaves behind.

the process is patchwork at best, apparently unable to permeate the quarter in its entirety (Solaro forthcoming).[56]

Albergheria followed a different path: newcomers (as many SOS Ballarò members are) were not looking for economic opportunities related to nightlife or the food industry, but to social enterprise, mainly linked to the high presence of migrant populations. In a few years, two of the main loci in the city centre for legal representation of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in general, opened a few hundred meters apart: Moltivolti and Circolo Arci Porco Rosso. Handala, an association promoting projects in deprived areas of the city, moved its 'headquarters' in Ballarò. From 2005 on, a myriad of new clubs, associations, cooperatives, NGOs, GROs, saw light and started working from Ballarò, until they almost became one through the constitution of SOS Ballarò.[57] In this sense, gentrification aesthetic in Albergheria is different from that in Kalsa, but this does not mean the quarter's feel or look is not changing: "Ballarò has something different now", another fellow researcher told me with a sigh of frustration. Some pubs and restaurants arrived here too; some artisanal workshops did as well.[58] Renovation went through cleaning, tidying up, and reimagining the urban space with new colours, shapes, and ways to live and enjoy it; media started paying attention to the quarter besides crime news. In short, Ballarò became cool and politically active, an attraction for "idealistic, unprejudiced, adventurous and energetic" people (Lees, Slater & Wyly 2008: 24).

To summarize, Palermo city centre status quo at the end of the 2010s brought researchers to investigate if and how gentrifying processes are affecting the urban tissue. On one side, production theories, movements of capital, rent gaps, changes in the overall population, seem to suggest there is nothing particular about what is happening to the city centre: it is simply following a larger trend. A shift in the focus and in research methods, from

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[56] The author here argues for sacks of resistance to the process, but it is not clear how those sacks work or what shape does resistance assume in these circumstances.

[57] In my year in Ballarò, I came in contact with so many organizations that compiling a list would be impossible. The trend also seems to be far from over: new associations are formed and start working at an impressive rhythm.

[58] At the same time, Kalsa experienced the arrival of new associations and activists. The difference is in the balance between enterprise and social enterprise the two quarters created, and not in the presence/absence of some.

production to consumption theories, tells a different story. Kalsa and Albergheria are changing in a very peculiar way: "[They] are becoming hipster!" as a friend suggested with utter disgust one night as we were sipping a craft beer in the space adjacent to an independent pub where one can pick a vinyl from a huge selection and play it for free. According to consumption theories, gentrification is in motion in Palermo, and the literature seems to suggest it will not be possible to stop it, or even point it in a direction that will allow for a different outcome than displacement of historical residents, population replacement, and bourgeoisification.[59] My ethnographic experience adds complexity to this diffused fatalism in two different ways: the first has to do with the daily activism of the assembly of SOS Ballarò, and the way they try to drive urban change to combine it to what the quarter already is. The second is linked to the mere, continuous, and passive presence of SOS Ballarò in Albergheria, and the kind of influence this aspect has on newcomers. In the next section I will focus on the latter and highlight how 'pioneer gentrifiers' react to the fact that SOS simply exists. As described by Peppe, a core SOS member, when moving their first steps in the quarter, newcomers have to take an important decision: "When you come [in Ballarò] you have to make up your mind: you can *abitare* [live in, have a house] in Ballarò or you can *vivere a* [live] Ballarò".

2.1 First Steps in Ballarò: the Art of Settling Down.

At the beginning of December 2016, I had been in Ballarò for a month, and I was looking for any possibilities to know more about the historical market and its population. For this reason, I was glad to see Nicolò's touristic cooperative, Terradamare, was organizing a tour of the market to listen to "tales whose real protagonists are the families [and] marketers populating […] a space also destined to the trade of words and memories"[60], not just merchandise or produce. Tales from historical marketers alongside a degustation of their products, all for a small fee; it sounded like a great

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[59] This focus on inevitability of unstoppable socio-economic forces driving gentrification is particularly visible in literature about its positive effects (Florida 2003, Freeman 2006). I will examine this literature later on in the chapter (sec. 5)

[60] http://www.terradamare.org/tour-mestieri-ballaro/ My translation. Accessed on 31/03/2021.

ethnographic probe. I arrived at the appointment and met for the first time Nicolò, who would become one of the main participants to this research. He introduced the tour to the group, telling us to pay close attention to the words of those we would meet in our five stops. The plan was to visit a bar/patisserie, an olive seller, a sweets manufacturer, a seeds and spices shop, and an artisanal brewery. Nicolò guided us through the market holding up an artichoke he borrowed from a grocer, instead of the classic umbrella or paddle used by tourist guides in Ballarò. He was also very careful in giving time and space to the "living monuments" to tell their stories, stretching back to WWII, WWI, sometimes even the XIX century. For this reason, I was surprised when we arrived at Ballarak, the artisanal brewery, as it not only did not date back to the previous century, but it had not even had an opening night yet.

We sat down at a long table with a glass of tasteful beer in our hands nibbling on what the other marketers gave us, when Federico, one of the owners, turned a mic on to tell us about the pub:

> Ballarak is one of the ancient ways some say this area and the market were called. […] We decided for it because we didn't want to be detached from the rest. It is true, we came to Ballarò, I'm not gonna lie to you, because it was cheaper to rent here. This doesn't mean we don't know what Ballarò is or stands for. We are now part of the quarter, and we will try our best to give back.

The owners also told us the turbulent story of how they financed their project, how much they had to struggle for banks to give them credit, and how they built the pub on a budget by hand, crafting almost everything around us. They closed by saying inauguration night was in a few days and invited us all to come back.

Ballarak's story is useful in explaining how somebody new arrives in Ballarò and tries to settle down to do business. The owners are four guys in their early 30s, all graduated in different disciplines. They thought about opening a brewery together after they were faced with the choice of leaving Palermo and Sicily to migrate somewhere else or stay here and try to follow one of

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their common passions: artisanal beer. Not having much liquidity at hand, they decided they had to save on location, and looked for low-rent areas. In short, four young highly educated people with a hipster interest and able to build a pub on their own, decided to set up their enterprise in a low rent area where there are specific services and a 'vibrant' community: according to the literature, they are the epitome of 'pioneer gentrifiers'. I argue, this situation is more complex though, and strictly connects to SOS Ballarò's presence: being part of Nicolò's tour can be read as a new business enjoying the opportunity for free advertising; at the same time, Nicolò is widely recognized as a core SOS member. Even before opening their business, the guys had already entered the activists' network, and embraced some of its basic ideas, like the importance of the historical market or the kind of impact urban change should have on the quarter. To address the former, they try to buy every ingredient for their kitchen from the market as "it is not only close to us, but the quality is high, and prices are affordable. We have so many great things in Ballarò!" On the latter, they consistently took part in assemblies both before and after opening day, especially during the period when SOS Ballarò was drawing the project of the new cover for Piazza Carmine (see chap. 5).

If pioneering gentrification is linked to ideas of a wild (urban) frontier (Makagon 2010), an empty space on the other side of the border of civility that pioneers have to discover, conquer, and civilize, Ballarak offers a nuanced reading. The owners did not see Ballarò as an empty space they had to conquer, but as a community they should become a part of, offering many possibilities from an economic, social, and political point of view. I argue this happened because SOS Ballarò existed, was there before their arrival, and set the tone for future incoming population. The assembly has obviously no power to confront a private investor on their ideas or projects on how to spend their money. It is nevertheless a well-known political reality with a specific weight that newcomers have to somehow confront.

In explaining the implications of such existence, the concept of 'mere presence' (Coles 2008) can be of help. Coles describes the influence international bodies had in electoral processes in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina: international staff and electoral supervisors did not always have something to do, tasks to carry out, or goals to reach. On the contrary, they

felt "a mild sense of guilt" for not being always engaged during working hours or saw some of their (in)activity as a "waste of resources" (Coles 2008: 135). At the same time, the author argues, this sense of wastefulness does not account for the passive work they were carrying out: their mere physical presence, not only in polling stations, but in cities and towns more generally, had positive repercussions on how the electoral process was carried out. The aura of impartiality and technical ability an international official had in this context, has a value beyond their active duties. Similarly, SOS Ballarò's mere existence in the quarter, if it does not entail inactivity or impartiality at any point, has some effects beyond the fact that activists can interact with newcomers: "We felt we could not come here and do nothing but make and sell beer", as Federico told me. For this engagement, Ballarak always enjoyed the thirsty presence of SOS members for a refreshing pint or a bite to eat (especially after the Tuesday assembly), as well as high praise and publicity.

At the same time, those who ignore SOS Ballarò's presence and its network, are usually judged harshly by activists, with the result of getting excluded from activities and events. A bar café opened in the quarter just before I started fieldwork. The owner joined some assemblies and tried to cooperate with other members, but was met with reluctance when it became clear that

> she was in it for the money. She wanted things to happen in front of her bar just to sell a coffee or two. Once, she wanted to organize a thing for the kids of the catechism class [...]. She told me they should pay 5€ to have a snack in the afternoon. What am I, Scrooge McDuck?! The kids, can you believe it? You don't make the kids pay for a snack. Not [in Ballarò].

Peppe was maybe the more vocal about this situation, but other members expressed their perplexity in her regards and the fact she tended to use SOS to her own advantage or ignore its existence tout-court. This became clearer during the Christmas season in 2017: we wanted to set up a Christmas tree in Piazza Mediterraneo, the main square in Ballarò. After a long wait, we were able to get the scraggiest branch of a pine tree from the city council for free.

We roamed the quarter asking for spare decorations, and we bought a set of lights from one of the marketers. We called for the kids in the quarter to decorate the 'tree', and set up the lights asking to one of the shops on the square to plug them in. It was ugly, all leaning on a side, tied to everything around it to counteract the wind; nevertheless, we were very proud of it, because at a minimal cost Ballarò now had its tree, sure lousy and lame, but "isn't it the perfect image for what we do? We get things done the best we can with what we have!"

A couple of days after, another tree appeared, right in front of the bar café, a perfect spruce 3 m high, with blue decorations and blue lights all neatly arranged. It took members five minutes to conclude the bar owner had put the tree there, spending a lot of money, but even more impertinently, ignoring the action we did before to guarantee a Christmas tree to Ballarò.[61] I cannot say if activists were angrier because she did not tell anyone about her intentions or because she spent a lot of money in contrast to how 'we do things around here'. Maybe anger was all in the beauty of this new tree in contrast to our mangy one. Nevertheless, this was considered as a final act. When I sat down with Peppe right after Christmas, he reasoned around the tree and concluded that "her attitude is the one of those who don't want to live inside the network, but off of it. She does not want to live Ballarò, she just lives *in* Ballarò."

The difference between the two cases is that, in the first Ballarak recognized the existence of SOS Ballarò and strived to be a part of that network, which in turn became a signal of living the quarter in all its intensity, of *vivere Ballarò*, as Peppe would say. In the second, the bar owner refrained from acknowledging SOS presence, making it clear (at least in the eye of members) she saw Ballarò as a place like many others where to do business or have a house: *abitare a Ballarò*. Members usually get their coffee in the bar right next to hers, in a sense, not acknowledging her existence either.

In the last pages I traced the debate on gentrification to show how Palermo city centre has experienced urban change and renovation as a consequence of the initiative of private citizens, intended as both enterprises, individuals, and

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[61] Even though I have little doubt on the fact the bar owner organized and paid for the tree, I did not have the chance to confirm SOS Ballarò's suspicions once and for all.

politically active groups. This allowed me to explore the point of intersection where economic, social, and cultural forces meet, giving way to different outcomes depending on how different subjects interpret their presence and activity in a given space or urban context. In the next section I will shift the focus and explore dynamics involving the public sector, mostly intended as the city council, to show how different ideas of urban planning manifested in Palermo in the last 160 years, and how this legacy translated into the approach the city council takes today, always keeping in mind the legitimate presence and action of the assembly of SOS Ballarò.

3. Urbanization with a Dropper: Master Plan, Minor Execution.

> *Se tu vuoi conoscere da vicino la plebe palermitana, la vera plebe, quella che ha fame e che ha freddo, a cui manca l'aria e la luce, vieni con me; io ti conduco al mandamento Palazzo Reale; io ti guido per i meandri dell'Albergheria. [...] Ogni volta che vo gironzando qua e là per l'Albergheria, io sogno di possedere una martellina incantata, per tracciare nuove strade e nuove piazze, per dare un po' di luce, un po' d'aria, un po' di sole a quella povera gente* (Onufrio 1882:14-18 in Lo Piccolo, Rossi-Doria & Schilleci 2006: 31-32)

> If you want to know up close the Palermitan plebs, the true plebs, those who starve and shiver, those who lack air and light, come with me; I guide you through *Palazzo Reale*; I lead you through the meanderings of Albergheria. […] Every time I wander around in Albergheria, I dream of having an enchanted hammer, to trace new streets and new squares, to bring a bit of light, a bit of air, a bit of sun to those poor people. (My translation)

In a few paragraphs in a tourist guide written in 1882, the author perfectly captures the core principles of urban renovation in Palermo (and especially in Albergheria) that are still valid today. From the Italian unification onwards

(1860), the city council commissioned plan after plan to architects and engineers to improve the lives of its inhabitants and transform Palermo into a modern, organized city. As I will show, such actions by the state were driven by, on one hand, an attempt to reduce the density of the urban pattern, especially in overcrowded and impoverished areas such as Albergheria, through large new streets and open spaces (Giorgianni 2000);[62] On the other, there was the will to regulate urban expansion along new axes outside the centre, so that new parts of the city would follow a planned and geometrical logic instead of a wildfire expansion dynamic (Lo Piccolo, Rossi-Doria & Schilleci 2006). If, from 1860 onwards, the city council produced more master plans one can count (all with their variations, exceptions, modifications etc.), the passage from the tourist guide mentioned above still expresses a key feature of urban planning in Palermo: the desire for a magical tool, allowing the wielder to create impactful consequences immediately, without the necessity to confront the harsh reality of urban renovation processes, always laid on the anvil of bureaucracy and party politics, while being relentlessly battered by the hammer of corruption and organized crime.

3.1. 1860-1945

Albergheria was always considered a quarter of poverty, overcrowding, and poor public health. Any attempt to change it would not only have to consider its renovation but also its decontamination. In this sense, the rhetoric of *risanamento* (a term combining the two) and emergency intervention remained dominant after the Italian unification (1860) up until the 1960s. Especially after a cholera epidemic in Naples in 1884, starting from a part of the city similar in social composition and urban fabric to Albergheria, the Italian government asked cities to implement programs of *risanamento* to improve public health; the best way to do so was to trace new large streets where fresh air would flow and sunlight reach the ground. The first step of such planning was the demolition of old deteriorated buildings (Biocca 1992). As Lo Piccolo, Rossi-Doria and Schilleci (2006) and Prestileo (2017)

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[62] Albergheria and Palermo are far from unique examples of such approach. Many cities in the South of Italy were the object of similar (prospective) interventions (for an overview of Naples urban planning see Biocca 1992)

describe in detail, the city was always fairly quick to implement demolition phases, while slow in restructuring the resulting free spaces, and never really worried about providing enough housing for displaced population resulting from demolition, either in the areas where they occurred or anywhere else. Especially during the fascist period, the so called 'demolition pickaxe' of the regime proceeded to destroy vast portions of the quarter, without providing public housing or housing tout-court for the displaced: in the period 1922-1936 10.000 housing units were demolished and about 35.000 people displaced; on the other hand, between 1925 and 1938 IACP (*Istituto Autonomo Case Popolare* or Autonomous Institute for Public Housing) built only 4000 units (the figures refer to the whole city centre, Prestileo 2017: 6). If the discrepancy between houses demolished and houses built was to be partially reduced by the construction of new quarters outside the city centre, the beginning of WWII imposed a halt to the expansion and presented the city with a new array of issues.

During the bombings by the Allies from the 25th of June 1940 to the 22nd of July 1943, more than half of the 260.000 housing units in the city were destroyed or irreparably damaged. As a result, inhabitants per housing unit went from 1.7 to 3.4 (Lo Piccolo, Rossi-Doria & Schilleci 2006: 50-51).

This period of urban planning in Palermo sees uncountable attempts at resolving overcrowding issues and poor public health conditions. If planners always proposed a two-phase program to address emergency and rethink the urban space, they were also often forced to downsize them due to lack of funding, discontinuity in the administration, or historical events, often leaving Palermitans to fend for themselves.

3.2. 1945-1980

Post-war rebuilding efforts in Palermo are tightly linked to the general situation of the newly born Italian republic. In the 1950s and 1960s, Italy experienced an economic boom also (if not primarily) thanks to construction enterprises. Especially in the south, where industrial production was generally less relevant than elsewhere and economy heavily relied on public subsidies, construction represented one of the few sectors actually producing employment and wealth. Moreover, rebuilding efforts were regulated

according to emergency principles with 'agile' tools like 'specific urban plans' (*Piani Particolareggiati* or responding to particular logics and needs), instead of urban master plans aimed at giving back an organic vision of the city. Instead of regulating the way the city would expand, these plans were often "functional tools of legitimization" of wild development. This is particularly evident in the reconstruction plan of 1947, in which new arteries determine directional expansion outside the city centre, "coherently with development companies' interests, [irreversibly] contributing to the decline of the city centre" (Lo Piccolo, Rossi-Doria & Schilleci 2006: 51. Blandi 1998).

In the context of loosely regulated urban expansions and a growing construction sector, the Palermitan political and social system was rocked by the rise of Cosa Nostra, the Sicilian version of mafia, not only through a stronger-than-ever control over the territory and economic activities, but also through electoral success. Christian democratic politicians close to mafia families came to occupy key positions in the city administration, especially with mayor Salvo Lima and assessore to public works Vito Ciancimino from 1958 to 1963. In this period the city council conceded over 4000 licences to build to just three pensioners with no connection to the building sector, obvious figure heads for mafia families: as a result, Cosa Nostra controlled and carried out the demolition of vast parts of the liberty-style city, especially just outside the four central quarters, and built high density condominiums. By placing this huge urban renovation effort in the hands of organized crime and turning a blind eye to construction techniques and materials, the city council guaranteed enormous profits to mafia families, and a springboard to accumulate even more political power (Cannarozzo 2000, Lupo 2004, Pedone 2013, 2019).[63] Shortly after, two brand new residential areas appeared on the map: ZEN (*Zona Espansione Nord* or north expansion zone) and CEP (*Centro di Edilizia Popolare* or public housing centre). Both were built following similar logics of cooperation between state and mafia and were almost entirely financed through taxpayer money.

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[63] This period of wild urban expansion and accrued power by mafia at the expense of Palermitans is aptly named *the Sack of Palermo*.

The city centre never really benefited from post-war rebuilding funding, as this pot of money was regularly pillaged to finance these new expansionist projects. The result was a grievous state of disrepair and abandonment: in the period 1959-1972 the city centre saw 58.2% (74.525) of its inhabitants leave for the outskirts (Lo Piccolo, Rossi-Doria & Schilleci 2006:62). The situation remained more or less the same throughout the 1970s, with the city council announcing many times over interventions and programs (like the master plan for public housing in 1966 or the institution of a commission in 1973), but hardly ever bringing them to completion (Inzerillo 1984, Pedone 2013, 2019).[64] In these conditions of disenfranchisement, overlook, and marginality, "urban and social degradation [fed] each other in a cumulative process", and informal economies and illegality thrived, guaranteeing at least a basic livelihood to many and a lavish one to very few (Lo Piccolo, Rossi-Doria & Schilleci 2006: 66).

3.3. 1980-1994

The 1980s and 1990s are a dense period in the history of the city. In the span of 15 years, Palermo was the stage of a gruesome mafia war between two violent factions that produced more than 1000 victims between 1981 and 1984 in the city centre alone. The so-called Corleonesi (from the small village outside Palermo where they were born) wiped out every member of the Palermitan families they could get their hands on. The establishment of their absolute power coincided with an exponential growth of mafia's economic and political influence and gave way to the conflict between organized crime and the State.[65] From the late 1980s on, mafia gave way to the so-called season of "Excellent Cadavers" (Stille 1994), orchestrating murders of police officers, judges, politicians etc. in order to protect Cosa Nostra form the Maxi-Trial (1986-1992), a gigantic prosecuting effort that brought to the bar for the first time 476 mafia members, including those at the top of the hierarchy. The trial ended in 346 convictions for a grand total of 2665 years

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[64] Also, in many of these programs, Albergheria is left out as an area requiring specific attention; an idea that will remain valid for many decades to come.

