

'[La casa] non è più sexy in Italia.' The absent politicization of housing in Italy, insights from Turin

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### '[La casa] non è più sexy in Italia.' The absent politicization of housing in Italy, insights from Turin

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#### ABSTRACT

During the years of economic crisis and austerity, and the subsequent economic growth dependent on real estate and tourism, housing has returned into the spotlight on the political agenda in Southern European countries and cities, where activists and social movements scaled up their struggles and created bridges with institutional actors, fostering policy change. The latter, however, did not happen in Italy. In this article, based on exploratory case study research carried out in the city of Turin, we present three themes that help explain what we call the 'absent politicization' of housing in Italy during the last decade: a multi-actor, multilevel housing policy capable of defusing specific problems; the absence of bridges between politicized and institutional actors; and the role played by party-politics, with attention to 'populist' Movimento 5 Stelle in power in Turin. By focusing on differences with Southern Europe, we contribute to overcoming dichotomies that have long dominated comparative housing studies; and contribute to linking housing studies with contentious urban politics in the post-crisis years.

#### KEYWORDS:

Comparative housing studies, contentious politics, housing needs, housing policy, problematization analysis, social movements, Southern Europe.

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## 1. Introduction

As this special issue testifies, housing is back in the spotlight on the political agenda. The economic crisis, austerity policies, and the subsequent real estate investment and speculation amid economic growth have determined increasing disconnection between housing costs and household incomes, resulting in rising hardships and evictions throughout the world (Madden and Marcuse 2016; Farha 2017). As a response, housing movements have grown in quantity and intensity in cities on all continents (Vilenica et al. 2019), forcing institutional actors at multiple levels – from international institutions to local authorities – to reengage in housing policies. Southern European cities have been at the forefront of these processes: there, economic crisis and austerity policies have hit cities especially hard (Knieling and Othengrafen 2016); economic rebound was particularly dependent on real estate, construction and tourism, bringing about processes described as gentrification and touristification (Sequera and Janoschka 2015; Alexandri 2018; Cocola-Gant and Gago 2019); and social conflict regarding housing has been fierce (Annunziata and Lees 2016; Arampatzi 2017; Mendes 2018). And yet, significant differences existed in the patterns of nation-wide politicization of housing, which has become a central topic in changing national politics in Spain, Portugal and Greece; but not in Italy. Although the latter is probably the Southern European country with the fiercest history of housing activism, during the last decade the action of activists and politicized actors has not resulted in nation-wide movements, and housing did not get to the centre of media and political discussion.

Why did this happen? What keeps Italy apart from the Southern European trajectory of housing re-politicization? This article takes some steps toward answering these questions through case study analysis in the city of Turin. Exploratory in nature and based on qualitative methods (see Section 3), the main goal of our study is that of extracting, from the empirical material, preliminary explanations for what we call the ‘absent politicization’ of housing in Italy. We define the politicization of housing, for the purposes of this article, as the process through which housing is publicly understood to be a ‘problem’, and conflictual understandings of this problem (and possible solutions) are articulated among different actors and scaled up to the national stage.<sup>1</sup> By ‘absent politicization’, therefore, we do not intend the absence of political struggles over housing – quite the opposite, we will discuss some of those struggles in Turin; rather, we refer to the absence of: i) the emergence of a generalized, nation-wide understanding of housing as a problem, ii)

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<sup>1</sup> See Gusfield (1989) on the difference between ‘issues’ and ‘problems’; and Foucault’s problematization analysis (2001, 171-173), that is, the epistemological focus on the process of problem/solution formation.

articulations in the public arena of conflictual understandings over that problem, and iii) significant changes of national policies and politics resulting from those articulations.

By focusing on differences within Southern Europe, we pursue a secondary goal, that of contributing to overcoming the dichotomic thinking, which has dominated comparative housing studies, that sets the South (and East) apart from the rest of continental Europe, concluding that the former has a less advanced housing and welfare policy than the latter. The seminal work by Judith Allen and her colleagues (2004) has been crucial for subsequent efforts at exploring Southern European housing systems in their own terms – see, e.g., Tulumello and colleagues (2018) on why dichotomic thinking fails to explain housing policies in Portugal, or Arbaci (2019) on the limits of the concept of segregation. By pursuing these two goals, finally, our study contributes to linking housing studies with contentious urban politics<sup>2</sup> in the post-crisis years.

Our argument is organized as follows. We start by discussing the recent politicization of housing in Southern Europe and its absence in Italy – at the same time as we exclude simplistic explanations for the latter. Then, we describe our epistemological approach and methodological design (Section 3). Thereafter we move to the case study, introducing Turin and its housing problems (Section 4), and then present three interlocked themes that emerged from the fieldwork and which help to explain the missing politicization of housing in Turin (Section 5): the capacity of local policies to defuse specific problems; the absence of dialogue or confrontation between activists and institutionalized advocacy and political actors; and the role of party politics, particularly of Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S; 5 Stars Movement) – a young national party that refuses to be categorized within the left/right spectrum and is commonly labelled as ‘populist’ (e.g. Adinolfi 2016). In the conclusions, we discuss our findings in comparison with the trajectories of other Southern European countries, at the same time as we qualify the extent to which the dimensions emerging from the case of Turin may be generalized to the Italian case.