[65] It is important to note that the State in this case was not a monolith but at least duplicitous, with parts working to prosecute and imprison mafia bosses, and parts working to cover their traces and protect them through a corrupted judicial system or ad hoc legislation (Lupo 2004).

of imprisonment. Mafia's reaction to the ending of the trial was swift and brutally violent: Cosa Nostra killed two of the leading prosecutors in the trial as well as many of its supposed political patrons and protectors. At the same time, Cosa Nostra started a series of terroristic attacks throughout Italy in what became the season of terror. In Palermo though, as in the rest of the country, citizens started to raise their voice against mafia brutality, leading to the so-called Palermitan Spring, a period of intense mobilization and political awakening focussed on ideals of justice, legality, and freedom (Dicky 2005, Lupo 2004, Renda 1994, Santino 2009, Schneider & Schneider 2003).

The socio-political turmoil linked to mafia violence culminated in a new administrative season with the election of Leoluca Orlando[66] as mayor of Palermo. His moderately reformative agenda incorporated the aforementioned ideals of legality and justice, which also significantly impacted urban planning. At the beginning of the 1980s, the city council asked a group of technicians (planners and architects) to draft a program, able to guide renovation in the city centre. The group had been officially formed in 1979 and conducted analyses and formulated proposals for the renovation of the city centre that were rarely operational, recalling for their grandeur (and ultimately infeasibility) those produced before WWII. After a few back-and-forth between the group, the city council, and other subjects (e.g., the university of Palermo), a preliminary redacted version of the master plan for the city centre was approved in 1993, and became operational in 1994, under the auspices of mayor Orlando. As it was the case in other master plans, here too Albergheria was relegated to a separate regulatory plan: the contextual plan n. 4. The city council wanted to "aim at the conservation, requalification and valorisation […] of the building stock in the area of Ballarò Albergheria, creating the necessary conditions for the permanence of its residents" (variation of P.R.G. approved with D.A. n. 581 06/08/1993. My translation). The plan set a high standard: renovate the quarter while paying attention to the architectural heritage, maintaining a high standard of refurbishment (especially for historical buildings), and creating the conditions for Albergheria to not suffer abandonment any further. At the same time, the plan

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[66] Orlando was the mayor during my fieldwork period too, serving his fourth and fifth mandates after a 12 year hiatus (2000-2012).

did not touch on the issue of unauthorised development or expansion of old buildings that happened from the post-war period onwards, not making any plans to demolish them or pardoning infringements (Pedone 2019, Prestileo 2017).

The 1994 contextual plan n. 4 for Albergheria Ballarò still represents the matrix shaping any future intervention. Many of my ethnographic encounters in city council offices with architects and urban planners ended up with these hand-coloured gigantic maps being unrolled on a large table surrounded by architects and surveyors to ground our discussions in both technical precision and historical memory.

3.4. Long Term Marginality: the Case of Piazza San Pasquale.

The historical overview I gave above is instrumental in understanding the situation Ballarò experiences today. More than 150 years of botched interventions, half-carried-out plans, bombings, demolitions, corruption, embezzlement, violence, marginality, poverty, left a visible mark on the urban fabric of the quarter, as well as an intangible wound in its social one. Here I focus on the former, to discuss how SOS Ballarò confronts it and looks for plausible solutions. To do so, I will consider one specific spot in the middle of the San Saverio market: Piazza San Pasquale. Going from the historical market of Ballarò to San Saverio through via Grasso, I walked everyday past this 15x15 m square of concrete used by vendors to set up stalls during market hours, or by residents as a parking space in the afternoons. At the back of the square there are three adjacent old and depleted four-stories buildings. A makeshift car wash occupies the ground floors, while families live in the second and third. The fourth half-floor, in typical Ballarò fashion, is empty, its windows boarded up. On the western side of the square there is a 2m high wall that forms an angle and continues parallel to the sidewalk for another 20 m, enclosing another portion of 'free' land adjacent to, but separate from, Piazza San Pasquale.

Inside the wall the ground is a metre higher than the street level, in state of utter neglect, covered in weeds and garbage. At the back of this second plot, a third depleted building without windows seems to be holding up only thanks to two large concrete triangular pillars. During my fieldwork, and especially

when the process of formalization of the San Saverio market started (see chap.4), I stopped to observe this spot almost every time I walked by, often together with vendors from the market or other activists. This area, as most of Albergheria, does not have many open spaces and the quarter can hardly afford to waste any. Our idea was that, if we could empty this second plot inside the wall, clean out weeds and garbage, maybe tear down the partitioning wall, and lobby the city council to reinforce the two pillars, we could double the size of Piazza San Pasquale and add vital space to the market.

As it is in the method of SOS Ballarò, these discussions soon went from the streets to the offices of city councillors, architects, and urban planners. As mentioned before, these meetings often included huge maps of the quarter, mainly drawn in the late 1990s. Piazza San Pasquale, in all its stratified complexity, turned out to be such an unintelligible spot that some iterations of these maps did not include it at all, leaving the space blank or showing only some dotted lines. Therefore, we invited surveyors to come and see for themselves, so that (maybe) they could redraw the map and start working on this area. After months of research, there was a breakthrough that unfortunately meant nothing could be done of that second enclosed plot. According to the cadastre, this was technically the ground floor of a building that partially collapsed in the late 1970s, the remains of which were now the fourth building without windows supported by the two triangular pillars described above. The wall between Piazza San Pasquale and the neglected plot was put up by the landowner so that nobody would use their property. Being a plot zoned as private land destined to residential housing, there was nothing that could be done about it without the city council repossessing it from the rightful owner, whose name we were never able to determine. Frustration grew in the assembly (as well as in some of the civil servants working with us), to the point of Tommaso hastily stating in one of our discussions that "next time we find something like that we just go and clean it up, shovel the dirt on the street, put it in the hands of vendors AND THEN we call the city council!"[67]

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[67] Ironically, this is exactly what happened in another quarter of the city, Meschita, when SOS Ballarò helped some residents in dealing with the same exact situation: a plot of land

This ethnographic example perfectly shows the consequences a long and intricate history of urban planning can have on the conditions people have to face on a daily basis, and how complex it can be to intervene and create positive outcomes, even if the city council is fully engaged in the process. Here, two sides of the state emerge in all its internal incoherency. As mentioned in my introduction (sec. 5), this research considers the state both as a monolith, intended (or better imagined) as an entity able to single-handedly impact one's life in its totality (Obeid 2010, 2015, Rasanayagam, J., Beyer, J., & Reeves, M. 2014), and as a cluster of fragmented offices, disjointed units, self-contained (and sometimes self-absorbed) bureaucrats (Gupta 2006, 2012, Obeid 2010, 2015). The example of Piazza San Pasquale highlights how long-term processes like urban planning and renovation have to go through the latter, in a seemingly endless series of meetings, discussions, map readings, surveys, etc. SOS Ballarò approached the issue with some degree of confidence in its ability to activate this fragmented machine, but soon had to face the consequences of decades of lack of interest, never-enacted urban plans, labyrinthine property rights. That space was apparently irreparably marginal, lost in the meanders of the state apparatus and its inability to act. For this reason, activists grew frustrated to the point of starting to imagine another State form, more powerful, even magical (Das 2004), able to take care of the consequences of their actions at short notice. Tommaso wanted to take action "as if the state does not exist" (Graeber 2009: 203) to then bring it in the conversation to acknowledge SOS Ballarò's action, and somehow make it official.

To summarize, I approached the debate on gentrification and urban planning in Palermo from two different angles. Considering private individuals or enterprises, I described the way they can contribute to reshape the urban landscape, and what happens when they enter a territory where a legitimate

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freed by a collapsed building and turned into dumpster. This space started a long dispute between the rightful owner, who complained about their space being in use by the public and ended up fencing it, and the residents of the area, asking why the landowner never said anything for the 20 odd years the space remained abandoned.

and recognizable political subject carries out activities linked to urban renewal. Shifting my focus, I considered the way the public sector, especially in the form of municipal governance, approached the issue in Palermo. The ethnographic example clearly showed how history can concentrate in one single spot on the map, to leave activists wondering if interventions to regenerate marginal spaces are even possible. In the next section I will tackle this issue of the plausibility of interventions, and answer a fundamental question in the debate about gentrification: Who decides what urban renewal should look like? Who should drive the process?

4. Gentrification in Contentious Spaces: How Ballarò Thinks of Itself.

Gentrification is undoubtedly a topic of conversation in Ballarò. As I noted above, the word and its meaning are discussed and debated; even more, they are a source of concern among activists: "I know very well we are on the razor's edge [with gentrification]" Tommaso told me when discussing urban renewal in the quarter and the possibility for private investment to flood Ballarò. It is also true though that the word did not come up in public assemblies or in conversations more casual or less structured than the one I presented at the beginning of the chapter. Activists, marketers, residents, vendors from San Saverio almost never mentioned gentrification; instead, they referred to what was happening to the quarter as "urban re-qualification". On one side this does not depend on a deliberate choice to avoid the term, or on a reasoned argument to select re-qualification as a specific terminological practice. Urban planning in Italy often features 're-qualification' alongside renewal, renovation, and renaissance. One could say the choice is here simply a result of a widely used terminology; on the other hand, I argue it reflects a specific set of political ideas and practices, and results in a specific attitude towards urban renewal.

Above, I described the effect SOS Ballarò has (or has not) on newcomers and potential gentrifiers through mere presence (Coles 2008). Moreover, I showed how state-driven urban planning in Palermo was out of citizens' hands not only throughout the XX century, but how this legacy did not allow activists to have an impact even nowadays. In short, nothing I described until

now entails SOS Ballarò having a particularly active role on gentrifying processes. It is therefore necessary to ask: what is SOS Ballarò doing about urban re-qualification? Can we argue, together with Solaro (forthcoming: 41) that SOS Ballarò is an "element of resistance" to the gentrification of Palermo city centre? To better answer these questions, it is important to clarify what resistance means in these circumstances.

Lees, Slater and Wily (2008) analyse two case studies, Lower Park Slope in New York, and the Mission District in San Francisco. Here, grassroots activists and specifically designed policies were not able to completely contain the injection of capital in the two areas, or block rental and property skyrocketing prices. In Lower Park Slope, the main subject trying to counteract the negative effects of urban renewal is the Fifth Avenue Committee (FAC). This is a non-for-profit association responsible for the renewal of more than 600 housing units to provide affordable housing. It also created the so-called Displacement Free Zone (DFZ) to raise awareness on evictions due to rent increases, while counteracting predatory practices used by landowners to force tenants out through legal assistance and a solid communicative platform. FAC tries to ultimately 'shame' landowners into not raising rents or at least sit at the table to negotiate (Lees, Slater & Wily 2008: 254). FAC's main mission is thus to help historical residents, especially if particularly vulnerable to predatory landowners and their 'techniques', to stay in their homes, and "preserve the ethnic and class diversity of the neighbourhood" (*ibid*.).

The case of the Mission District in San Francisco is even more glaring: during the 1950s and 1960s the district lost much of its population of Italian and Irish immigrants, who moved to the suburbs with the help of the local government. In the next two decades, new waves of immigration (especially from Latin America) found low housing prices in the area, alongside artists from the beat generation, looking for the ever-celebrated 'vibrant atmosphere' of the inner-city neighbourhood. A second wave of gentrification started in the 1990s, with the dot-com industry: large live-work spaces flourished in the remains of former factories, together with new office spaces, saturating the housing market. In such a climate, private companies started working on two megaprojects for almost 43.000 m² of office space, sparkling stern protests,

culminated on one side with the torching of two live-work spaces under construction, on the other through a petition and a legislative proposal narrowly defeated in the elections of November 2000. (Lees, Slater and Wily 2008. For a related example on Barcelona, see Portelli 2017).

The two cases highlight two main strategies, articulated in three different activities: assistance to those at risk, protests and demonstrations, and pressure for legislative action. Resistance here combines the three aspects, configuring activists' action either in New York or San Francisco, as a *reaction* to a process they detected as a threat to the social fabric of their neighbourhoods. If it is true that SOS Ballarò partakes in some activities comparable to those listed above, I will refrain from labelling them as 'resistance to gentrifying processes'. I argue in Ballarò activists are not *reacting* to an ongoing process but driving how urban change should be enacted, denoting a specifically *proactive* attitude. To better clarify, the starting points for FAC, protests in San Francisco and SOS can be of help: FAC was born in 1977 after the demolition of two entire blocks by the city council to make room for a new school; the building process never started because of the fiscal crisis New York was facing. It is in reaction to these events that the Committee was born and started addressing housing issues and revitalization tactics for the Fifth Avenue area.[68] Similarly, resistance in San Francisco, as an activist vividly described, started because

> [i]t's hard not to notice… when a new restaurant opens up seemingly every day, replacing a small grocery store or auto body shop… when snow white, picture-perfect Buffy and Ken come out to play at night, […] or when […] it seems like every third person has an eviction story […]. One day you decide you have to do something about it. (Lees, Slater and Wily 2008: 257-8)[69]

In both cases, activism is reactive and stems from specific events flagging up the beginning (or continuation) of gentrifying processes. As we saw earlier

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[68] http://www.fifthave.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&pageId=559. Accessed 04/01/2019.
[69] The quote from Gordon Winiemko, artist/activist in the Mission District in the late 1990s, comes from the documentary by Cavanaugh, F., Mark Liiv, A. & Woods, A. (2001) Boom! The Sound of Eviction.

(see chap. 2 sec. 2), SOS Ballarò was not born because of urban renewal, but because of an act of intimidating violence against a pub confiscated from a local mafioso and reassigned to an anti-racket group of entrepreneurs. In a sense, SOS Ballarò started talking about urban change, planning, and re-qualification by chance, hence from a different perspective.

4.1. Proaction and Urban Re-qualification.

SOS Ballarò was born out of the necessity to condemn mafia violence and presence in the quarter. Activists met for a two-day workshop primarily to voice their anger and frustration towards organized crime; "Two days are a long time to reflect" though, as Tommaso explained, and "give you a lot of time to calm down and start peeling at your rage, like an onion". The discussion in that first assembly gradually shifted from a clear-cut and direct antimafia stance to a more convoluted set of questions: what makes it possible for a local mafioso to act criminally without worrying about repercussions? Why does mafia in Ballarò have such a strong hold? How is it possible for mafia to prosper in any territory? To answer such questions, they decided they "had to talk about everything, in detail, for as long as it [took]". Among other issues, like unlawful building, unemployment, educational and nutritional poverty, drug epidemics etc. three main issues emerged: infrastructural decay, housing 'emergency', and the horrible conditions of public spaces. What SOS Ballarò proposed to itself was to reason around the features the quarter already has and that, as of that day, represented fertile ground for mafia activities and influence. The main aim of this operation would be to re-interpret those features and make them function for the opposite purpose: improving everyone's livelihood, so that mafia influence would erode gradually. To do so, they propose, advocate, and work towards three main objectives: lowering the unemployment level through already-existing industries, like the historical market; lowering levels of illegality and unlawful building, especially in the San Saverio and historical markets; clean and refurbish public spaces to go from open-air dumpsters to social spaces with specific functions. In the next section, I will concentrate on the third point, to leave the other two to chapters 4 and 5.

4.2. Get Your Hands Dirty (Over and Over Again).

In the previous chapter (sec. 3.3) I described how SOS Ballarò took initiative directly, and cleaned, renovated, and put back to fruition a small but fundamental public space in the quarter: Vicolo Gallo. In that section, I used the example in the vignette to explore the concept of direct action (Graeber 2009), as well as one of the ways in which the assembly builds its legitimacy and interacts with the state apparatus. In this section, I will use the same example and similar others to try to answer another fundamental set of questions: how does SOS Ballarò view urban renewal? What does the assembly mean when it speaks of re-qualification? Ultimately, who is at the centre of the re-qualifying process?

The action in Vicolo Gallo in February 2017 was only the first of three consecutive interventions SOS Ballarò organized for this space. The second came some months later, after a big storm knocked down the tree at the centre of the square. The city council intervened and removed the rests of it, leaving the space empty. For this reason, when the Lions Club Palermo called Nicolò and told him they wanted to do something about it, Nicolò accepted their help to the condition of deciding together how the space should change. The Lions Club is an international charitable organization of private citizens dedicated to humanitarian causes. In Palermo it is considered "pretty exclusive, usually they have money and resources. It's basically people with wealthy parents", as Prestileo, the fellow researcher mentioned above, pointed out in one of our conversations. These resources (both economic and human) could nevertheless fill in the gap left by the minimal state intervention and SOS ever depleting ability to follow up on every issue the quarter presents. This rather odd partnership sparked some brief if heated debate inside the assembly: as Prestileo put it "the Lions are not exactly comrades [as in left leaning]. Are we sure we want them in Ballarò?" His concern was that "this could be the way in which capital enters the quarter. Minimal things like this could be a scouting opportunity for rich folks, who then decide to buy in Ballarò". The assembly reflected on the matter at length, coming to the conclusion that

> it depends on how much we stay on top of this action. Who drives
> here? Who decides what we are going to do in Vicolo Gallo? I'm

inclined to say it's not going to be [the Lions]. It's not even going
to be [SOS]. It's going to be Vicolo Gallo, like last time. The
people living there decide what to do with the place.

These remarks by one of the core members put an end to the discussion in the
assembly, even though they did not dissipate all the doubts in every activist.
Nevertheless, SOS would make sure that Vicolo Gallo residents would have
the strongest say in the kind of space this odd partnership would create. In
short, SOS idea was that Vicolo Gallo was far from an empty place where one
could build from scratch. Already existing forms of agency had to be granted
the driver's sit, even if incoming 'forces' were the expression of an
international century-old organization. This second intervention resulted in
another day of work for residents, Lions, and SOS: together, they decided to
draw a game of the goose on the ground and install a slide, so that the space
could grant playing time to the kids living in the area. The group also built a
set of large flower beds and, after a short discussion, planted productive plants
(aubergines, tomatoes, peppers, herbs etc.) instead of ornamental ones, so that
families around the Vicolo could have an economic benefit next to the
aesthetic one.

Vicolo Gallo is a clear expression of what SOS Ballarò intends as urban re-
qualification. This space is far from a blank page: here families live in poor
housing and experience unemployment (or underemployment at best).
Buildings enclosing the square still show the scars of WWII bombings.
Ground floors are used as storage space for trifle of all sorts. At the same
time, it is the locus for a specific sociality, which is simultaneously private
and public. By the look of it, Vicolo Gallo seems to be the courtyard for Pippo
and his brother's house, but it actually connects the biggest parking lot in
Ballarò to the two markets and is one of the largest open spaces in the area.
Many times, when passing by, I had the sensation I was walking in
somebody's living room and felt compelled to speed up; many others, I would
stop to take a rest or sip a coffee while jotting down some notes and being
asked by Mrs Emma if I wanted a glass of water because "France', you look
a bit tired…" In the mind of the assembly, all the above has to be considered

when thinking about how the space should change to improve the lives of those who use it.

Of course, every aspect mentioned can be the subject of a counterargument. The fact that families living in Vicolo Gallo experience poverty or unemployment creates the conditions for the space to become the locus for somewhat illegal activities (drug pushing, un-licensed sale of food and beverages, etc.). The state of disrepair of the buildings means they can be abusively occupied and transformed in storage space by putting up a door and buying a padlock. The blurry nature of the public/private divide meant the space was at the same time interpreted as one's courtyard, resulting in arbitrary access, and as negligible "because it's the city council's responsibility to keep it clean, not mine!" Both these aspects materialized during a two-month period when one of the residents was renovating his house and the Vicolo became a construction site. As long as the renovation was on-going, the space was occupied by a small truck, cement bags, a concrete mixer, and debris. When the renovation was done, everything went away but the large pile of rubble, which sat there until activists and residents carried out a third intervention. At the same time, while renovating his house, the resident was able to reconnect the water fountain in the square to the grid after years of unsuccessful requests to the city council to do so.

Vicolo Gallo is thus a contentious space: familiar and warm, chaotic and dilapidated, home of unexpected mastery and utter neglect. To echo the title of this chapter, a bit of change was needed; the state of disrepair Vicolo Gallo was in until February 2017 (and at intervals after then) was hindering on everyone's ability to benefit from it. What kind of change was needed though? What are the principles that should guide an intervention of urban renewal in such a context? To better answer these questions, I will now go back to literature on gentrifying processes to describe a key shift in the way urban renewal happens in Ballarò.

5. From Place to Space: Re-qualifying the Margins.

The example of Ballarò and the way SOS reasons around the possible routes for urban renewal offer the possibility to re-interpret the debate on gentrification and urban planning in general, first from a linguistic point of view. If many authors already criticized the use of certain rhetoric tools to describe urban change (e.g., Makagon 2010, Macleod 2002), it is also true that they struggle with alternatives. The rhetoric of 'urban frontier', of pioneer gentrifiers "as the broom that will do the initial sweeping" (Makagon 2010: 39) to offer a cleaner and safer environment to a second wave of newcomers is punctually and aptly critiqued; at the same time, gentrification is painted as the inevitable future of every urban centre (hence the focus on practices of resistance mentioned above). If not gentrification, what? The literature appears fatalistic, and alternatives so scarce that authors like Florida (2003) and Freeman (2006) tried to reinterpret gentrification in a more positive way. The former talks about how the new creative class entering impoverished and disenfranchised neighbourhoods "bring[s] cultural capital to a section of the city that may have lacked such prestige" (Makagon 2010: 41), to give way to a trickle-down effect for everybody else to enjoy. In a similar vein, Freeman focuses on the so-called "poverty deconcentration thesis" (2006: 127), according to which class diversity in a neighbourhood is preferable to high concentrations of poor residents. The theory sparked a series of policy attempts to move richer residents in poor neighbourhoods through economic incentives (Freeman makes the case of Harlem and the HOPE VI program in New York. Freeman 2006: 126-7). Again, a trickle-down effect is supposed to take place: new and better services would come to the area, this time due to an increase in social rather than cultural capital. If Freeman offers a moderate and veiled critique of such a theory, mainly focused on racial dynamics, he also investigates positive effects of the injection of richer residents: new shops open, new services get activated, the population becomes less disenfranchised.

It is hard not to notice that characteristics Freeman cites as improvements (such as the availability of fresh produce) can (and should) be seen as a baseline instead of an aspiration. The lack of services and opportunities in a

heavily disenfranchised neighbourhood seems here to be solvable only through the arrival of newcomers with different social positions and backgrounds. I argue the case of Ballarò offers an alternative to this conclusion: through a thorough acknowledgment of the presence of the people in the quarter, SOS Ballarò also recognizes the fact that they already have the required skills to muscle through a reality made of economic stagnation, unlawful building, and criminal activities. Because of this ability, historical residents do not necessitate enlightenment, the trickling down of socio-cultural capital of those better off or better educated. On the contrary, as shown in chapter 2, it is activists who tend to learn these skills for themselves and put them to use in institutional settings. In short, the urban context one tries to impact is not a blank page. Michel De Certeau (1984: 117) makes a useful distinction between place and space. The debate on this distinction is complex and stratified, especially in the fields of urban geography, urban planning, and architecture. The two terms are sometimes swapped, and re-signified according to ideas of design, usage, perspective etc. (see for example Seamon & Sowers, 2008). For the purpose of my argument, I will consider the simpler distinction by De Certeau as a way to differentiate between the locus where "the law of the proper rules", where "elements are *beside* one another, each situated in its own […] distinct location" (place) and the way in which these elements function to create "a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities" (space) (De Certeau 1984: 117. Emphasis in the original). Trying to apply this distinction to my ethnographic example, one could intend Vicolo Gallo as being in such a state of dilapidation that, in order to change it at all, one needs to completely reimagine it. In such extreme case, this 'place' becomes a blank sheet for the planner to build from the ground up and put elements back in their proper position. SOS Ballarò's approach rejects this idea, affirming at every step the importance of those who have built this 'space' brick by brick, not just in its materiality, but in its socio-cultural specificity. In the mind of the assembly, there is no need to imagine new qualities for Vicolo Gallo; rather "we just need to take what Vicolo Gallo is, and make it work", as Tommaso would say: qualities that are already existing need to be re-discovered, re-qualified to reiterate their value in the socio-cultural context that created them. In this

sense, there is no such thing as *place* in Vicolo Gallo; it was and it will always be a *space*, re-qualified and made functional by those who made it in the first instance, following the simple if vague principle that Vicolo Gallo, as one of the residents put it "existed before anybody came to change it, and will still exist long after everybody will have left."

Chapter Four

The San Saverio Market: Mediation, Street activism and the Field of Possibilities

Introduction

Sitting on the protruded root of the ancient tree in the middle of Piazza Colajanni, I enjoy a relaxing moment in the fresh shadow of the square at the centre of the San Saverio market. It was a long hot morning of work side by side Gaetano, a 51-year-old Palermitan active in the market since 2008.[70] I came to San Saverio around 8 am today, to help him with his stall, as his health conditions are not well enough yet to carry out a full day of work on his own.[71] We sat together, talked about a lot of things, sold a few objects. Then, around 12.30, he stood up a bit bored and told me to go get his shopping carts: "*Smontiamo* for today, I'm tired and there's nothing more to do: it was slow." *Smontare* here means retrieving all the objects Gaetano has on display on his tarps on the sidewalk and put them in a more or less orderly fashion in three shopping carts. To finish it up, we have to cover the carts with the tarps, and tie everything together with three pieces of old frayed rope. All tied up, the carts go on the other side of the road, next to the entrance of the bar opposite the stall. We cover them with three planks and make sure nothing moves around; they will stay there until tomorrow. The moves are repeated as a ritual, from start to end. I ask fewer questions every time we do it together. Every day, Gaetano teases me during these operations: "look carefully and you maybe you learn something". The planks, the ropes, the tarps, all work as an antitheft system, together with Gaetano's reputation as the self-proclaimed "Mayor of Ballarò": his stuff should be left alone, and

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[70] It is hard to establish with absolute certainty when Gaetano started coming to San Saverio as a vendor. His version changed several times during my fieldwork, but he came there every day for about ten years, with 2008 as the most often used date for the beginning of his business.

[71] One night in the middle of August 2017, heat and tiredness had the better of Gaetano: he had a mild stroke during the night and was hospitalized for several days. This vignette takes place roughly a month after this episode: it is adapted from field notes taken between the 13th and 21st of September.

everybody knows it. This is not to say that, from time to time, he doesn't come to his carts to find them upside down, emptied, or his things shattered on the street.

On a hot morning like today, sitting on the ground, touching objects, smoking cigarettes, walking around trying to dodge garbage piles, I would get grimy and smudged. I assess the level of dirt on my body by lowering one sock to check the colour difference between the shin left uncovered by my shorts and the ankle. A clear dark line together with the filth on my hands suggest I should go home and take a long shower.

The market is dismantling in front of me. As it happens every day around 1 pm, vendors start to fill boxes and bags with shoes, clothes, cutlery, white goods, etc. Some have strollers (especially Romanian vendors), others have carts. These vendors usually push their merchandize around the quarter to go to their storage spaces, small warehouses obtained in the ruins of old buildings through illegal restorations or occupations. Others, like Gaetano, find a hidden spot around Ballarò and store their stuff outside. Those coming from outside the quarter sometimes have cars or Ape Piaggio, a small three-wheeled pick-up truck. Others have a couple of duffle bags, like Kamal, a Tunisian man in his fifties now leaving the market under the weight of his possessions.

One thing not weighing down vendors on their way home is money: after a 7-hours day in San Saverio, from 6 am to 1 pm, they leave with an average of 10 € of coins in their pockets.[72] After putting Gaetano's stuff away, today as every other day, I went and bought him two packets of Pine light, contraband cigarettes I have only seen in Ballarò, for 4.80 €. Then we started walking towards his bus stop, as he lives with his parents in one of the city's peripheral areas.[73] We walked through the Ballarò market where he bought something to eat, bread and some cold cuts, to bring back home to his parents. He is always very careful with his money, trying to save as much as possible:

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[72] The quantitative data on San Saverio I have is patchy and incomplete, as it comes from a minimal survey me and other researchers administered in the market during the early stages of the formalization process (for more see sec. 5). I nevertheless deem it reliable, as quantitative and qualitative data corroborate one another.

[73] When I first came to the San Saverio market, Gaetano was homeless. He would sleep on a deck chair in front of the closed bar opposite his stall. He moved back in with his parents after the stroke in August 2017.

usually a grand total under 4 € for groceries. At the bus stop, we kissed on both cheeks and called it a day: "See you tomorrow France', don't make me wait for you as you did today!" He offered me a cigarette and disappeared on the boiling hot and sweaty bus directed south-west.

This vignette illustrates the conditions a San Saverio vendor like Gaetano endures in his daily life, facing vulnerability, poverty, and marginality. Vendors in the market can be divided in three major groups, almost equal in raw numbers: Palermitans, Romas, and Maghrebis (especially from Morocco and Tunisia). During weekends, a third major group of sub-Saharan and West African migrants, especially Nigerians, appears in the market. Nobody here is 100% legal. Many amongst migrants have visa issues or are undocumented. Many Palermitans share the same conditions: Gaetano for example carries with him a tattered identity card expired several years ago, which he is not able to renew because he does not have a permanent address. In this sense, he faces the same difficulties of an illegal migrant: inability to access social services, healthcare, subsidies etc. All but deportation. Romas do not have visa problems either, as they are usually EU citizens,[74] but their business often involves the whole family, with little kids enduring the long days at the market alongside their parents. Even those better-off share high degrees of instability. Pino is well-established in the market, he has valid documents and a house in the quarter; nevertheless, he sells counterfeit merchandise and contraband cigarettes, making no more than 20-30 € a day. Vendors selling 'legit' products share similar issues: Mr Luigi sells objects obtained through donations by friends or out-of-business shops liquidating their stocks. He has a pension, but it is not enough to live. San Saverio allows him to make enough money to make ends meet on top of what the state grants him for 40 years of labour. Nevertheless, he does not have a license to sell and occupies a plot of the square he has no permission to occupy. He also does not pay taxes. Last

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[74] On the other hand, being EU citizens does not mean Romas do not experience issues with documents, as I realized when Gaetano introduced me to a woman in her twenties and pregnant who would not access healthcare because of the lack of valid documents and the fear she would get rejected by the hospital.

but not least, many vendors share similar stories of prison sentences, violent acts both perpetrated and endured, scars both literal and metaphorical.

In short, San Saverio tells a story of struggle and marginality, misery and efforts, garbage and mistreatment, all combined to the art of making ends meet through a complex trade. On the other hand, the market shows how all those involved feel they own the quarter, how it is their territory. 'Mayor of Ballarò' is not just an ironic label Gaetano uses to feel empowered or make people laugh; it encapsulates the deep sense of belonging he developed in the years he spent here, in Ballarò's alleys and squares, with its rats and utmost beauty, decadal friendships and bitter conflicts.

Though San Saverio is a limitless mine of ethnographic data, it does not exist in isolation, both in reality and for the purpose of this thesis. In this chapter I will trace the ways in which the market at first collided and then collaborated with SOS Ballarò. This shift from the story of the market to the story of its constitution as an institutional body politics depends mainly on my positionality and my role as an SOS member. As I will show, SOS started a process together with the market that I was able to follow from its inception. The purpose of this process was to create change in San Saverio and re-qualify the area following the principles described in chapters 2 and 3. The market, illegal, unregulated, chaotic, and infinite source of conflict, needed "a bit of gentrification". SOS idea was to involve vendors and put them in the driver's seat to transform the wild phenomenon described above and in chapter 1 section 3 in a recognized site for free exchange, a formal and regulated market area, a source of pride and improved livelihoods for all those involved.

In the next pages, I will describe the steps the San Saverio community had to take to create a field of possibilities for political discussion in and about the market. I will tackle this issue by focussing on two different aspects. On one side, I will retrace the ways in which SOS Ballarò jumpstarted a conversation in and about the market that soon became part of the ordinary lives of activists, vendors, residents, and city officials. For this reason, I will describe the very first assembly SOS organized in this part of Albergheria and the consequences it had. The main question I will answer is: how was it possible to create a field of possibilities for political discussion in an environment like the San Saverio market? I will then go beyond practice and

the simple existence of the field of possibilities to explore what kind of space (De Certeau 1984) the market is. To do so, I will consider some basic if fundamental questions SOS had to ask, not just in San Saverio, but every time it decided to embark in a new political project akin to this one: who decides how the field of possibilities should be used? What are the principles governing the newly formed political discussion? To answer these questions, I will consider two main concepts: rearguard theory (Santos 2014) and thresholds of legality (Bartoli 2019).

1. The Assembly Before the Assembly: Setting the Table in San Saverio.

> Tommaso: Francesco, you have to help me.
>
> Me: With what?
>
> T: I need somebody to go to the airport tomorrow and pick up Ilda Curti.[75] […] She comes from Turin, and she'll help us convincing the municipality to legalize San Saverio.
>
> M: WHAT? Is SOS going to work on San Saverio?
>
> T: Yes! We planned a public assembly in the church with city officials, Polizia Municipale[76], RAP, residents, associations, and THE MAYOR for the 13th [March 2017] but Ilda will be around from tomorrow to prepare us.

Tommaso surprised me with this request on the 9th of March 2017, a day like many others. As said before (see chap. 1 sec. 2), I was warned by Patrizio, the fellow researcher who introduced me to the market, that San Saverio was a hard place to investigate ethnographically (especially without a gatekeeper). This idea was corroborated by the fact that, between my first SOS assembly

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[75] Ilda Curti is a former assessore for the city of Turin, North of Italy. Before becoming an assessore, she started following and studying a market in Turin similar to San Saverio, called the Balon. She was nominated in 2006 and worked hard to give the market a basic regulation to prevent it from being closed down through police intervention, while guaranteeing the right of residents in the area to live peacefully despite the presence of hundreds of vendors.

[76] Italy has three main police forces: Carabinieri are a part of the army and respond to the minister of defence. Polizia di Stato, or simply the police, is outside the army and responds to the minister of internal affairs. The third is Polizia Municipale. It carries out mainly administrative procedures, like monitoring licenses to sell and compliance to regulation, traffic, occupation of public soil etc. In the context of San Saverio, the latter has the most crucial role, hence their involvement in the process.

in January 2017 and the day of Tommaso's call, the assembly had never even mentioned the San Saverio market, let alone embarking on a political project about it. In fact, to that day, the visit to the market with Patrizio described in chapter 1 was still the only time I had experienced San Saverio. Tommaso took me by surprise, but the possibility to access the market and contribute to regulate it was very tempting. I borrowed a car and went to the airport to pick up our expert *assessore* from Turin the very next day.

After the announcement of the 13th of March event, SOS members acted immediately: the Facebook chat started chiming every five seconds, emails went around, agendas got written and circulated. We arranged a small assembly for the day of Ilda's arrival to prepare for the 13th, with two points to discuss: how could we convince city institutions and residents that the regulation of San Saverio was a cause worth pursuing? And even more importantly, how would we involve vendors and guarantee their central role? In Benford and Snow's words (2000) we needed to "frame" the process following SOS method(ide)ology: what knowledge did the assembly have of the San Saverio market? Was it legitimate? What other sources of knowledge could we draw from?

As the preparatory assembly for the big event of the 13th went on, activists' facial expressions did not promise anything good: we soon realized nobody amongst us knew enough about San Saverio and the vendors to make valid hypotheses on how to tackle the issue of the market. What we knew was that vendors looked poor, that they may be implicated in some form of illegal activities, and that they were occupying the area of the market for far too many hours a day: the market happened on a daily basis in a considerable portion of Albergheria, from 6 am to 1 pm on weekdays and non-stop from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon. 500 vendors daily, and up to 1000 in weekends traded in all sorts of goods: used, recycled, new, counterfeit, or stolen. Especially the long hours created considerable discontent amongst residents in the area, who then put pressure on the city council to act and "God help us, move them somewhere else", as a woman living in Ballarò since the 1970s once told me in all her frustration. The market was dirty, full of piles of garbage and overflowing bins, which were periodically set on fire as RAP

constantly delayed collection operations. We talked for a couple of hours trying to put together as much information as we could, but we came out with just impressions: "It is like we have a pressure cooker in our hands that is going to explode, but we have no idea why or what's in it", Peppe said dangling his head. Luckily enough, the assembly had a guest star, Ilda Curti, with a decade-long experience with this kind of phenomena:

> I know very well how you feel. The frustration of not knowing or not understanding is a burden, but you have to understand you just started! When I started in Turin we had no institutional back-up. We just had to go to the market at night with flashlights while [vendors] were setting up their stalls and talk to people. In more or less three years, we ran a study that gave us the tools to intervene with legislation and a structure like the association Balon di Torino.[77] Give yourselves time and come up with a way to involve everybody.

Ilda was trying to move our discussion from diagnostic to prognostic framing (Benford and Snow 2000). In other words, SOS appeared to be unable to pinpoint who the victims of the conditions created by the market were, and clearly identify how they articulated in the everyday lives of residents and vendors. SOS seemed unable to say for sure who or what "the source(s) of causality, blame, and/or culpable agents" were (Benford and Snow 2000: 616). Hence, we should focus on more generic aspects, and, more importantly on ways to address issues following SOS basic principles. The aim had to be to create a path to regulation and governance of the area through "a slim legislative tool like a formalization: a few basic principles, established by the vendors, that the market has to follow, and the city council simply monitors and puts down on paper", as Ilda put it.

The group regained its energy, as we started brainstorming following Ilda's advice. The assembly ended after another hour of intense discussion, and six main points to use on the 13th of March to convince everybody that

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[77] The association Balon di Torino is the associative body responsible for the management of the area and the market, from assigning spaces to different vendors to paying taxes to the city council for the occupation of public soil or garbage collection.

the San Saverio market could be a resource more than a burden. Although generic, the six points were articulated along ideological lines (or frames) of Participatory Democracy, History and Tradition, Economic Struggle, Residents/Vendors Relations, Cost/Benefit Relations, and Ecology:

1) The process to legalize the San Saverio market had to be carried out according to SOS Ballarò's principles of inclusiveness, equality of people involved, and consensus building through assembly practices.

2) The market could not be moved elsewhere, because "Albergheria is the natural habitat of marketplaces". The millennial tradition of market presence and trade in the quarter makes it impossible to move San Saverio elsewhere.

3) In Albergheria, San Saverio would remain the safety net it already was for so many people.

4) Residents' anger and frustration were justified, inasmuch as they did not forget the extreme conditions endured by vendors.

5) The market represented a burden for the municipality, especially with emergency interventions for garbage collection or police operations. An organized market would bring revenues to the city instead of just costs.

6) The market would significantly contribute to the ecologic ideas the city was trying to implement, especially through reuse and recycling.

In our intentions, framing guidelines in these terms would help us create an effective rhetorical device to use during the event on the 13th of March. To follow from chapter 2, through this assembly and the six bullet points, SOS Ballarò was creating a legitimate discourse to present to city authorities, residents, and vendors, to then give way to a political discussion involving all the stakeholders. At the end of this preparatory assembly, we decided the event on the 13th would be twofold: in the morning we organized a workshop and invited people from the university of Palermo, city officials, residents, and anyone interested in having a discussion aimed at the production of legitimate knowledge about the market. The workshop would prepare a report to present in the plenary assembly in the afternoon, at the presence of the mayor and the highest-ranking city officials. As Ilda Curti put it, our main

goal for the afternoon assembly was to "get the mayor to say that he will put effort into San Saverio. You can consider it a success if he just points at someone in his cabinet and tells them to work with you". Being this hardly the first time SOS Ballarò put the mayor in the position to support their efforts, core members were fairly confident the 13th of March was going to be the beginning of our work to make the San Saverio market a formal institution.

2. Warm-Up Workshop: Distilling Legitimate Knowledge.

The 13th of March finally arrived. SOS Ballarò was burning in anticipation. In the morning, a group of 20 people made of SOS members, scholars from the university of Palermo, low-grade city officials, and residents, gathered for a workshop aimed at creating shared knowledge about the market. Activists circulated a flyer amongst vendors to invite them to the workshop too, but, at least at the beginning, none of them were present. We met in the San Saverio church, at one end of the market area. The religious space managed by Don Andrea was not new to this kind of political discussions: another series of meetings about the market happened here in 2012. For issues linked first and foremost to the lack of involvement of vendors, these meetings had little to no follow-up. That morning, the apparent absence of vendors from the workshop casted the same dark shadow. Was this going to be a repeat of our preparatory assembly? A two-hour discussion between people who clearly lacked a deep understanding of the phenomenon they wanted to explore? Nevertheless, the workshop started, feeding off of the enthusiasm of Ilda Curti and those listening to her for the first time.

Ilda began by describing her experience in Turin, and her definition of this kind of markets as "fizzy phenomena: if there's a tiny space for another box, another table, another stall, some vendor will occupy it automatically. We need to understand where and when the market happens". We tried our best to map out the area of the market, opening and closing times, day by day differences, merchandise, internal organization, ethnic communities, the needs it responded to, both vendors' and customers'. Our whole plan crumbled down piece by piece though, as we once again noticed our

knowledge was patchy and superficial. After a couple of hours of struggle, Pino, one of the vendors, walked in the room, leaving everyone silent for a split second. He sat in a corner and listened for about three minutes. He then interrupted the discussion and made very clear we knew nothing. A generalized sigh of relief went around the room the very moment he decided it was time for us to listen to the market's first-hand experience. He moved his chair in the middle of the room and explained us a few things, talking in a very straightforward manner, even though his thick Palermitan accent and a speech impediment made him hard to understand. Answering our questions, he reinforced our impressions on the market, and partially validated our six rhetorical frames: indeed, the market worked as a safety net, a social security cushion for migrants, homeless people, even retirees. It was true a lot of the merchandize was recycled or reused. He was well aware that residents were unhappy, and shared some of their complaints, especially about garbage and poor hygienic conditions. Pino also told us he was participating in our meeting as the vendors' representative, sent by the community to the workshop to both help us and (I reckon) keep an eye on the 'intellectuals'. He drove our reasoning for a good hour and a half and answered to a deluge of questions, reassuring everybody the market was ready to take a step further in its regulation. Vendors were behind him, and, if we "act properly", behind us and the process. The workshop ended in a frank convinced applause: it sounded like there was manoeuvring space to involve vendors this time. The group decided Paolo, a core SOS member, would be the workshop's speaker to report to the plenary assembly in the afternoon. Tired but mildly optimistic, we all went out for lunch, while Pino very publicly walked with us through the market.

3. The Assembly Breaks Down: How Failure Hides Opportunity.

At around 3pm, city officials started gathering outside the church, where the plenary assembly was about to happen. The sacred space of the mass had been changed for the occasion in a political arena of debate and decision. Several council members, the captain of Polizia Municipale, the RAP CEO, Don Andrea, Ilda Curti, residents, activists, the vice-mayor, and the mayor, were

all present. The mayor sat with Ilda at a table in front of the altar, facing the church and the rest of the attendance; everybody else was sitting on the benches; Tommaso was in charge of moderating the assembly; Pino was sitting in the dark, at the back of the church, on a pile of plastic chairs, alone. He looked shady and sceptical. Needless to say, he was the only vendor present.

Ilda opened the discussion again, narrating the situation in Turin and the similarities it had to the one in San Saverio. Everybody listened carefully, especially the most powerful in the room. It was now Paolo's turn, core SOS member and designated speaker from the morning workshop: he had the task of recapitulating our work and put our six-point-framing device to good use. Some people asked me to take up this role, but I declined. I felt in too much of a positional dilemma to represent the voices of people I had just started working with on a topic I did not really know. I felt like (and was) an outsider and a researcher: standing in the spotlight advocating for them would have made me the foreign agent who came in to save the day. Two minutes in Paolo's speech though, and I started regretting my decision: I should have taken the role despite this issue, because Paolo was failing to convey the core principles of our work in the morning: our prognostic framing (Benford & Snow 2000) got lost in his speech, with none of the six points clearly surfacing. He appeared confused and this reflected in the expressions of those in attendance. They looked puzzled, baffled: how is it possible that the bunch of 'intellectuals' we put in a room for a whole morning came out with nothing but non-sense blabbing? They seemed to think.

In this occasion (and maybe only this one during my fieldwork) SOS Ballarò failed to capitalize on the legitimacy of its approach and reputation. The work done in the morning, as well as that done in the preparatory assembly, resulted flimsy and ethereal. No SOS member thought we did a bad job in preparing for the event, but in this specific occasion we all learnt that legitimate knowledge production has to translate in sound and powerful political rhetoric, because otherwise the assembly practice is high-jacked, and its basic principles distorted.

The mayor was the first one to see the space left open by Paolo, and immediately tried to capitalize on it. During my fieldwork, I came to know him through similar events as a theatrical character and expert rhetorician: "A fox of a politician", as one of my interlocutors once defined him. This was a precious occasion for him: a full attentive audience made of residents from a voting district he was usually unable to reach; even more precious, considering we were less than three months away from municipal elections. He took the floor by storm. The assembly we intended to be horizontal and egalitarian became the locus to exercise power and decisiveness:

> The problem of the perimeter [of the market]: should we say the border on this side is Corso Tukory and vendors cannot stay on the other side of the road? Who is in favour?

The majority raised their hands.

> Can somebody come up here and write it down? Thank you. So, on the other side, should it finish in via Albergheria? No? Ok; via Verga? Is it better?

Again, rise of hands.

> Good. Should we say the market is going to happen only during weekends?

The vast majority showed their agreement with an applause.

I was fuming. The mayor was acting as an all-mighty leader on the basis of a plebiscite, in front of a handful of people representative of nothing at all. You could have not distorted SOS Ballarò method(ide)ology more if you tried. Pino slumped into his tower of chairs even more, seemingly thinking "I knew it". From the back of the church, I was observing but could not take notes. I was furious. I knew I was not the only one though. I could see Tommaso, Nicolò, Paolo, Peppe, all the other SOS members were going through the same frustration; all but Don Mario.

Don Mario is the priest of the Santa Chiara church, the hundred-year-old Salesian institution in Ballarò. He stands 2 m tall, 120 kg: the proverbial gentle giant. His appearance matches his political weight: as the director of Santa Chiara, he is responsible for several social activities addressing educational, cultural, legal, and nutritional poverty. As Nicolò puts it, "he is responsible for the wellbeing of the quarter when every other system fails. He is deeply involved in politics, while keeping a distance from the political [as in party politics and elections]". As a priest, Don Mario brings with him an aura of respectability, neutrality, and legitimacy, and deploys them with caution and consideration.

At that very moment, he was aware he was the only one in the church who could turn the rather absurd situation of an assembly become a plebiscite inside out. All of a sudden and with mystic impetus, he raised both arms to the sky and stood up:

> Point of order. This is not how things should be done. This is an
> assembly. We are here to discuss all together about the issues and
> flag up possible solutions.

His tone was firm but calm, expressing the kind of resoluteness nobody can afford to ignore, not even the mayor. He looked even bigger than usual, almost capable of reaching for the dome of the church and blow the lid off this whole situation. The atmosphere was broken. Everybody sat back in silence. What had happened up to five seconds ago did not matter anymore.

The question of legitimacy is here once again central. As usual SOS Ballarò tried its best to build up legitimate knowledge and discourse. Failing to convey this legitimacy meant it also failed to influence the political context it tried to set up. With no legitimacy left to spend in the political arena after Paolo's failed attempt, the only plausible outcome became losing control to a higher authority: the mayor. Only an infinite source of legitimacy like the Santa Chiara director and especially Don Mario, could shift the power dynamics back in SOS Ballarò's favour. Don Mario hitting the reset button also had an ulterior and, in the long run, more relevant consequence. By creating another chance for SOS Ballarò to drive the discussion, he invested

all his political and social capital and asked those in attendance (city officials included) to trust the assembly method and respect the process that brought forward the possibility for a discussion in the first place. As a result, SOS Ballarò regained self-confidence, and faced the rest of the assembly and the next months in a more daring fashion, asking the municipality for ever growing support and pushing it to invest human and economic resources. I argue that, if the assembly on the 13th of March had not broken down, the project of the formalization of the San Saverio market I will describe later on would have not been so thorough and innovative. In a sense, Don Mario electrocuted the community back to life, inviting it to make some foundational choices to express its fullest potential. We responded to his request with enthusiasm, as Tommaso regained control of the proceedings and asked for speakers, bringing the method back to assembly dynamics. SOS members all put their names in the hat; they all echoed what we said in the morning and the six frames we worked on during the first SOS assembly, plus the necessity for a profound study of the area and the phenomenon of the market, given that the morning workshop highlighted many gaps in our knowledge. At this point my positionality had shifted completely: the anger and dissatisfaction I felt during the mayor's extravaganza, in conjunction to Don Mario's shock, made me feel central to the project, especially when Nicolò brought up the necessity for a study:

> Good afternoon. I am Francesco. I am part of SOS Ballarò. I am an anthropologist, and I am doing research in the quarter. I think we badly need detailed data on the market, and I would be pleased to collaborate in the research process. My warning is: it takes time. It cannot be done in a week, but if we assemble a research group, we can have enough material in about six months. Especially if we have the back-up of the municipality, of residents, and especially of vendors.

In a moment I solved my positionality dilemmas, not only by making it clear to those present, but to myself. I picked a side because I felt invested in the process and partaking of SOS ideas to improve their (and my) quarter's

conditions. As said at the beginning of the chapter, in this moment I realized my ethnographic presence in the market would not be finalized to the study of the market itself, but of the process I just became a key factor in. My ethnographic object could not simply be the market anymore, but had to be the market going through regulating, legalizing, and formalizing processes, enmeshed in a new field of possibilities for political discussion.

4. Research and Activism Assemble! Assessing the Status-Quo.

The 13th of March had no tangible effects on the quarter or the market. The only practical development was the mayoral deliberation n. 81 of the 21/04/2017, instituting a so-called techno-political roundtable about the market. This administrative tool is one of the ways in which SOS Ballarò collaborates with the municipality and essentially represents a formal space where activists and city officials can sit at the same table and discuss problems and solutions in relation to specific phenomena. In this case, the deliberation established that several *assessori* (or their delegates) have to collaborate with SOS Ballarò "to the process of regulated and defined formalization" of the San Saverio market (my translation).[78] For many reasons, the first meeting of the roundtable did not happen until late May 2017, while the second took place at the end of September, and only after the mayor signed another official document re-instituting the group. Nevertheless, the assembly described above had two major effects: 1) SOS members, city officials, and (more importantly) Pino granted me (and the rest of the assembly) the possibility to access the market with the purpose of research and political activism, and 2) a new field of possibilities for political discussion was ready to be opened up for all those hovering around the market. These two aspects are strictly linked, as my presence (and therefore that of SOS Ballarò) in San Saverio represented that space for discussion on an everyday basis. I was able to roam free with the approval of vendors and city officials, gather data and listen to all the claims and ideas in and about the market. At the same time, and perfectly in

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[78] SOS Ballarò has lobbied the municipality for the institution of many techno-political roundtables in the last years, tasked with tackling a variety of issues. For another example, see chap. 2 sec. 3.1 or chap. 5 sec. 2.2.

line with SOS Ballarò practices, these claims and ideas had to be not simply critical, but also constructive, as they would fuel the discussion inside SOS Ballarò assemblies and drive its actions at the techno-political roundtable.

It is in the period between the 13th of March and the second meeting of the techno-political roundtable in late September 2017 that I was tasked by the assembly to put together a research group and start gathering data on the market, while fostering vendors' participation to the political process. Together with three young Palermitan scholars[79] I started going to the market every day with two main purposes: on one side we had the task to build consensus around the fact that the market needed to become more orderly to be fully recognized by the municipality and have a more positive impact on the lives of those involved (I will focus on this aspect later on in this chapter). Primarily though, we just needed more information about the social and economic dynamics shaping the market and its relationship with two other entities: residents and the S/state. Our main research question was: why are relationships so contentious and conflictual between these three? Our main question as activists was: what can SOS do to make sure these conflicts do not preclude the possibility for a participatory and democratic process of urban re-qualification? For these reasons, we designed a survey made of five generic questions (nationality, gender, how many days in the market spent per week, type of merchandise sold, estimate of earnings) that we mainly used as a ploy to start conversations with vendors, as we were more interested in gathering qualitative data and opinions on the future of San Saverio. In this period, we also worked as activists, organizing vendors assemblies, events with both vendors and residents, distributing flyers, and inviting city officials to walk in the market with us. The complexity the market showed during our short research project was outstanding. Levels of conflict were impressively high. At the same time, most of those involved showed varying degrees of interest in the process of formalization of the market.

During the 15 plus years of its existence, the market represented a problem many tried to solve. The city council tried many times to control or suppress the phenomenon, mainly through police interventions spanning from

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[79] The three scholars are Federico Prestileo, economist, Chiara Giubilaro, urban geographer, and Melania Ferrara, then political scientist now full-time activist.

arresting a single alleged fence to mass removal through prolonged military occupation of the area. At the same time, as mentioned above, Don Andrea organized several meetings with city officials and residents from 2005 on, to ask the municipality to enforce state laws prohibiting unlicensed commerce, illegal occupation of public soil, disturbances, etc. Vendors always expressed defiance and anger towards such strategies:

> One time the Polizia Municipale captain came around with the other [police forces]. They wanted the market to go, simple as that… At the time I was living in a *catoio*[80] with my partner and the rats. I grabbed [the captain] by the collar of the jacket and shoved him against the shutter there [points to the other side of the street]. I shouted in his face to come with me and see where I lived, with the garbage and the rats, on a mattress on the ground. "Get me out of here first, then you can say something about the market! If you can't do anything, just go away or it gets ugly!" After two minutes he came back, handed me 20 € and told me to go eat something.

This anecdote is one of Gaetano's favourites, as it shows both the conditions he is able to endure as a vendor, and the length he is willing to go to safeguard the market and his job. It also perfectly depicts the atmosphere in the market at the beginning of the process to formalize it. Police forces would receive orders to dismantle the market, giving way to an irresolvable conflict with vendors. Seizing merchandise always ended up being close to meaningless, as the nature of the objects for sale makes them easy to replace: an afternoon of collection in the bins around the city and every vendor could be ready to sell the morning after. As the anecdote shows, the State embodied by police officers would sometimes be moved by the reaction of vendors, drop their intentions to swipe the area, and give in to acts of charity. In short, the State was never able to properly enforce legislation on commerce or urban decorum in the area. On the other hand, vendors became suspicious at best,

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[80] A catoio is a typical Palermitan single-room house on the ground floor of old buildings, previously used as a warehouse or a stable.

confrontational at worst, when interacting with the State. In this context, the field of possibilities for the two to imagine a solution to the problem of San Saverio was close to non-existent.

The living conditions in the market were also deeply frustrating for residents, to the point of bringing them to violent outbursts. Forced to live in unhygienic conditions, struggling to sleep especially during weekends and holidays, witnessing "uncivil" behaviours, being unable to "invite friends over, [as] they are scared or disgusted", residents' unrest augmented the pressure in the area. When I started working in San Saverio, I was surprised by the tone of their complaints and the 'solutions' they were willing to back up: "I sometimes want to go out at night with a stick and beat someone to a pulp", "I'm going down with some fuel and set somebody on fire", "they are dirty and stink! Let's put them somewhere else: jail, nuthouse, morgue, I don't care". The level of frustration expressed by residents, if stripped of its most extreme and vicious facets, can be understood in relation to the situation they have been enduring for more than 15 years. It is true that garbage piles up and is set on fire.[81] It is true vendors are noisy and create unhygienic conditions, as the area is not equipped to host a market. It is true vendors block building entrances with their stalls. Finally, it is true the market occupies the area five days a week for seven hours a day, and non-stop from Friday nights to Sunday afternoons. If, as noted above, the relationship between State and vendors left little to no space for discussion, the one between residents and vendors represented a literal dead end.

Similarly, the long existence of the market exacerbated the relationship between residents and the State. The former tend to picture themselves as *part of* the State. It should protect them and guarantee them the right to a peaceful life; the same State that lets them down so many times:

> I pay all my taxes, I vote, I do my civic duty. But still, I have no rights, nobody guarantees them. [Vendors] don't pay taxes, they are illegal, they make a mess, but nobody tells them anything. I

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[81] It is also true residents sometimes profit from the situation by e.g., throwing garbage bags out of their windows on to the streets or abandoning on the sidewalk a couch, a broken tv, an old mattress, (see chap. 1 sec. 2)

just want for the State to do the State and make people respect the laws […]. If I don't pay a tax, or a fine, [the State] comes after me with all it has. Meanwhile, they roam free. You tell me Francesco, where is the State?

Marco, a 32-year-old restaurant owner, expresses here a straightforward necessity: he wants "the State to be the State" or at least "act like one" (Weeden 2003). As shown by many (see Abrahams 1988, Gupta 2006, 2012, Mitchell 2009) the State is far from being a unitary entity. In anthropological analyses, it results more akin to a cluster of practices and agencies. Nevertheless, in San Saverio it is sometimes imagined and "hoped for" (Jansen 2014) as a monolith, able to, at least in principle, enforce the law and manage both territory and population. Residents would like for the State to be able to exercise power in the form of "manipulation" and "penetration" (Johnson 2001: 215) of the neighbourhood and are frustrated by its inability to do so. They continuously file complaints, call the police, call offices and the mayor, but receive little to no response. Here, as in any other relation examined above, the field of possibilities was restricted to conflict at best, non-existent at worst.

To summarize, the metaphor of the pressure cooker used by Peppe in the first assembly referenced above was the most apt. SOS Ballarò entered San Saverio with little to no space for action: residents were on war footing; vendors thought nothing depended on them and nothing would happen anyways; the city council appeared unable to even think about the issue. Thanks to the initial shock brought by the assembly on the 13th of March though, SOS Ballarò carved a space for its day by day capillary action on the street, with the specific intent to start a never-ending assembly, build legitimate knowledge, and create the field of possibilities for a political discussion where 1) residents could compare their needs to those of vendors; 2) vendors could gain political weight by deciding how the market should be run, and 3) the city council could gain leverage to legislate in the best interest of all the subjects involved without resorting to military interventions or revanchist politicies (Smith 1996). In the next section I will describe how this field of possibilities came into being, and how it started as an imagined space

devoid of any specific content, to become a pregnant discursive practice full of political implications.

5. Vendors-Residents-State: Simmelian Models and Street Activism.

I have described how SOS Ballarò accessed the San Saverio market with the intent to open a new field of possibilities, but what kind of space is this? What does it allow SOS to do? In the attempt to answer such questions, I will refer to the Simmelian model of the triad, as it allows for a linear description of otherwise inextricable relations between parties and their interests, to then describe the role SOS Ballarò played in creating a meaningful way for people in San Saverio to communicate and try to solve their conflicts.

Georg Simmel (1964) theorizes the triad model by adding complexity to the dyad, the simplest of social relations happening between two individuals.[82] In the dyad it is rather straightforward to determine if the relationship is conflictual, harmonious, vertical, horizontal, etc. By adding a third subject, Simmel complicates the model along many lines, as this addition could create two isolated dyads, two shifting ones, an open triad, or an interrelation based on mediation. For the case of the San Saverio market, this last aspect of mediation is the most important. It is true that the subjects involved here are three, namely vendors, residents, and the municipality; it is also true that the three were at best loosely interrelated. As we saw, relations around the market were all based and crystallized on apparently irresolvable conflicts between two parties: 1) Vendors were unwilling to change their habits in the face of residents' complaints; 2) residents put constant pressure on the city council which was unable to respond to it in any way; 3) the city council did not have any institutional relationship with vendors, set aside confrontational ones. SOS Ballarò's arrival allowed for all these dyadic conflictual relations to become triads with a mediating party.

5.1. Residents v. Vendors.

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[82] Simmel also analyses the sociology of the relationship of a subject with themselves, but for the purpose of the present discussion I will not consider this aspect.

Residents and vendors first started to exchange ideas and discuss their respective positions through me and other SOS members. My initial role as an activist was to create a never-ending assembly: I would collect ideas and complaints from residents and distil them in a discourse to report to vendors. At the same time, I had the task to involve vendors in creating a future vision of the market that would consider and respect residents' positions and needs. The third part of this initial operation was to present residents with vendors' ideas, dispositions, and motivations.[83] SOS Ballarò was therefore always enmeshed in the conflict, with the specific aim of defusing it and recomposing different positions in a coherent project able to involve all the stakeholders. Vendors had to think about residents' requests of hygiene and quiet sleep, while residents had to consider vendors' necessity to sell a few objects to *vuscaris' u pani* (earn ones' bread). In short,

> we have to stay in the conflict with both feet and take it upon us. That way we can understand what's going on in the market and create a bit of empathy in residents and vendors. From here we start working on solutions.

Tommaso here reflects on one of SOS basic principles: conflicts in San Saverio are harsh, given the material conditions endured by its inhabitants; SOS Ballarò can take these conflicts upon itself and reduce them by creating links between actors based on empathy; through empathy SOS tries to work on creating consensus around a shared solution (Graeber 2004. For a more detailed analysis of consensus see chap. 2 sec. 3) and push it in the arena of city politics. Following Simmel (1964), we could say that SOS Ballarò proposed itself as the mediating subject of the (newly formed) triad, giving way to a new set of power dynamics. As Simmel aptly notes though, the arrival of a mediating subject poses a new set of questions and conflicts, which, in the case of San Saverio, are linked to SOS sudden appearance and uncertainty about its true nature and objectives. Our constant presence in the

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[83] Every passage, collection of ideas, distillation, and reporting implied a median phase of assembly discussion inside SOS Ballarò. Every week, and every time I would meet one of the members, we would discuss my findings and work out a method to move the process forward.

market raised two basic questions in both vendors and residents: who are you? Whose interests are you representing and pushing on us? At first, both vendors and residents saw SOS as an agent or resource of the other party, or of the State. To counteract this legitimate opinion, SOS decided to firmly apply its method(ide)ology and bring all the actors together in the space of a structured assembly, where the simultaneous presence of all the stakeholders would reduce the possibility for misunderstandings, partial readings, or conspiracy theories.

5.2. Residents v. (Vendors v. Vendors).

On the 2nd of May 2017 SOS Ballarò called for a public assembly open to all but specifically aimed at vendors, with two basic intents: make stakeholders meet and talk to each other in a controlled environment and create a core of politically active people. The assembly fulfilled both its basic aims: 45 people met to discuss the first steps towards the formalization of the market. In an hour, participants talked about the borders of the market, opening and closing times, space needed to set up stalls, ways to assign these spaces, and how to manage such assigning process. The assembly decided that vendors would create an association with the help of residents and SOS Ballarò. Members of this new association would pay a daily fee to the association itself to cover its costs (e.g., paying for public soil occupation or garbage collection). Similar to that on the 13th of March, this assembly had no immediate practical effect on the functioning of the market. At the same time, the group laid the foundations for a dialogue between residents and vendors, and between the market and the municipality based on compromise between parties and consensus building.

This assembly also gave the possibility to SOS Ballarò to become more visible and accessible to residents and vendors in a public forum where activists could make their intentions and positions clear, in an attempt to reduce the space for misunderstandings and start a transparent relationship. Reducing, but not eliminating. This moment brought to the surface another set of conflicts SOS Ballarò was largely unaware of up to this moment. In Simmel's theory of the triad (1964), the three subjects, independently of whether they are individuals or groups, are internally coherent. This poses

issues from a theoretical standpoint: vendors in San Saverio were far from being a coherent unit. Different political interests and ways to manage territory and economic activities formed an intricate tapestry of power dynamics, source of forms of resistance, anger, envy, violence, etc. (for more see chap. 1 sec. 2). One such case exploded on the 2nd of May: during the assembly, a verbal confrontation erupted between Kamal, a Tunisian vendor in his fifties, and Micky, a Romanian man in his late thirties at the centre of a big family of vendors. The two are stall neighbours on the right side of Piazza Colajanni, at the centre of the market. On our first encounter in late March, Kamal expressed all his frustration towards Micky and his family without mincing words:

> You come in the morning and your place is gone! I have been around here for almost ten years, but I can't keep my place because they always steal half a metre from me, and I have to argue day in and day out! And then I get mad, I lose my temper, and they come in group! Six or seven, sometimes with pipes or a knife!

He could barely contain himself; his eyes got watery as he expressed his frustration. We were only a few steps away from the object of his complaint, but he seemed not to care. Even though I never witnessed one such violent confrontation, I understood Kamal's concern about Micky's way of dealing with conflict and asserting his power during the assembly on the 2nd of May.

After an hour of smooth discussion, Micky showed up with a group of relatives and friends, mostly men, and stormed the assembly. Kamal grew angry and loud, as Micky lead his friends in the middle of the circle of chairs, screaming and gesturing. The assembly came to a screeching halt: nobody was able to calm down Micky and his friends. Tommaso acted promptly and took the lead. He intimated everyone to shut up, and gave me a glance: "Take them, get out of here and explain to them what is going on."

Up to that moment, and for reasons depending on both my inability to connect with Micky, and Kamal's rather scary tales, I never had the chance or the courage to talk to any member of the Romanian families in Piazza

Colajanni.[84] I took my chance, brought the group outside of the circle of chairs and, while the assembly started working again, I explained to Micky the process of creating a vendors' association to manage the market. He and his friends became quiet and listened carefully to what I had to say, making sure they understood every word: Micky speaks a good Italian, differently from some of his companions, so that every few sentences he interrupted me, apologized, and translated for the others. None of my interlocutors looked particularly enthusiastic about my proposal, but, as I saw on many other faces in that period, they all seemed to think: "Let's give a chance to this strange group of poorly assorted characters". I finished talking and invited them to join the assembly, provoking a great deal of anxiety in Kamal, who yelled at me:

> What did you tell them?! You played the double face, didn't you?! You come here and tell me something, then go there and tell them what they want to hear! You are crazy if you think I'll stay here while you stab me in the back and give them all they want!

I grew very concerned and a bit scared as I did not like being in the crossfire. I soon regained composure though, as I realized SOS Ballarò members had my back and everybody else looked calm. Vendors from Maghreb sitting in the circle stood up to try to talk Kamal down, while one of them came to me, took me on the side and told me not to worry, as Kamal is "a bit crazy and when he does like this you don't have to listen to him. Just let him be."

This episode contributes to complicate the Simmelian model. If that assembly was a way for SOS Ballarò to become a mediating subject and bring together the interests of residents and vendors as an attempt to reach a compromise, vendors split during the assembly, imposing on SOS (and me in particular) another mediating position in the confrontational dyad made of Kamal and Micky. At the same time, and as noted above, the role of mediator poses several issues: Micky and his friends first, and Kamal after, could not

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[84] The Roma population in Italy (as in many other places, see Okely 1983) is the object of long ingrained ethnic prejudice and stereotypes that certainly affected Micky's relationship with both Kamal and me. Unfortunately, I do not have sufficient data to analyse this conflict using an interethnic framework. For more on the conditions of Roma population in Italy and continental Europe, see Piasere 2009.

immediately ascertain SOS nature. Left outside from initial discussions, Micky thought SOS was "cutting them off the thing and put them out of the market". At the same time, Kamal thought SOS was being two-faced: he left the assembly in a hurry and did not talk to me for several weeks, limiting our interactions to half-hearted hellos and goodbyes. After this assembly then, SOS Ballarò became a mediating hub not just between residents and vendors, but also inside the market between different groups of vendors and particular interests, to create a method for conflict resolution and a common purpose.

5.3. Vendors v. State.

Another dyadic relation SOS transformed in a triad is that between vendors and the municipality. In this case, the dyad was only potential, given that the two subjects did not have any regular exchange.[85] SOS was mostly interested on investing in a main strategy: activists believed that "the only thing that can save and change the market is to become an institution", able to engage with the other institutions in the city, be them Polizia Municipale, RAP, *assessori*, or even the mayor, in a fair and balanced way. As such, activists were particularly worried about one specific piece of legislation that could hinder on that possibility: the so-called Minniti decree on security and immigration (law n. 48, 18/04/2017). With this legislative tool, the minister of interior affairs Marco Minniti redistributed powers concerning the maintenance of "urban security", granting mayors a wider scope to curb criminality and unwanted behaviour impinging on urban decorum (Morganti 2018). To this end, a mayor can either resort to independent legislative tools (e.g., closing specific commercial activities at specific times or forbidding people to sit on the ground in public spaces, etc.), or ask the central government for more resources to implement urban security.[86] According to the Minniti decree, the San Saverio market could be considered a threat to urban decorum and a potential recipient of municipal harsh legislation, or even military

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[85] This changed in July 2019, when Sbaratto, the association of vendors, was formed and started participating to the techno-political roundtable directly.
[86] Slightly stretching the definition by Smith (1996) it can be said the Minniti decree ratifies the methods of the "revanchist city". According to Morganti (2018), the decree loosely defines concepts like urban security and decorum on purpose, so that local authorities can interpret them to tackle specific phenomena they deem damaging for their communities.

interventions by the state police to be removed. With this in mind, me and other SOS Ballarò members approached vendors to convince them it was necessary to work together and pre-empt punishment or, at worse, a dismantling order: "*We* have to think about [the market] and take care of the situation, because if we leave it to *them* [the State] the market is gone forever". At the beginning of my work, these words were met with genuine scepticism and defiance:

> Really? Is the police going to come around? What are they going to do, arrest me? They can't because I'm committing no crime. They take my stuff? I don't care, I'll get new one and come back when they're gone. [The mayor] doesn't care, why should I?

Tano, a vendor in his early forties "in the market since day one", was defiant of any lurking threat by the State; simply put, he did "not believe in the State, it can't do anything!" If his position is justified by 15 years of apparent indifference and botched police operations, it is also true the assembly on the 13th of March, SOS Ballarò's continuous presence, and the upcoming mayoral elections (June 2017) brought San Saverio to the foreground of city politics. Reflecting on this, Tano's bravado crumbled, especially when considering what he could lose following a police operation:

> My Ape[87] is 150 [cc] and I don't have a driving license. It's unregistered too, so if they come around and I'm in it, they'll take it away and I won't have a way to come to the market anymore. […] Also, if they come and take my stuff, I'm gonna get furious! [Switching to a softer tone] Those are some very nice jeans I have there…

In short, SOS Ballarò pushed for vendors to be concerned about the State and the municipality following this mantra: get involved and drive the process or risk losing your ability to make ends meet. Activists wanted vendors to think of themselves as one side of a balanced triad, where the municipality is at the

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[87] Ape Piaggio is a three wheeled pick-up truck that can be driven without a license if it is less than 125 cc

same level of the market and potentially has the same power, especially because the mediating element, SOS, would be on their side, tipping the scale every time it became necessary. This is a clear instance of SOS Ballarò acting as a mediator between the market and the S/state. As I mentioned in the introduction (sec. 5), the assembly often assumed the role of mediator between the position of marginal groups and city institutions, with the aim to bring the former in a more prominent position. One of the consequences of this is to also make these groups more legible to the authority and maybe expose them to violent repercussions (like those implied in the Minniti decree). At the same time though, marginal groups being brought to the fore of city politics could mean for them to enjoy some of the benefits the S/state could provide, like better hygienic services, a more efficient organization of the public space, and a louder voice in determining the future of the market *as a part* of city politics and not just a side character/victim.

5.4. All v. S/state.

All the work described above done by SOS to position itself as a mediator in the dyadic relations present in San Saverio came together in the context of the techno-political roundtable instituted by the city council mentioned in section 4. The latter was not involved in the daily routine of the assembly or the market; the city council participated instead through regular meetings between SOS members and city officials, where the former would report on and discuss their daily activism, to then plan future actions (see introduction sec. 5). The roundtable is an administrative resource SOS frequently deployed to push forward its ideas and projects together with the municipality. Its legal base is article 118 of the Italian Constitution, the so-called principle of subsidiarity.[88] According to the Constitution, "State, Regions, metropolitan Cities, Provinces and Municipalities favour autonomous initiatives by citizens, individuals or associates, for the implementation of activities of general interest" (my translation). In this context, the city council guarantees multiple spaces for SOS Ballarò to contribute to the creation of political

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[88] Ironically enough, article 118 of the constitution on subsidiarity is also the legal base for the Minniti decree (Morganti 2018)

guidelines, legislation, and initiatives in the Ballarò area and beyond. The San Saverio roundtable, as per mayoral deliberation written in April 2017, includes the participation of 6 branches of the administration (namely economic activities, traffic, inclusive citizenship, environment, office for the historical city centre, and the mayoral cabinet), the municipal police, and RAP (garbage collection service), alongside SOS Ballarò members (usually three or four, me included). The main aim of the roundtable was to work on a new legislative tool that would allow for the creation of an "area of free exchange" in the quarter. Alongside the space of the assembly, the roundtable, which became an almost weekly occurrence from September 2017 on, is the clearest representation of the field of possibilities SOS Ballarò opened in relation to the San Saverio market. In the meeting room, SOS would bring ideas and opinions from the market with legitimacy and certainty, as they came from months of assemblies and dialogical practices, always remarking the inability of the municipality to capture those ideas and opinions on its own:

> You know very well how this goes, if you want to do anything in the market you have to go through what they [vendors] know and our mediation, because otherwise it's the same old story, you try to do something, and nobody listens to you. We have to check what we can do, but we have to start from what Ballarò says and proposes, or nobody will care about it.

Tommaso interrupted the discussion with these words during the second roundtable meeting in September 2017. At this point he had already been elected as the president of the first district of Palermo, the one including Ballarò and the whole historical city centre (see introduction, sec. 5). Harnessing all his experience in city politics, he was careful in pointing out gaps in the administration while offering a possibility for the city council to intervene in an area historically almost impermeable to its action. The median position he described for SOS gave way to the formation of another triad comprising the city council and the area of San Saverio, with SOS in the middle, and leaving some space for the municipality to "check what we can do" according to existing legislation.

At the same time, SOS was proposing the city council to mediate on its behalf with residents and vendors in San Saverio and facilitate eventual governing actions while absorbing some of the pressure the market would create. On the other hand, though, it was also asking to "do things in a new way, think of something [as in laws and rulings] new and good for this situation." SOS successfully obtained from the roundtable to reason around politics instead of policy. In his distinction, Rancière describes the former as "erupt[ing] in that rare moment when those excluded from the existing social order make themselves visible through disagreement, calling attention to the 'scandal' of their invisibility" (Rancière 1990: 19 *in* Postero & Elinoff 2019: 9). On the other hand, he defines policy as the enactment of "the set of power relations and technologies that maintain the social order" (*ibid*.). As we saw earlier, the city council could intervene through policy, especially with the Minniti decree. SOS, following vendors' and residents' needs, put the 'invisibles' in the spotlight, asking the municipality to work on new solutions with them. To do so, the assembly enacted a two-fold strategy. On one side, it created the opportunity to shift from the idea of the almighty State to that of the fragmented state. On the other, it continuously remarked the fact that politics (as intended by Rancière 1990) had to be built in the ordinary and not based on concepts of emergency or scandal.

In San Saverio, the State could manifest in its monolithic nature through the Minniti decree and mobilize resources to solve the issue of the illegal market through policing, and ultimately removal. In this top-bottom dynamic, the threat represented by the potential power of the State is key, and enacting it through emergency logics linked to urban decorum seems to be the fastest solution. As said in chapter 3 though, SOS Ballarò holds dear the idea that it is not through removal and sanitation that the quarter will get better: San Saverio is seen as a resource to re-qualify. Thus, to intervene before the State deployed raw policing power to clean and clear San Saverio, the assembly started a relationship with the state in its actual fragmented configuration, made of multiple offices and officials, contrasting views, opinions, and interests.[89] Especially during the months between March and September

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[89] Of course, the municipality could have decided to go a different way, disregard SOS Ballarò entirely, and remove the market. The question of legitimacy highlighted in section 4

2017, before the roundtable started meeting with regularity, SOS became the only source of that on-the-ground knowledge necessary to tackle the many issues the market posed for the municipality. Therefore, city officials had to routinely recognize SOS Ballarò's (and thus vendors') central role in determining the guidelines for the market formalization, while having to admit that the work of recognising and regulating San Saverio required the coordinated efforts of different branches of the municipal administration.

The second aspect of SOS strategy mentioned above is linked to what I described in chapter 2 section 4, as a "descent into the ordinary" (Das 2006: 7). Once established that the San Saverio market needed to change for the benefit of all those involved, it became necessary to determine who was in charge of deciding what this change would look like. To do so, SOS Ballarò applied its method of the never-ending assembly and strenuous conflict resolution, and asked vendors to make the process of the formalization of San Saverio a part of their ordinary life, so that it could produce slow but significant changes in the way the market imagined itself.

To summarize, the situation in San Saverio presented a constellation of dynamic and shifting dyads, none of which allowed for a space of discussion and mutual recognition, given the decade-long history of sterile confrontations. Without any space available for productive conversation, SOS Ballarò had to push itself on the stage, carefully identifying existing binary relations and temporarily transforming them in triadic ones by acting as a mediator and lowering animosity. At both levels of its action, the one in the street and the one in the offices of the city council, SOS Ballarò crafted a field of possibilities for new ideas and solutions to emerge. Its methods to do so, like the assembly or the roundtable, allowed for this field to become visible and tangible, the place where politics happen (Rancière 1990). SOS Ballarò became the mediating hub of the "constellations of critique, disagreement, difference, and conflict" (Postero & Elinoff 2019: 6) emerging from the initial phases of the process. In their provisional definition of politics, Postero and Elinoff refer to the formulation of this constellation as

above and in chapter 2 offers an explanation as to why the municipality was always keen to collaborate with the assembly.

"the practice of world-making" necessary to political action. I argue the field of possibilities created through deconstruction and re-construction of relational networks by SOS Ballarò is the space where this political practice took place. In the next section I will discuss what kind of world was being made in the field of possibilities in San Saverio by referring to two key concepts: rearguard theory (Santos 2014) and thresholds of legality (Bartoli 2019).

6. Who Gets to Decide the Future? World-Making from the Rear.

What should the San Saverio market look like as a result of a collective plan for re-qualification? As said above, to answer this question SOS started a never-ending assembly involving vendors, residents, activists, and city officials. These four constantly debated the future of the market. To echo chapter 3 section 5, the main purpose of this debate was to resist the idea of San Saverio as place, where things could be placed beside one another according to the rule of the "proper", and push for an understanding of it as space, "a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities" (De Certeau 1984: 117). In other words, it was not possible to apply a pre-constituted scheme to San Saverio. One could not take existing municipal regulation on market activities in Palermo and apply it there: San Saverio would disappear. One could also not press pause on the market, even if only for the time necessary to re-design it from scratch. On one side, as Tommaso told city officials at one of the roundtable meetings, "we have to start from what Ballarò says and proposes, or nobody will care about it." On the other, market activities could not be suspended even for a minute, given how much vendors depended on their daily earnings. If the market needed to change, it had to do so on its own terms, following its own guidelines, shaping its own framework, its own rearguard theory (Santos 2014). Boaventura De Souza Santos defines rearguard theory as the construction of a system of understanding based on the lived experiences of those made invisible, marginal, minority even though majority. In his *Epistemologies of the South: Against the Epistemicide*, the author calls for the intellectual to look over the shoulder of the vanguard, in the hope that grand theories of oppression and

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emancipation get replaced by "knowledge [that] flies at low altitude because it is stuck to the body"; the knowledge of those who "feelthink and feelact" (Santos 2014: 31). Embodied knowledge gives way to a new kind of epistemological endeavour, as the theorist does not build their framework to then apply it, but lives through the plurality of "conflictual programs [and] contractual proximities" (De Certeau 1984: 117) to form their theory from the rear. The project for the formalization of San Saverio was centred on understanding what the market was, so that that status-quo could be translated into a more organized form, an "orderly market" as every vendor, activist, resident, and city official kept repeating. Orderly, but not proper. All those involved in the process to formalize San Saverio had to recognize the validity of the epistemological effort produced by vendors as the starting point for any step towards the "orderly market". SOS Ballarò had to remark this point countless times, especially when the municipality was part of the conversation. After months of discussions and negotiations though, a city official at the roundtable concluded that "applying the law 'as is' is close to meaningless. It has no effect". Laws, regulations, "the proper" (De Certeau 1984: 117), appeared inadequate. To build on the concepts of politics and policy as defined by Rancière (1990) on the back of Santos' contribution (2014), it was impossible to fit the new San Saverio market in existing legal frameworks: vendors' push for economic and social inclusion seemed impossible to be regulated. It was instead existing regulation that needed to be emancipated from precedents and norms to adapt to new forms of politics emerging in the field of possibilities (Santos 2014: 24).

The last step in my analysis of the process to formalize San Saverio is to unpack this emancipation of regulation when it links more tightly to decision-making processes regarding thresholds of legality (Bartoli 2019). As Bartoli explains, legality, strictly intended as respecting the rule of law, is not affordable for everyone all the time. To regulate San Saverio, one would have to e.g., require vendors to obtain a license to sell as itinerant sellers. According to Italian law, the taxation on such licenses is 3600 € per year, independently from profit. Vendors in San Saverio hardly reach such sum as their total annual gross income. Their options are limited to obtaining a license and not paying taxes, or not obtain a license at all. This 'simple' hurdle

thus relegates them to a condition of "chronic illegality" (Bartoli 2019: 40. My translation). Bartoli argues one alternative to this vicious circle of creation and recreation of illegality is to re-define the threshold of legality itself, or, to say it with Santos, emancipate regulation. A new legislative tool is necessary, one that starts regulating from the rear to lend legitimacy to the lived conditions of vendors, so that laws "can be observed and followed" (Celano 2013: 422. My translation) and not just transgressed by default.

SOS Ballarò worked with vendors, residents, and city officials putting these principles in practice on an everyday basis. The assembly harnessed the embodied knowledge of vendors and the newly established set of relationships in San Saverio to imagine how the market should look like and function. The result of this process was a complex system that sees vendors associating in a new body politics, called Associazione Sbaratto, officially constituted at the end of 2019.[90] In its countless assemblies, the association decided the basic features of the market, like how much space is necessary to set up stall, the system to assign stalls to registered members, how to organize the cleaning of the area, how to manage conflicts between vendors, the system to keep communication open with residents of the area (some of which are active in the association), and the system to interact with the municipality. All of this was brought to the attention of the techno-political roundtable and the many officials hovering around it. All they had to do was write "a slim legislative tool", as Ilda Curti put it, and ratify the work of the association. In turn, vendors established a system of economic contribution, so that they could have a role in covering the costs of garbage collection and occupation of public soil.

To summarize, San Saverio was the epicentre of a far-reaching process of urban re-qualification. The locus of harsh conflicts that could lead to revanchist actions and removal became the space for mediation, which fostered the construction of a complex theoretical framework built from the

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[90] As of today (June 2021), Associazione Sbaratto is made of more than 200 subscribing vendors, with SOS members and residents offering their support, especially in relation to paperwork and official documents to be presented to the municipality. The president of the association, as well as all the members of the elected board are active vendors in San Saverio.

rear and the re-definition of the threshold of legality. The market remained in San Saverio, still guaranteeing vendors and customers the safety net they needed. At the same time, it went through a profound change that reshaped the relational networks around it. Of course, it would be wrong to say that today, as of June 2021 and especially after the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the market is in perfect shape. Far from it, the techno-political roundtable continues to meet regularly, so that vendors and officials can monitor the situation together, adjust regulation, program interventions etc. Nevertheless, as Gaetano told me during a visit after my fieldwork, "[San Saverio] is still a mess France', but we're working on it like crazy! It's a mess, but it's the mess *we* are building."

Chapter Five

The Re-qualification of the Historical Market of Ballarò: Politics, Interrupted?

Introduction

In the last chapter I explored the process of creating a field of possibilities for political discussion from scratch in the San Saverio market. As said, I was able to follow the process from its very inception and participate in SOS Ballarò's mediation between the three different subjects active in the area of the market: vendors, residents, and the S/state. I described how conflicts that had surfaced in the last 15 years revolving around the very existence of the market were mitigated by the appearance of SOS Ballarò and its street activism. The new field of possibilities for political discussion became the space where ideas about the future of the market materialized, following the principle that those experiencing the highest degree of marginality and insecurity (vendors) had to be granted the driver's sit in the process of re-qualification of the market. The purpose of this redistribution of political weight was to prevent phenomena of removal through revanchist policies, and make sure that the market could become a more orderly affair and keep having the role of safety net for all those involved, while guaranteeing a better quality of life to residents. San Saverio and the field of possibilities were the locus for the creation of a rearguard theory (Santos 2014) based on the legitimacy granted to vendors' knowledge by their newly acquired institutional position. One question left open in chapter 4 concerns the content of rearguard theory, and how this content is worked out and decided upon by those at the centre of rearguard theorization: how does a specific idea become part of the assembly that never ends and of a consensus building process? How do people reason around it to come to their conclusions, while maintaining some form of compatibility with the conclusions of others? What kinds of ideas are included in the process? In this last chapter I will answer these questions about how rearguard theory and SOS method(ide)ology combine. To do so, I will consider the case of the historical market of Ballarò, and the process that

brought SOS to produce a multimillion euros project to be financed by the EU for the construction of a new infrastructure: the cover in Piazza Carmine. Through a detailed ethnographic account, I will show how the notion of a field of possibilities to be explored allows for considerable space for ideas to change, develop, become more complex, and be distilled in a theoretical framework built from the rear. Far from following linear trajectories, I will argue that these ideas are subject to considerable and constant oscillations between extremes, and that this process of political oscillation between different opinions, practices, demeanours, and attitudes was a feature of the behaviour of both marketers, activists, and the S/state. To better follow these movements and their intricacies though, it becomes necessary to form a basic definition of my concept of political oscillation in relation to that of interruption, as developed by Li (2019).

In her *Politics, Interrupted*, Li retraces her long ethnographic experience in Indonesia to offer a counterargument to the idea that we are living in a post-political age (Swyngedouw 2010). To do so, she highlights how politics and political discourse were ever present in the life of her interlocutors, always with the potential to translate into productive forms of activism or mobilisation. The simple "gut feeling of being treated unfairly" could, at any given moment, "morph into a campaign - but only occasionally does that morphing take place" (Li 2019: 37). According to Li, the fleeting nature of the gut feeling, the subjectivity attached to the notion of 'unfair treatment', and the fact that morphing only takes place occasionally, put ethnographers and their methodology in a perfect position to investigate whether the "critical insight" produced by subjects on the basis of the gut feeling is "historically effective" or suffers "interruption" (Li 2019: 34). The question then becomes: what constitutes a historically effective product of political discussion? In an attempt to give an answer, Li defines interruptions as "non-linear trajectories and the spatial, temporal, or topical breaks" in the construction of a "philosophy of praxis that *has to* link up to the broad economic and social processes that shape the conjuncture, enabling the social group to develop a new, more coherent and reflexive knowledge and make it into the organizing principle of collective action" (*ibid*. My emphasis). Even though Li never defines interruptions as a definitive closure of the political discussion, it

seems this discussion has only one plausible outcome: the basis for the gut feeling, what Gramsci (and Li with him) defines s*enso comune* (common sense), "must be further amplified by working class movements and political parties that are capable of forming persuasive narratives". In a way, the "raw material" of which senso comune is made of has to be made productive by the "organic intellectual", tasked with "discern[ing] its insights and clarify[ing] them" (Li 2019: 34).

My ethnographic experience of SOS Ballarò's methods suggests a different pathway for ethnographic inquiry. As said before, rearguard theory (Santos 2014) seems a more appropriate label to describe what happens in Ballarò than philosophy of praxis. Here, senso comune does not seem to need discernment, clarification, or distillation. The organic intellectual is not the one "close enough" to senso comune (Li 2019: 34) but is the one who has it in the first place. The gut feeling translates into "feelthink and feelact" (2014: 31) and overflows into the ordinary. This requires time for people, be them marketers in Ballarò, vendors in San Saverio, activists in the assembly, even city officials or the state apparatus, for their political discourse to form, to find a way to become historically effective. The necessity for amplification of senso comune through working class movements or political parties seems to be less relevant, and the path to historical effectiveness less established through an a priori assumption of what *effective* actually means. The goal of the political discussion in Ballarò was not preconceived, but emerged at its own pace, through ordinary politics embodied in the never-ending assembly. For this reason, I argue that the politics of the quarter, intended as the dynamic many engaged in to find their way of interpreting their situation and working out plausible solutions to improve on it, can be better analysed through the notion of political oscillation, rather than interruption.

My interlocutors were engaging in a political discussion *while* carrying on with their lives, given the ordinary nature of the political process they were enmeshed in. Some days they were happier to see me than others; some days they were more willing to put aside their tasks to talk politics than others; some days they had sold more produce than others; some days they were worried about something way more important than "your little assembly". Drawbacks, insecurities, concerns, a particularly worrisome event in the

news, all contributed to the way in which all those roaming in the field of possibilities moved around. A particularly good coffee or picking up smocking again, were as central in forming one's attitude and opinion about the political process as grand ideas about urban re-qualification. All of these contributed to the oscillating process to find one's best way to build their theoretical framework and engage in the politics of the quarter at their own pace.

In this sense, SOS Ballarò's task became to simply keep the oscillating process ongoing, sometimes pushing political discussion through daily conversations or structured assemblies, sometimes letting it slow cook on the back burner. The process I was a part of in Ballarò is not comparable to that of a group of people following a precise itinerary to go from being oppressed to being emancipated. These concepts needed to be defined through ordinary practice first. How are people perceiving their oppression in Ballarò? What does it mean to reach emancipation for them? Like in a game of marble maze, where the player operates two wheels to tilt the board and make the marble go from one side of the maze to the other without falling in the wrong holes, every individual involved in the process was asked to participate in tilting the board back and forth to reach a common understanding and, eventually, a common goal. As in the maze, a simple glance was not enough to determine the right hole for the marble to fall in to win the game, but the process allows the players to discover which one is the best. SOS Ballarò's task was to keep the game going, inviting people to tilt the board all together.

This last feature of an at-first-sight unrecognizable goal, clashes with Li's idea of 'historically effective' practices. In her analysis, Indonesian farmers working in palm oil plantations experienced interruptions in their political reasoning as e.g., they were presenting "formidable counter-tendencies embodied in their own common sense" preventing them from "launch[ing] an explicit challenge to the regime of private property in land that has come to govern their lives, labours, and everyday social relations" (2019: 48). My interest here is not in debating if the equal redistribution of resources would be the best option for marketers or not. What I propose is a view of the process that brings people to a specific political decision that is more organic and less normative and includes not just intellectual or ideological labour but also

everyday practice, attitude, feelthink and feelact (Santos 2014). I argue the ethnographer is in an even more privileged position to investigate this process as it unfolds in the everyday than they are in following the way in which common sense morphs into mobilization, intended as a direct expression of a specific philosophy of praxis. This way, the figure of the organic intellectual gets re-configured and re-dimensioned by the rearguard theorist, or, as Tommaso put it in one of our late-night discussions:

> If you walk too far ahead and don't allow for everybody to evolve in their ideas independently and with the group, you sure arrive before everybody else to your conclusion, but you will have no back up once there. First, but also alone. […] Maybe in the process you'll find yourself changing your mind about what the right idea was…

In the next pages, I will show how this process of oscillation between different attitudes and opinions involved 1) the S/state, 2) activists and core members of SOS Ballarò, and 3) marketers in the historical market. Each of these groups put political oscillation into practice in different ways, at different paces, and with different agendas, to then converge in the single point of the project of the cover for Piazza Carmine as the epicentre of the re-qualification of the historical market of Ballarò.

1. state and State: Little Oscillations, Big Swings.

In the historical market of Ballarò the S/state manifests in different forms than in San Saverio. There, the S/state manifested as either a completely disinterested entity or a scary eventuality made of policing and removal. In the historical market the S/state is, at least in theory, involved in every aspect of marketers' activities. It regulates commercial activities, especially those linked to produce, meat, and fish sales. It enforces legislation through police operations involving the deployment of varying degrees of repressive force. Finally, it needs to be involved when a new piece of infrastructure is being built. In the next sections I will touch on the first two to show how S/state action in Ballarò presents significant oscillations between the two extremes

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of capillary control of the territory and retreat. I will leave the third one to the last part of this chapter, as the infrastructure of the cover in Piazza Carmine represents the locus where S/state oscillations had to somehow harmonize with those of the other subjects involved.

1.1. Thresholds of Legality: Being Legal in the Historical Market.

When I decided to conduct fieldwork in Palermo, I had never visited the city. During my pre-fieldwork research I identified the historical market as a potential site for ethnographic inquiry: it was a public space open all day every day for me to walk through, even if only to buy groceries. Without a gatekeeper or any other points of easy access, the market offered an invaluable opportunity for probing participant observation. For these reasons, I spent the first period in Palermo going to the market every day, making myself known by chatting with marketers and customers while buying two apples and a pound of beef at an absurdly slow pace. During this period, I always had the sensation that Ballarò was a thriving marketplace, with more than 200 commercial activities doing good business all day long. As said elsewhere (see chap. 1 sec 3), the market also appeared chaotic and not exactly abiding by all the legislation I knew was to be applied to commercial activities involving food products. My experience with historical markets in Tuscany (where I grew up), was that these are orderly affairs, heavily regulated in the way merchants manage the economic as well as the public health side of their business (Lelli 2015). In Ballarò few marketers ever print a receipt, and every transaction is in cash. Countertops look old and made of materials not compliant with regulation. Scales are almost never digital.[91] Here and there one can find little wooden stalls of contraband cigarettes or counterfeit merchandise. In short, Ballarò seemed to be running free, untethered by state or municipal legislation. For this reason, I decided to study municipal regulation on market activities to try to paint a picture of how

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[91] These two aspects stood out at the beginning thanks to my personal experience. My father is a cook and knows regulation about proper materials and their maintenance as a part of his job. My mother is an agricultural consultant: part of her job is helping farmers participate in weekly markets to sell their produce directly. In this instance, my parents functioned as consultants and corroborated my impression of non-compliance to state regulations.

marketers intended the concept of legality and how it interlinks with their everyday activities.

This initial research phase became even more relevant when I met SOS Ballarò. When discussing the legality of the market and SOS Ballarò's approach to it, Nicolò told me how one of the first actions SOS took was to lobby the city council to write a special ruling exclusively for historical markets as a stand-alone part of the *Regolamento Unico Mercati* dated 2013 (Unified Marketplace Regulation, from now on simply RUM).[92] Nicolò claimed that

> you cannot ask Ballarò to comply with the same rules of a market happening in *Falsomiele* [a residential neighbourhood in the periphery of the city] in an empty parking lot. The space there is totally different: no cramming, no crowding, every stall has its 4x6 [metres of space] allocated. Here we do things as they were, in alleys and streets where you don't have 4x6. Are we supposed to close Ballarò because the streets are too narrow?

As I started reading the RUM, I had my impressions confirmed and better understood Nicolò's point of view. Article 27 (RUM 2013) on 'Safety and fire prevention' is a good example to illustrate how Ballarò simultaneously had no possibility to abide by the law and made no effort to do so. The article, (27 sec. a) states that the "frontal distance between stalls must be at least 4.5 meters": some of the alleys where Ballarò happens are not 4.5 m wide without stalls. Generic regulation about market activities establishes a threshold of legality (Bartoli 2019) too high for marketers to clear, leading to the necessity Nicolò expressed to establish a new one. On the other side, in sec. b, regulation requires stalls to be equipped with a "6 kg polyvalent powder fire extinguisher". As far as I could notice, no stall or shop had a fire extinguisher at hand, even though this could be obtained fairly easily. Marketers simply did not know or did not care about this rule.

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[92] This specific section of the RUM on historical markets (or RUMS) is yet to be approved by the city council and written into municipal law. As of today (June 2021), SOS Ballarò has organized multiple events to lobby the municipality and force the city council to discuss and approve it, but it was never fully successful. All the quotes from the RUM are my translations.

A more complex example of how the threshold of legality established for the Ballarò market does not allow for compliance is art. 26 sec. 2: here the municipality asks marketers to commerce "food products […] using modalities and equipment necessary to guarantee that they are protected from external contamination", in accordance with "ministerial and municipal ordinances". SOS Ballarò members saw the implications of such article one morning in November 2017, when we were called by a butcher in Ballarò facing police controls. Officers of the NAS division of Carabinieri[93] were asking Mr Antonio for his documents, his license to sell, and his registers. Mr Antonio is one of the few marketers who has a regular license and prints receipts after (almost) every sale: the fiscal portion of the controls was going smoothly. The atmosphere abruptly changed when officers started assessing his equipment and public health requirements. Mr Antonio's butchery is on the ground floor of a building and is equipped according to the law: his fridges are spacious and clean, his cuts well preserved and stored, the internal walls tiled up to the ceiling, his knives and other tools clean and accurately put away. On the other hand, both in relation to the way one "does business in Ballarò" and to the little indoor space, the counter where he prepares, weights, and packages cuts to hand out is on the sidewalk. The counter is refrigerated and has panels to close it, as required by law. Nevertheless, NAS officers were contesting the fact it is on the street, and in proximity to fumes emitted by vehicles passing by. The street where Mr Antonio has his shop is technically a traffic limited zone (ZTL, for more on this see sec. 1.2) and motor vehicles should not be allowed to transit. On the other hand, the municipal ordinance establishing ZTL dating 2003 was never made fully executive by the city council with a deliberation. From the point of view of the law, Mr Antonio is in contempt as he is not adequately protecting his merchandize from fumes. He argues this is impossible:

> I should have a normal shop, with the doors and everything, and
> the counter should be inside, but how can I do that? There's no

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[93] NAS (*Nuclei Antisofisticazioni e Sanità*, antisophistication and public health units) is a special division of Carabinieri, the police controlled by the ministry of defense, specifically tasked to maintain and safeguard public health, especially in relation to the commerce, sale, and transformation of food products.

space inside and that's not how it works in Ballarò: here we sell
on the street!

Although being right in the minds of activists AND officers ("we know it's impossible, but we have to apply the law. It's not our job to bend it or be flexible", one of the NAS Carabinieri said) he came out of the experience with a 2500 € fine.

The episode above, together with the brief overview on the legalities of market activities shows how the S/state in Ballarò oscillates between wanting to regulate every aspect of the market and its commercial activities and failing to ratify key pieces of legislation, leaving Ballarò in a legal limbo difficult to navigate even by those, like Mr Antonio, who are willing to put in the effort. Nevertheless, specific police interventions, as in the case of NAS, do not consider this oscillating process and the resulting contradictions. As stated by the officer, NAS were not in the market to bend the rules or be flexible, but to apply the law as it is codified. In short, it seems that repressive actions by the State, unlike legislative ones by the state, are not susceptible to oscillation. If we take a step back and relate Mr Antonio's position to the rest of the market, it becomes noticeable how he is one of the few with a license to sell, paying taxes and bills for electricity and water. "Why don't they go to those who don't pay anything and don't give a shit about the law?" He asked with a broken voice after the officers had left.

To summarize, in Ballarò the State regulates everyday activities through municipal and national legislation. At the same time, the State tries to enforce such legislation through police interventions. If both these processes suggest intransigency and inflexibility, I showed how both are subjected to inherent contradictions. In the first case, the oscillation is linked to the fragmented nature of the state apparatus, and its inability to move from one regulatory step to the next. On the other hand, law enforcement operations carried out in the objectivity of the law, are the locus for oscillatory movements that are even more sudden and extreme then the ones showed by legislating processes. Officers did not bend the rules for Mr Antonio, but completely ignored them in relation to the rest of the market.

In the next section I will explore further the question of state intervention in Ballarò through the case of the aforementioned ZTL, how it came to be, and how it was the object of intense negotiations between S/state, marketers, and SOS Ballarò.

1.2. ZTL: Taking a Big Swing at Reshaping Ballarò.

In 2003 the city council in Palermo started discussing the possibility to introduce a ZTL (*Zona Traffico Limitato* or traffic limited zone) in the city centre. This is now a very common tool municipalities in Italy use to limit motor traffic in some parts of their territory to residents and special-permit-holders only, with the aim of reducing carbon emissions and number of motor vehicles circulating in what are usually narrow streets and sites of historical importance. In Palermo, the ZTL was imagined covering the entirety of the city centre, including vast portions of Albergheria, the entirety of the Ballarò market, and all the streets around it. In this section, I will not re-trace every step of how ZTL came to be through a 15-year-long legislative process. Here I am more interested in the way in which this measure was perceived and what kind of discussion it sparked in the quarter for three main reasons: ZTL was the object of a rare marketers' organized protest, who marched towards the city hall to ask for its removal; it was also one of SOS Ballarò's first interests right after its inception; finally, in the market ZTL (and especially its abolition) represents a short-hand for prosperous times long gone, the easy solution to a complex issue. Touching on these three aspects will allow me to depict once again how the politics around this topic took shape through political oscillation in discourse and practice of all those involved.

In May 2015, the city council voted to make the ZTL in the market area executive. From one day to the next, the historical market and all the streets intersecting it were virtually closed to motor vehicles. Marketers, customers, and residents suddenly needed a permit to circulate in the area. If obtaining one was relatively easy (although expensive) for residents, it was almost impossible for marketers. They were asked to present official documents to prove their necessity to drive through the market as part of their job. As said in the previous section though, only a small percentage of marketers have all their documents in order: from one day to the next, marketers were revoked

access to their livelihoods. On one side, "we weren't very worried. I came here without a license [to sell] for 20 years, who cares if I have to drive in without a permit? It's just another risk", as a marketer put it. He was more worried about

> customers. The municipality is telling people not to come to Ballarò by car or they get a fine. How are they supposed to come? How is a 70-year-old lady supposed to come and buy 10 kg of potatoes if she can't come by car?

In a few days, marketers discussed the matter and decided to act:

> We had had enough! Who are these people [politicians] to come and tell us how to do business? Ballarò was always with the cars! We [marketers] talked for a bit, and then, one morning, we closed up shop and [marched] to the city hall. We were really angry! We were calling them [all kinds of names]!

The city council responded to the impromptu protest by halting the legislative process altogether. The vote was revoked and so was the ZTL in the quarter. In the span of a few days, the State tried to reshape the territory of the market in one big stroke, in a show of strength and decisiveness that did not pair well with marketers' attitude and perceived needs. From an extreme to the other, the State decided to cave in after the protest, and take the less decisive stance of legislative inaction. The political discussion on the ZTL was therefore at a stalemate: marketers did not want it and were ready to defend their position with action; on the other hand, as the assessore in charge of traffic and mobility told me, "it is not possible to imagine a city centre with cars anymore. Not [just] in Palermo, but anywhere. Cars have no place in a city centre." Echoing the previous chapter, the field of possibility for a political discussion about the ZTL was clogged by harsh conflicts.

When SOS Ballarò came to be at the end of 2015, the assembly wrote its first document, the grid of critical points for the re-qualification of Ballarò. One of the sections was about their intention to re-design the ZTL keeping in mind marketers' needs. For this reason, SOS Ballarò proposed to form a

techno-political roundtable (the first of a long series) and sit down with city officials to re-draw the maps. On one hand, SOS was asking the city council to exercise flexibility and reverse the top-bottom dynamic of its first attempt. On the other, the assembly had to convince marketers of the validity of a ZTL, and the potential benefits in terms of ecology and better quality of life, "especially for you who have to breath in that crap all day, and for the produce you sell to people", as Tommaso put it in one of his conversations with a marketer. After a few months of discussions, the city council presented a new provisional ZTL map, temporarily excluding the market and some of the surrounding streets, so that marketers could have easy access to the area, while the rest of the quarter would benefit from lower traffic levels.[94] In this way, SOS Ballarò bought time for marketers to keep on refining their opinions and discuss the politics of a ZTL in Ballarò, maintaining the oscillating process ongoing. As Tommaso said during an assembly of marketers in November 2017,

> You may be right that not having cars is going to hit commerce, but aren't you the ones who have run Ballarò for generations? I refuse to believe we cannot come up with a solution to bring people to the market even without their cars! We have [the municipality] on our side, they are going to do what we tell them. Let's find a solution and ask for what we need!

The applause by the marketers in attendance after his words signalled a sincere will to keep discussing the matter and find a common solution. They were equally sincere though, when during my daily conversations with them about the future of Ballarò, the ZTL would sometimes be discussed in very different terms:

> Marketer: You see, you come here to tell us we have to do more work, we have to go to the assembly and talk to each other and

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[94] As said in the previous section, ZTL in this provisional form was not made executive through city council deliberation until late 2018, even though many councillors tried to bring the matter up for a vote during the three years of legislative limbo.

> *save* the market. I'm here from dawn to dusk, breaking my back, and I should come to the assembly to make you happy?
>
> Francesco: No, sorry, this is not my point, it's not a question of making *me* happy […]. What SOS wants is for the market to take control […] because you know what's best for Ballarò, you have the knowledge and the history. You decide […]. We have a megaphone, a room, and the telephone numbers to get important people in that room to listen to you.
>
> M: [visibly angry] If you have the number, call [the mayor] and tell him to get rid of this fucking ZTL, get the cars back in the market. When there were cars, business was good. Now people don't come. Get the cars back and leave us alone!

To summarize, ZTL in Ballarò is one of the most contentious topics of political discussion. The S/state, marketers, activists, all have interests in discussing it in detail, and tailor it to their needs. The process to do so is far from linear and unambiguous. The attempt by the State to unilaterally enact legislation following top-bottom dynamics only lasted a few days. The marketers' protest added complexity to the picture, and downsized State power and decisiveness to state fragmentation and ambiguity. SOS Ballarò's constitution created the premise for a mediating process between the two parties, forming a new triad (Simmel 1964) and opening the field of possibilities for a political discussion. All those involved started looking for a pathway to a coherent idea for a ZTL that would include everyone's economic, social, and political needs. Far from being over, the oscillating process described above is still ongoing in 2021, more than two years after the city council officially restricted access to motor vehicles in the whole area of the market.

2. SOS Ballarò: Opportunities and Oscillations.

In this section I will shift my focus from the S/state and its action in the market to SOS Ballarò. This choice will allow me to highlight another aspect of processes of political oscillation. Until now, I showed how these can be

fostered, cultivated, and kept going through acts of negotiation and mediation. What happens though when activity and conscious choices are supplanted by inactivity or inability to intervene? To answer this question, I will consider a period of stagnation in SOS Ballarò's capacity to jumpstart a conversation in the historical market, to then turn to how that period ended, and how, thanks to an unexpected opportunity, activists, marketers, and city officials all found themselves involved in the decision-making process that would lead to the most ambitious infrastructural intervention in Ballarò in decades: the construction of a covered market in Piazza Carmine.

2.1. "We Are All Just Tired": Activist Burnout and Broken Promises.

The aforementioned grid of critical points represents SOS Ballarò's first attempt at a comprehensive political program. It touches on 21 main points, divided into 53 subsections. To give an idea of how central the historical market is to SOS Ballarò's project, it is only one of the 21 main points, but it has 21 of the 53 subsections. Roughly half of the initiatives and demands SOS had about the quarter referred to the historical market. One of the first official acts of the assembly was to establish a parallel registered association grouping all those who wanted to sustain the market: the Association of the Historical Market of Ballarò. In its first push, SOS Ballarò put all its energies in the re-qualification of the historical market, considered as the "engine of the quarter", as SOS members would say.

Nevertheless, after having worked with the assembly for a few months in 2017, I was confused about the material difference between the numbers in the grid and how we were directing our efforts on the territory: if it is true that the San Saverio market drained the assembly's energies for months, it is also true we were hardly ever discussing the conditions of the historical market. Assemblies, meetings with city officials, even private conversations rarely mentioned the subject. At the same time, the market was suffering economic scarcity, marketers were facing police controls, legislation was far from getting approved and enacted. In the first nine months of my fieldwork, neither the board nor the body of the Association of the Historical Market had met. SOS members were experiencing burnout (Gorski 2019) after months of

intense emotional labour in San Saverio, "channeling, legitimating, and managing one's own and others' emotions" (Taylor & Rupp 2002: 142). On top of this, activists had already worked tirelessly for years to the re-qualification of the quarter. Up to 2017, SOS Ballarò had somehow successfully negotiated ZTL implementation, while pushing the city council to write a specific section of the RUM to regulate historical markets. It had organized several events in and around the market to bring new customers, like concerts, and monthly barbecues. It had renovated several public spaces, organizing regular events to keep them tidy. It had organized a buskers' festival and multiple editions of an annual three-day football tournament to promote antiracism. In short, in June 2017 activists were simply tired. They had very little energy to tackle the biggest challenge the quarter presented. Tommaso expressed all this during one of the few days off he decided to take during my fieldwork:

> I'm even afraid to go to the market at this point because I don't know what to tell [marketers] when they ask me what we are doing about Ballarò. I avoid it altogether, and believe me, it hurts like hell. We promised and didn't deliver.

On one side, activists were burnt out. On the other, marketers had little to no confidence in SOS Ballarò's ability to foster change and impact their living conditions. They were "not seeing us around anymore. Are you sure you are even doing something about [the market]?" a marketer told me one day in no uncertain terms. In short, a field of possibilities for political discussion was open but seldom used by those involved. What kind of opportunity could help fatigued activists to regain their energies? How could the assembly start a project able to electrify Ballarò and start a long political discussion on the role of the market? The answer to these questions arrived unexpectedly one day in early July 2017, when a chance fell on activists' laps almost out of nowhere.

2.2. "We Just Hit Lunacy": Unexpected Opportunities and How to Seize Them.

During the first SOS assembly in 2015, activists' task when writing the grid of critical points was not only to identify a problem, but to suggest plausible solutions and indicate how to pursue them. The first subsection about the historical market mentions the "realization of the covered market in Piazza Carmine with funds from the Urban Agenda" (my translation), a European project aimed at "promoting cooperation between Member States, cities, the European Commission and other stakeholders in order to stimulate growth, liveability and innovation in the cities of Europe and to identify and successfully tackle social challenges."[95] In the 'actions to take' section of the grid, the assembly warns that applications for funds have to be submitted to Urban Agenda by the 1st of June 2017. As noted above, on the 1st of June the assembly was far from ready to present a comprehensive project to the European Union; it was hardly talking about the market at all. Nevertheless, its position as a legitimate political subject put SOS on the radar of institutions as an interlocutor to activate in case of necessity. In early July, Tommaso received a call from an architect of IACP (*Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari*, Autonomous Institute for Public Housing) informing him that funding from an initiative similar to Urban Agenda, FESR (*Fondo Europeo Sviluppo Regionale*, European Fund for Regional Development)[96] was available at short notice. The assembly had about two weeks to present a project in collaboration with IACP to FESR that tackled both economic development and socio-cultural issues. SOS Ballarò called for an emergency assembly to discuss the first steps to take, immediately forgetting about burnouts and fatigue. The sheer size of this unexpected opportunity infused activists with renewed energy. Our aim was to try to answer a basic set of questions: what does a project aimed at revamping the historical market of Ballarò look like? What principles should it follow? How do we make sure it is an expression of what the market wants and needs?

In trying to answer these questions, the grid of critical points gave some insight on four main notions: 1) the historical market is the biggest employer of the quarter, and the main pillar of an economically depressed area.

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[95]   https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/urban-agenda-eu/what-urban-agenda-eu.   Accessed 28/01/2020.

[96] https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/funding/erdf/. Accessed 28/01/2020.

Whatever intervention SOS wanted to bring forward, it had to positively impact everybody's economic conditions. 2) At the same time, activists were worried by the fact that marketers are usually reluctant to cooperate amongst themselves. Any project would have to bring them together and allow for a space (real and metaphorical) to share preoccupations and benefits. 3) As mentioned, Ballarò is a historically disenfranchised area. Hopes of a profitable autonomous intervention by the State are structurally low. The only way to electrify the market and inject it with strength and will to act was to come up with something of historical proportions that would not follow a top-bottom dynamic. 4) Stakes for marketer are always high. As I will show (see sec. 3.2.), marketers can go from having a living to *not* having a living in the span of a few hours. The project had to address marketers' ability to make a living according to the principle that

> legality is more profitable than illegality. Wouldn't you prefer to face police controls by taking out a folder with your documents and drink a coffee while they check them, instead of having to run away and lose your stuff?

Luca, another SOS member and long-time Ballarò resident, was always adamant about this point: "Whatever we do, we have to make [marketers] become [licensed sellers]!"

To summarize, in order to mobilize the historical market SOS Ballarò had to come up with a project able to better marketers' livelihoods without impacting residents' purchasing power, promote cooperation amongst marketers, vouch for the ability of the State to have a positive impact on the quarter, and show the benefits of becoming licensed sellers. All of this had to be achieved keeping in mind the millennial tradition of the market and the historical relevance of Ballarò. In two weeks.

After a two-hour long discussion, the assembly created a task force made of Tommaso, Filippo (an architect completing his PhD about Ballarò and participatory planning), Matteo (a real estate agent), and Cristian (one of the owners of the Ballarak pub, see chap. 3 sec. 2.1.). They had to work on a twofold idea. On one side there was the covered market in Piazza Carmine.

The task force, and Filippo in particular, had to produce a plan for the square and the cover to present to IACP. On the other hand, the assembly decided to tackle the housing emergency in the quarter: Tommaso and Matteo had to identify some buildings (and respective owners) for the IACP to buy out and refurbish as public housing units.

A bit more than two weeks after the first assembly, on the 18th of July 2017, SOS met again, so that the task force could present their ideas in detail. On that day, the usual circle of chairs was around a big table covered in maps, documents, and pictures. Activists were studying the content of the documents and listening carefully as Tommaso and Matteo gave a report on housing, and their attempt to select buildings IACP could buy and refurbish.[97]

If the discussion about public housing was important, SOS was there primarily to listen to Filippo and Cristian talk about the cover. Far from being an original idea, the cover is a revival of a structure built at the beginning of the XX century following a project by Ernesto Basile, designer of the Massimo theatre in Palermo and of the Montecitorio palace refurbishment in Rome, house of the Italian chamber of deputies.[98] The cover was in Liberty style, made of metal, with big stairs on all sides to level off the uneven surface of the medieval square. It was the permanent residence of all of Ballarò's fishmongers until the late 1970s, when it was demolished and stored away, and fishmongers had to relocate around the market.

As Filippo and Cristian were explaining the drawings in front of them, they showed how they remained faithful to the original construction: the cover

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[97] For reasons of space, I will not analyse in depth the work the assembly did on this aspect. Suffices to say, in two weeks the two activists were able to establish contacts with several property owners and agree, at least in principle, on the fact that IACP would buy their properties and refurbish them. They came up with a list of seven buildings, for a total of 20 to 25 housing units scattered around the quarter.

[98] In 2019 SOS Ballarò and IACP felt the necessity to involve another partner in the design of the new cover for Piazza Carmine: the University of Palermo, and specifically the department of architecture LabCity. In their research, LabCity discovered that the cover was not indeed designed by Ernesto Basile but was a project the municipal administration lifted from a textbook and proposed almost without changes. At the time of the assembly recounted here though, SOS was unaware of this detail and the belief that Ernesto Basile designed the cover was widespread, contributing to shed a legendary light on the project: "We are reviving the work of one of the greatest", as Nicolò pointed out to me. This is the reason why I decided to not include the more accurate information in the text, as it would change the atmosphere of the ethnographic account of the assembly. For more on the design of the original cover, see Prof. Lecardane's seminar 'Progetto-Azione nella città del mercato Ballarò a Palermo', /https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lRB5wz75FN4&t=6419s. Accessed 18/11/2020.

would be for fishmongers only, and it would provide allocated permanent spaces with all the provisions necessary: running water, electricity, sewer system, public and staff-only toilets, etc. This way,

> we have an organized space with all the facilities, which is easy to clean and keep tidy. I know it's a bit conservative, I worked with the material I could find [in the university library] and the pictures we have [of the old structure], but I didn't have a lot of time to draw a more contemporary version, so I copied the old one. […] Of course, a structure like this means you can go inside [to set up shop] only if you are [a licensed seller], and, once you have the stall, you have to pay your own bills. […] I drew another littler cover on the side because I think this one will not be enough for everybody, but we'll have to verify the numbers and the specifics. I think it's good enough to apply for the money though [as in FESR fund]. The IACP is going to be very pleased that we came up with a finished project.

Filippo was confident we had something in our hands to work with, an actual chance of providing the quarter with a complex infrastructural intervention, able to address the four aforementioned points: 1) the creation of a potential attraction, both for tourists and Palermitans, recalling a golden tradition, could benefit marketers and inject new commercial lymph in the area. 2) The fact that Filippo's project was a preliminary idea finalized at winning the grant meant SOS would become the hub of a participatory process to draw the final version of the new cover. This could be the perfect pivot to establish strong cooperative connections amongst marketers and a space for them to have regular assemblies and share worries and benefits. 3) The fact that the cover would be realized through State intervention could represent the first step to build up trust between the market and the municipality, as two institutional subjects sharing equal status and legitimacy. 4) The idea of an organized space meant the colossal opportunity to rebuild anew Ballarò's legal situation. Those who wanted the possibility to set up shop under the cover would have to become licensed sellers.

Total funds requested: 6.2 million euros, to be spent in Ballarò, by the State. As Tommaso repeated like a broken record after the assembly, "we just hit lunacy".

Once the application was submitted to FESR, we had two things to do: wait for the project to be approved (which we were 90% sure was going to happen) and "bring it for a walk in Ballarò", as Nicolò put it. In late July 2017 we got informal communication that our project was indeed going to be approved. It was now up to SOS to re-activate the oscillating process for everyone to shape their opinion on the matter of the cover, both as individuals and as part of the community.

3. Time to Play the Game: Oscillation and Rearguard Theory.

The design SOS presented to FESR and IACP was provisional, a signpost to guarantee the funds and buy more time to calibrate it to Ballarò's needs. After its official approval, the questions to answer became: what should the cover look like? Who should move shop under it? What should be the conditions to do so? In other words, what principles should guide this massive infrastructural intervention and operation of urban re-qualification? As mentioned above, SOS Ballarò had already worked to four main points in its first assembly thanks to activists' knowledge of the quarter, and the basic necessity for the historical market to move towards legality and become less marginal in the political landscape of the city. Would these principles hold up once marketers had the possibility to reason around them, pick them apart, and rework them to engage in "the practice of world-making" (Postero & Elinoff 2019: 6)? In other words, what effects would political oscillations in have on the theoretical framework behind the construction of the cover in Piazza Carmine? In the next section I will approach these questions from two different angles: I will first look at the ordinary political discussion and show how marketers carved out their pathway towards world-making; I will then turn to the extraordinary, focussing on another show of strength by the State, to discuss how top-bottom dynamics impinge on the rear's ability to shape coherent theoretical frameworks.

3.1. Anger, Boredom, Discussion: How Ideas Come to Be.

In July 2017, the Ballarò market was considered to be in bad shape. Marketers were proud of their job, but continuously lamenting their precarious conditions and inability to make ends meet. They also spent countless hours at their stalls, seven days a week, 365 days a year. At the same time, customers were usually content with the fact that Ballarò offered good products at low prices, allowing especially residents of the quarter living on a low budget to provide for their families; they also complained about low levels of hygiene due to the precarious conditions in which marketers operated. The municipality, while celebrating "the great history and tradition of Ballarò, because Ballarò is Palermo and Palermo is Ballarò" (as the mayor would say whenever he mentioned the quarter in his speeches), often complained that Ballarò was impossible to manage. Finally, activists like Nicolò, truly in love with the market and what it represented, were also frustrated by the individualistic approach marketers sometimes showed: "It's really hard to involve them in any discourse: 'If my stall is full of [merchandize] and some cash is in my drawer, then why should I worry about the others?'"

In my position as an ethnographic activist, I had the chance to see all the above emerge during the months-long debate about the cover. SOS intent was to remark the importance of the fact that the cover represented the opportunity to legalize most marketers in Piazza Carmine. At the same time it was important to promote cooperation amongst marketers, and maintain the traditionally popular nature of Ballarò, so that its low prices and good quality could keep on serving the needs of people in Albergheria. These ideas were largely accepted by marketers who never lost a chance to elaborate on them and come up with original developments. On the other hand, in the marketers' discourse these ideas always coexisted with economic anxiety, lack of trust, boredom, racism, and the ever-present hatred towards the ZTL.

In section 2.2. I mentioned how ZTL was brought up by Davide, a marketer from Piazza Carmine, as a way to tell me (and by proxy SOS Ballarò) to leave him alone and solve his problems by asking the mayor to eliminate the ZTL and "get the cars back." That conversation is an example of the kind of continuous oscillation featuring in marketers' daily reflections, given that

after a few days, I had the possibility to talk to Davide about the ZTL again. He explained to me how, in that period, State action took him by surprise:

> We didn't know, we weren't warned, nobody came to talk to us. They just took away the cars, and people's ability to come to the market and buy 20 kg of stuff, throw it in the trunk and drive home. Now they all go to LIDL and we laze about.[99]

In a sense, Davide felt left out from the political process and lamented the frustration brought on by his inability to influence change. At the same time, he was complaining about the amount of work necessary to participate to decision-making. This only apparent contradiction in his thinking is understandable if combined to his economic insecurity and anxieties, sometimes resulting in discouraged pledges:

> My dad is here every day. He should be retired, with his pension at home doing nothing, but if he doesn't come, we don't eat. I can't set up family. I'm stuck. [...] Can't you just find me a job as a garbage collector? 600, 700 € a month and I would be the happiest! [laughs]

In his daily reasoning, Davide always conveyed a high degree of insecurity about his future and that of the market: "Are we sure this cover is our best chance?" "How do we know for certain this is going to make our lives better?" SOS did not have an answer to these questions, but constantly posed the accent on the alternatives to grassroots-driven change:

> If the market stays like this and doesn't react to supermarkets, it's going to disappear. One by one, we cannot compete with a multinational like LIDL or Carrefour. The cover gives us the chance to think of what the market is going to look like. Ballarò has a huge amount of credibility and knowledge. I know for a fact that if we all work together and row in the same direction, Ballarò

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[99] At roughly the same time of the executive legislation on the ZTL (early 2015), a first LIDL supermarket opened in Palermo city centre, 500 m away from the Ballarò market. Next to the ZTL, this represented the major threat to the market's prosperity.

will be the economic engine of the whole city centre, not just the quarter. I trust you: I want to see [supermarkets around here] close down in the next five years!

Tommaso, as usual, did not mince words when he opened the first assembly of the Association of the Historical Market of Ballarò after almost a year, in late September 2017. His ability to move people's emotions showed results almost immediately, when, after a few other speeches, a marketer asked to speak:

> You've been coming to the market for a while now, asking us what should happen, how we should behave when the cover is up. We've been discussing, we talk a lot, we have plenty of time [laughs], and I was thinking that an important thing is to get the machines to make payments [POS]. That way people can pay by card and not just cash. I believe people go to LIDL, yes, because it's cheap, but also because they can use a card. If they can do that in the market, then we can serve those who have the social card [the Italian version of food stamps]. Let me ask you this: who is going to get the money out of their social card in cash and come to spend it in the market? Nobody. But if they can use it in the market, I'm sure they will come, because LIDL sausages can suck it to mine, and people [in Ballarò] know. Of course, that means we must be able to ask for one of those. We need licences, be regular, get the banks involved [gagging noise], pay taxes [gagging noise] ...

Gianfranco condensed in two minutes what SOS had struggled to put in words for months. Marketers were discussing the cover and the future of the market. They were envisioning their version of change. Nobody in SOS ever thought of the ramifications of getting a POS system: as Gianfranco pointed out, on one side it would push marketers to become legal; on the other, this step was not aimed at profiting primarily from tourists or better-off customers. It was thought as a way to enable those in need to eat his sausages instead of the "garbage LIDL puts on the shelves".

In the span of two months of never-ending assembly, marketers and activists alike enjoyed the possibility for considerable space to oscillate between different political ideals to shape the future of Ballarò. On a constant basis, people were confrontational, reflective, and innovative in their attitude towards the issue. I was told that the problem of the market is "all these Turks [Palermitan slur for black people] who steal our jobs", and that "nobody should be mistreated because they are foreign"; that "I don't care what happens to the other [marketers] as long as my family eats" and that "we should form a consortium, so we can hire one person to do our taxes or some guys to bring groceries around for customers". My reactions (and those of other activists) to such statements were also subjected to oscillation. Sometimes I would engage in heated discussions and confront racisms, while others I would just let go and then bitterly vent my frustrations with other SOS members. On some days, conversations with marketers were deeply emotional, leaving me sad or melancholic. On others, I got home ecstatic and energetic, with brand new and deeply thought-out ideas to share with the rest of the assembly.

The daily conversation in Ballarò was full of swings small and big, until a coherent idea like the one Gianfranco proposed in the assembly could emerge organically. The market was the locus for rearguard theory to take shape under the influence of everyone's feelthinking and feelacting (Santos 2014), but the discussion, the politics of the re-qualification of the market were never interrupted (Li 2019). More aptly, they oscillated, until they would mould into practical solutions under the guide of rearguard theory. As Peppe, a core member of SOS Ballarò, told me the first time we met in February 2017,

> The secret is that it doesn't matter who is talking, or what they are
> saying. You listen carefully to everyone, try to understand. *Then*,
> you try to answer.

Following this simple advice, and the way it ramifies into SOS Ballarò's method(ide)ology, it is almost impossible for the political discussion to be interrupted and ultimately break down, especially if it happens in the realm of the ordinary. In the next section I will touch specifically on this aspect of

the ordinary through the account of the events that took place on the 13th of December 2017, when life in the market became temporarily extra-ordinary due to an unusually large deployment of police forces.

3.2. Santa Lucia: the Shortest Day of the Year.

The 13th of December 2017, Santa Lucia, is probably the most important day of my ethnographic experience, next to the 13th of March described in chapter 4. On this day, at 4 pm, marketers had called their second assembly to meet Maria, the chief architect from IACP in charge of the design of the cover, and her entourage. The purpose of the assembly was to discuss the project further, after a first assembly that took place at the end of October. Then, about 150 people, many of whom marketers, provided vital information to the IACP about working conditions in Piazza Carmine and significantly reshaped architects' and activists' perception of what the cover should look like. Activists were hopeful about this second assembly: "If it's anything like the first one, we have the cover ready by next week", as Nicolò told me the night before with enthusiasm. Little we knew, State action in the form of police controls in the market would make sure that the few hours of daylight of the shortest day of the year would pass by as slowly as possible.

On that morning, I was on the balcony of my apartment looking down on the San Saverio market, trying to push sleepiness away. At around 7.30 am, two police cars stopped in Piazza Colajanni: a pretty unusual phenomenon. Five police officers stepped out and started talking to one of the vendors. I put on shoes and decided to go out to check what was happening. In a very polite manner, the five agents gathered the vendor's merchandise (some smart phones and an XBOX) and asked him to follow them. Equally politely, the vendor sat in the car and was escorted away. I grew more concerned, not only because of the quick apprehension by the police, but because such police actions in Ballarò so early in the morning seldom come alone. As I was commenting on the situation with other vendors, my phone started buzzing. Tommaso was frantically asking SOS members to go to Piazza Carmine, as agents from the port authority and the coast guard were fining fishmongers and seizing their products. He described the situation as "tense and nervous".

I answered the call and went to the market. There were seven agents, none in uniform, walking up and down, checking fish sizes, species, traceability, asking for licenses to sell, contesting the legality of tools and materials. They were working quickly and purposefully. A fishmonger was behind his stall: evidently the agents had already done their job there. He was scooping fish salad in a Styrofoam crate, and putting it in a shopping cart to be seized and taken away. His expression said more than a hundred words: he was beaten, there was nothing he could do to save his livelihood but "*calari i cuorna*", lower his chin, and accept his fate. He was singing a melancholic song to himself as he started dismantling the marble countertops of his stall to be seized and brought away with the fish.

I looked around trying to assess the extent of the operation: agents were checking fishmongers' documents some stalls down the road, while some shops were already closed or left unattended, as the owners had already fled the scene and were hiding in the crowd. As I looked around, I recognized some of them as they witnessed in disbelief and genuine concern how thoroughly agents were checking paperwork and merchandize. At the same time, they were in a better position than those who were still at their stalls: if the marketer is not behind the counter, it is almost impossible for officers to identify whose property is what, apply sanctions to it, and issue fines accordingly. Davide, Gianfranco, Andrea, my closest friends in Piazza Carmine, answered to my questions with passing nods or minced words: marketers did not want to talk (to me) at that moment. I decided to walk up and down the market to feel its pulse and see if there were other agents around. Fishmongers in two segments of the market were closed. Only those at the southern end were still working; here they tend to have regular licenses and more or less legal product. Nevertheless, I knew word had already travelled: I had the impression they were trying as hard as possible to act as if nothing was happening at the other end of the market. The atmosphere was artificial, a theatrical expedient, like when extras in the background of the theatre stage whisper 'rhubarb' to each other to simulate the murmur of a crowded place.

On my way back to Piazza Carmine I grew more and more concerned. Piazza Carmine laid still, eerily quiet, palpably tense. The festive customers

had already left, leaving the Piazza half empty with just marketers and residents. There were little groups of fishmongers discussing the situation. I started picking up comments about the event: "Always on holidays!" "We are consumed already; can't they just leave us alone?" I could feel the same emotions: I grew angry at law enforcers for their blow right after we were able to sit in an assembly of more than 100 marketers for the first time ever; and right before we could do it again. "This is ten steps back. How are we going to get Piazza Carmine back in the process?" My thoughts proved themselves right when, in a thick Palermitan accent, I heard one of the marketers say:

> Nuautri parlamo, ma ca ci su i puocci ca camminano… [we talk, but here there are pigs/cops walking around]

As I turned to see from where the sentence came, a young fishmonger locked eye with me. He seemed to believe SOS Ballarò (and specifically me at that moment) attracts the police at best, calls it on marketers at worst. Even though aware that I was there for the exact opposite reason, to witness police operations and somehow make sure they were not abusive, I was also aware of the fact that I did not have enough legitimacy or social capital to directly respond to what, in Ballarò, is a grave insult. I slowly walked away, making sure he knew I heard him, but also pondering the fact that being the only activist in the market was not ideal. I called Luca and Totò, and asked them to come to Piazza Carmine, even if for five minutes only, because the situation was tense, and I was growing uncomfortable. The two came, bringing with them their baggage of legitimacy and authority. Luca worked for decades in the only newsstand in Ballarò, first with his dad and then on his own, organizing marketers in the 1990s and always lending a helping hand to anybody who asked. Totò, apart from being the owner of a historical sweets manufacturing active since 1890, is the president of the Association of the Historical Market. They arrived in Piazza Carmine straight from work, Luca in an elegant black blazer, thin to the extreme, and Totò in his white gown and t-shirt, heavily walking on the cobble stones in his clogs. The atmosphere

shifted immediately: fishmongers formed a small crowd and started venting their frustration:

> It's absurd! Always on a holiday! The market is full. Then they come, we start closing, they seize, we have to run, and people go away! What do you expect? For [clients] to stay around while cops are taking stuff away? […] If one day I kill myself or I come here and kill some of these *sbirri* [cops], you can't say I didn't tell you!

We listened carefully, as the tone shifted from the initial rant to the very serious last sentences. After a moment of silence, Luca stepped in, changing gears, and tapping into the pride fishmongers in Piazza Carmine are famous for:

> You are working as usual when they come, and you have to run away like *rats*. You pack your stuff and hide in the crowd. How is that a good thing to do? I understand you can't lose your stuff. I understand it. But you should be able to face them, stay in your place and talk to the cops as everybody else does […] There is only one way you can do that […] you get you papers in order, and when they come, you show them, and they leave you alone.

Luca and Totò calmed down the situation in half an hour of listening, answering questions, and comforting disgruntled marketers, exhausted by their working conditions. Moreover, as a result of me just standing side by side them, they infused me with the social capital necessary to face the rest of the morning in the market alone. Fishmongers in Piazza Carmine had little doubt about me from then on, given the endorsement they just saw me receive.

A few meters away, the stall being dismantled by the fishmonger was now reduced to its frame. The scene, once melodramatic, was now outright tragic. A crowd was following the operations of coast guard agents as they brought away every last bit of the stall and greeted with a deep sigh of despair the arrival of firefighters. An unbelievable silence enveloped the area: the firefighters were getting a big angle grinder ready, as they received the order

to cut down the two metal columns holding up the tarp covering the stall. The firefighters worked in silence, while their captain urged them to make it quick: it felt like they did not want to be involved in the matter for more time than strictly necessary. Two garbage collectors took away the carcass of the stall bit by bit to dump it in their truck parked around the corner. The crowd mourned the loss of the stall like it was a relative too young to pass, lowered six feet under by someone, the State, with no compassion, no understanding, no respect. Tears were shed. Small words of comfort were offered. "I'm sure he'll find something else". "There will always be a place for him in Ballarò". "He's a good man, we'll help him". "The injustice…they are wearing us out".

After an hour of cutting and removing, firefighters left and people forming the crowd went back to their somewhat ordinary activity. In place of the stall, two stumps of concrete signalled the grave of what once was a commercial activity providing for a family. We had just witnessed a death and funeral, but Ballarò is not new to this kind of bereavement and knows how to transform sorrow into tenuous hope at very short notice. A couple of hours later somebody had attached two strings to the stumps to hold a sign in the middle: "Close for renovation".

As said above, on the 13th of December marketers had scheduled their second assembly with IACP officials. After the coast guard left the market, activists met in a hurry to discuss the event and survey the damage that police controls had caused to the process to design the cover. While having lunch with Tommaso, Nicolò, and other activists, I wrote a letter to the mayor and a press release, both revolving around the concept of coordination between those involved in the process to re-qualify the historical market:

> The process SOS Ballarò started in the market to reform it is well under way, but it requires time and patience. […] Sudden repressive operations like this one push the process ten steps back and seriously undermine the trust the market has in the process and in [SOS Ballarò]. (My translation)

We were well aware at this point that the assembly in the afternoon would not be attended by 150 people, so we moved it to a smaller hall in Santa Chiara and hoped that at least someone would show up to discuss the cover with the architects.

I spent the half hour before the assembly on the steps outside Santa Chiara, drinking coffees and chain-smoking, building up expectations every time somebody walked in the square, only to have them shattered when they would not come into the building. Then, Davide showed up. He was with three other marketers from Piazza Carmine. He stopped with me for a cigarette:

> If it were just an assembly, after this morning I would have stayed home. But we have this thing of the project, right? Then I wanted to come, if anything to at least pay respect to the Madame architect [from IACP] who came to talk to us. It would have been a *mala figura* [bad impression, rude] not to come and leave her alone.

At the assembly there were nine marketers from Piazza Carmine, a meagre number, but activists still took it as a success. Their presence and will to participate (we discussed the minutiae of the first draft presented by the architect for about two hours) was the sign that a debate had been taking place in Piazza Carmine even after the police operation, and some marketers still decided it was important to participate and reaffirm their central role in the process.

On the other hand, two new faces were present in this assembly: two middle aged white men, both bald and well-built, dressed in jeans and blazers, one of them wearing black sunglasses on top of his head. Nobody knew who they were; activists (me included) grew somehow paranoic: "They really look like cops" Tommaso whispered in my ear, while asking to "keep your eyes open". It turned out they were not cops. They came to the assembly as friends of the owner of two buildings facing Piazza Carmine who is planning to renovate them and turn them both into Bed & Breakfasts.

The 13th of December 2017 is an important day in the economy of this ethnographic investigation. In the span of a few hours, it gives examples of all the instances I described throughout my thesis. At the beginning of the day, Ballarò and its market were in the middle of the field of possibilities, engaged in a never-ending assembly to define the guidelines for the construction of an infrastructure of historical proportions, capable of pushing the re-qualification of the quarter ten steps forward. Up to the 13th of December the State had not been significantly present in the market for at least a month, while the state apparatus in the form of IACP officials, had been prone to listening and highly collaborative. On Santa Lucia though, the State resurfaced in the form of repression through police operation, showing a different face (Obeid 2010), reminding everyone involved in the process that "we always have to take into account that the State is also this, and it's not like we can always completely direct it", as Tommaso said in the assembly that afternoon:

> The state, and especially the police, doesn't know everything we are doing. They don't talk to us; the police only sometimes listen to us but never tell us what they are doing. […] That's why we are here, in the long term, to make sure that when [police controls] happen you can just give them what they want and just wait for them to go away.

The small crowd of marketers at the assembly shyly nodded in response to Tommaso's prediction of a future when police will not be scary or outrage marketers anymore, when it will just be another thing that happens from time to time in Piazza Carmine, like a rainy day or your favourite football team losing a game, part of the ordinary life of the market and its politics.

On the 13th of December 2017, the oscillating process described in this chapter seriously risked coming to a halt, as another big swing in the attitude of the State risked toppling the game of marble maze. As Davide articulated above though, marketers recognized the fact that the other expression of the state, embodied by the Madame architect from IACP, was also oscillating in their direction, trying to contribute to the process the best it could. If all

marketers would have stopped tilting the board to find the right solution to the maze on that day, it would have been a *mala figura*, a lack of respect for those who had put in the work already.

This is the only case during the entirety of my fieldwork when the political discussion in the quarter risked suffering an interruption as intended by Li (2019), effectively preventing the possibility to find out what an "historically effective practice" (33) actually looks like in Ballarò. As of today, in June 2021, this practice has little to do with redistribution of resources, but a lot to do with the redistribution of political power and legitimacy, as marketers and SOS Ballarò are in the driver's sit, while the S/state and a group of researchers from the university of Palermo build a version of the cover in Piazza Carmine tailored to the needs of marketers and residents, as the former take their steps to obtain a license to sell and a solid fiscal position, while the latter make sure their purchasing power remains the same.

Conclusions

In this concluding chapter I will highlight some gaps and limitations of my research, while also mentioning how these represent opportunities for future ethnographic projects and more thorough understandings of SOS Ballarò, the quarter, and the political processes happening in Albergheria. I will then focus on the four main conceptual tools emerging from my analysis: the assembly that never ends, urban re-qualification, the field of possibilities for political discussion, and political oscillations. I will then give a brief overview of how they contribute respectively to the literature on social movements and democracy, urban renewal and gentrification, marginality and world-making practices, rearguard theory and formation of political ideologies.

1. Limitations and Further Inquiries.

As with any ethnographic inquiry, this thesis presents limitations due to my approach and my identity. The main two I want to highlight are the absence of a deep reflection on race and ethnicity, and the lack of a focus on gender.

Ballarò is a multi-ethnic community that sees the presence of migrants from West and Sub-Saharan Africa, Maghreb, South-East Asia, Eastern Europe etc. Nevertheless, neither I nor SOS Ballarò were able to include their voices in the political discussion about the re-qualification of their quarter. This can be blamed on lack of energies, burnout, and implicit bias in activists, all (but Eddy) Italian citizens and white. This is obviously a limitation, both in my research and in SOS Ballarò's activism, as Eddy voiced repeatedly during my stay in Palermo. It is also an opportunity for further investigation, given that SOS started working on including migrant communities in the political process in late 2018, after a group of drug dealers assaulted a Gambian man putting him into hospital.

My research is also affected by a lack of focus on gender dynamics. This aspect depends on two major factors. On one side, the assembly is mainly made of white, straight men aged 30 to 70. Women are a fundamental component of SOS Ballarò, and heavily contribute to its functioning, both by taking part in the political discussion and the assembly that never ends and by

organizing parallel activities like workshops on domestic violence, support groups for migrant women, after-school programs etc. My inability to follow these ethnographic threads largely depends on my focus on the projects revolving around San Saverio and the Ballarò market, both of which presented issues of access to gender as a research topic. In San Saverio only 16.95% of vendors are women (Prestileo 2017: 87). For the historical market I do not have available data on gender composition, but the vast majority of marketers (and customers) seems to be male. This poses the issue of access to gender diversity, undermining my ability to carry out an analysis of the two markets focussed on this aspect. As for race and ethnicity, this gap in my current analysis also represents an opportunity for future research, as the issue of access could be overcome through prolonged periods of ethnographic fieldwork, and the possibility to include in my analysis parts of the population I was unable to reach during my first stay.

In short, if this thesis features a strong reflection on my positionality as an ethnographer and an activist, it lacks an equally deeper reflection on my positionality as a product of my identity.

2. The Assembly that Never Ends.

In this thesis I explored the concept of the *assembly that never ends* as the answer SOS Ballarò offers to some questions about social movements, activism, democratic practice, and representation. I argued that this is the tool SOS deploys every time they want to start new political processes aimed at improving the quarter and the livelihoods of those who hover around it. Thanks to this practice, SOS manages to increase its potential for representation and inclusion: extending the concept of meeting or assembly to any conversation that might happen between a core member and a marketer/vendor/resident has the effect to reduce levels of officiality, keeping the political discussion accessible and ongoing, so that as many as possible can contribute to the debate with their ideas and knowledge without suspending their daily activities. This last feature roots SOS Ballarò's activism in the everyday practice of the quarter, initiating a "descent into the ordinary" (Das 2007:7) that is at the core of its method(ide)ology, as well as

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at the core of my fieldwork practice as an ethnographic activist. The assembly that never ends is the tool that allows SOS Ballarò to gather knowledge about the quarter and legitimacy through a shared democratic political process, as well as the tool that allowed me to gather data for my analysis and have an impact during my fieldwork.

3. Urban Re-qualification.

SOS Ballarò's example also offers some alternative readings of urban renewal and gentrification phenomena. Given that Ballarò is at the same time socially marginal and geographically central, the quarter is at risk of getting gentrified through private investment or be subjected to yet another botched public intervention following top-bottom dynamics. On the first aspect, the mere presence (Coles 2008) of a legitimate political subject like SOS Ballarò influences the way in which (some) newcomers enter the area to invest their money and monetize their expertise, undermining conceptions of marginal areas as urban frontiers to be pioneered and civilized. SOS draws a stark distinction between *abitare a* (live in) and *vivere a* (live) Ballarò: one can either interpret the quarter as a place to just conduct business and have a house, or as a tight political community to be an active part of. SOS Ballarò also employs a more active approach towards urban renewal: by cleaning public spaces and refurbishing them together with and according to the needs of the communities that created them, the assembly puts the accent on practices of *re-qualification*, intended as an iterated discovery of the qualities of a certain "space" as opposed to those of a "place" (De Certeau 1984: 117). The latter is the blank page where "the law of the proper rules"; the former is "a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities": according to SOS Ballarò, there are no "places" in the quarter. Spaces do not need to be renewed or designed from scratch: the qualities that these spaces already have need to be understood, re-discovered, appreciated, and made functional for those who created them in the first place.

4. Field of Possibilities.

I explored the concept of *field of possibilities for political discussion* in relation to the process of formalization of the San Saverio market. Here SOS Ballarò had to face considerable levels of conflict and animosity between residents, vendors, and the S/state. Through the assembly that never ends, SOS started chipping away at these conflicts by setting up a continuous dialogue between the stakeholders, while building a legitimate presence in the market. In their role as mediators, activists (me included) started a dialogue about the politics of re-qualification of the market, opening up a field of possibilities that all those involved (residents, vendors, and city officials) could inhabit with (potentially) equal decisional power. A levelled field of possibilities granted vendors a voice in determining how the market should change and be managed, while allowing everyone involved (SOS included) time to exercise empathy and learn the minutiae of San Saverio, so that easy solutions based on revanchist policies of removal and sanitation could be rejected as inequitable and simplistic. At the same time, vendors, activists, and residents could gather knowledge on the state apparatus, while learning how to interact with the myriad of officials, administrators, offices etc. in the most productive way possible. The opening of a field of possibilities for political discussion through the assembly that never ends represents an example of how a group of people featuring high levels of internal conflict can build its own political legitimacy according to principles they themselves establish and interact with the S/state in a balanced manner. I argue this process shifts weight in favour of epistemologies originating at the margins of the political cityscape, contributing to the emergence of forms of rearguard theory (Santos 2014) that represent the foundation for new definitions of thresholds of legality (Bartoli 2019), so that levels of marginality and exclusion can be questioned and negotiated following bottom-up dynamics driven by those most underprivileged.

5. Political Oscillations.

In an attempt to explore the concept of rearguard theory (Santos 2014), I examined the case of the historical market and how SOS Ballarò worked towards the realization of a publicly funded infrastructure for a cover in the central square of Ballarò. The concept of interruption in the political discussion (Li 2019) helped me crafting a more nuanced analytical tool, *political oscillation*, that better describes the kind of reasoning carried out by marketers, both as individuals and as a collective, to decide how the cover should look like and who should benefit from it. Political oscillation implies a less normative pathway towards the formation of new ideas then interruption (Li 2019), given the strong accent Li puts on theories of praxis and historically effective practices. In line with Santos' definition of rearguard theory, I argue that marketers, as well as activists, did not have a clearly established point of arrival for their reasoning. Instead, they oscillated between extremely different political ideas, spanning from racism and sexism to forms of humanitarianism based on class solidarity and cooperation. I do not intend political oscillation to be the full realization of SOS Ballarò's and the quarter's political project. Instead, I argue oscillation is a necessary process to allow for all those involved to craft a pathway towards what they believe to be a better form for the society they inhabit and contributed to build. The assembly that never ends, happening in the field of possibilities, is the metaphorical and literal space for people to experiment in their politics, and oscillate until they find a collective practice of world-making based on their newly formed rearguard theory that will serve as the tool to improve living conditions and reduce levels of marginality and exclusion.

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