## **2. Re-politicization of housing in Southern Europe**

As anticipated, we follow in the steps of the tradition of comparative scholarship inaugurated by Judith Allen and her colleagues (2004) and inspired by Gøsta Esping-Andersen’s theorization (1990) of varieties of capitalism. Allen and her colleagues have advocated the necessity to develop theoretical tools to explore Southern European housing and welfare in their own terms – rather than looking at them through the lenses

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<sup>2</sup> On contentious politics writ large, see Tarrow (1996).

of traditional housing studies as they developed in Central and Northern Europe. Not only do Southern European housing systems share a number of characteristics that make them ‘constitute a family resemblance’ (Allen et al. 2004, 3); but, more recently, all four countries have also shared a number of analogous transformations in their position in the global division of labour, namely in the sense of a progressive peripheralization within the European continental block (e.g. Gambarotto and Solari 2015). These transformations have had significant impacts on housing, especially since the burst of the economic crisis: first, Southern European housing systems have been among the most affected by the global economic crisis; and, second, they have been more or less directly pushed by European institutions to implement reforms to liberalize the planning and housing sectors in the name of fostering economic growth through real estate and touristic development (Tulumello et al. 2020), further aggravating housing hardships during the years of economic growth that followed (see Introduction).

This is the context in which, during the 2010s, housing has emerged at the centre of nation-wide political and institutional transformations in Spain, Portugal and Greece:

- in Spain, movements like the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH; Platform of the Affected from Mortgages) – that emerged out of street politics during the years of austerity – have scaled up from the local to the national level, becoming crucial for the promotion of housing reforms at various governmental levels and the emergence of a party, Podemos, which took power in main cities and reached the national government in 2019 (de Weerd and Garcia 2016; de Andrés and Smith 2019);
- in Portugal, the stratification of long-term housing problems with a housing crisis escalating during economic rebound was met by a visit of the UN Special Rapporteur for Adequate Housing in 2016, the fast growth of social movements, and, since 2018, a range of new policies (Mendes 2018; Allegra and Tulumello 2019);
- In Greece, and especially Athens, the spatialized politics of anti-austerity urban movements – in particular squats and the network Αλληλεγγύη για Όλους (Solidarity for All) – put housing at the core of their action and were part and parcel of the rise to power in 2015 of party Syriza, itself among the funders of Solidarity for All (Arampatzi 2017; Karaliotas 2019).

Granted, differences existed among the three countries, in the actors involved, temporalities and outputs: for instance, in Spain, housing scaled up as a national topic during the years of crisis (since 2009, with intensification in 2012-2013) in connection with mobilizations on mortgage defaults; while, in Portugal, growing housing prices made housing a nation-wide topic during economic rebound (roughly 2015-2019, with special intensity in 2017). The cases of Spain, Portugal and Greece show the capacity of activist groups to scale up the struggle for housing and, by creating coalitions with institutionalized actors, push forward transformations in the public understanding of, and policies for, housing. Politicized actors in these countries

were able to make housing a ‘problem’ acknowledged by the general public and, ultimately, institutions, which ultimately provided responses in the form of policy reforms.<sup>3</sup>

This did not happen in Italy, where housing has remained, as it has long been, outside of the national political and policy agenda (Petrillo 2017). Even the explosion of the Covid-19 pandemic, whose socio-economic consequences have deepened longstanding housing problems, has not been followed by a resurgence of housing struggles or policy reforms (Accornero et al. 2020; Chiodelli 2020; Esposito 2020; Gainsforth 2020).

Indeed, all our interviewees agreed that housing has long remained marginal to the social and political debate in Italy:

It’s not really useful we beat about the bush: my conclusion is that there is no housing policy in Italy (councilman, City of Turin).

This problem is not acknowledged, I don’t know how to put it differently: [housing] is not ‘sexy’ anymore in Italy [*non è più sexy in Italia*] (head of department, ATC Central Piedmont).

Let’s put it like this: housing issues and their space in the political agenda have been forgotten by everybody. Housing is not a topic to be used during elections, [not] a topic that brings votes (union representative, SICET Turin).<sup>4</sup>

Before moving to the empirical exploration, let us rule out three simplistic explanations of the absent politicization of housing in Italy. First, absent politicization cannot be attributed to the absence of housing problems. Though average housing prices have stagnated during the last decade (Davico 2019a, 2019b), the economic crisis brought about increasing poverty and, after some decades of disinvestment in housing policies (Caruso 2017), fast-growing housing hardships, evictions and mortgage defaults (Davico 2019b; Pozzi 2019). The following economic growth added complexity to the picture: housing burdens kept

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<sup>3</sup> Granted, we are not arguing that new policies have ‘solved’ housing problems: indeed, in many cases, those reforms have been criticized by activists and scholars for being insufficient or even counter-productive (see, for the case of Portugal, Tulumello and Silva 2019; Mendes 2020).

<sup>4</sup> The authors translated these and following quotes from interviews. See next section for details on methodology and the list of interviewees.

growing; evictions plummeted nationally, but continued to grow in cities like Milan, Turin, Bari and Rome (Davico 2019b). It should be noted that housing hardships are particularly intense, especially in the form of exposure to involuntary rent arrears and housing deprivation, for migrant households (Sunia-CGIL 2012; Medici Senza Frontiere 2018). This is partially to be explained by (racialized) housing discrimination: migrant households are more dependent on the private housing market than Italian households, reproducing segregation and vulnerability to exploitation along racial divides, and feeding conflicts with the native population (Oliveri 2018).

Second, the absent politicization of housing can hardly be attributed to the absence of activism in a country with a long and strong tradition of contentious politics in the field of housing – see, for instance, the history of squatting movements (Mudu 2012). During the last few years, social movements concerned with housing have emerged in several cities: anti-touristification groups in Venice and Naples (Vianello 2016), the articulation of squatting and anti-gentrification movements in Rome (Annunziata and Lees 2016), and the participation of movements from Milan in the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City.<sup>5</sup> And yet, ‘Italian social movements have found less space for debate and dialogue with institutions and local administrations in comparison with what has happened elsewhere, for a number of complex historical-political reasons that cannot be analysed here’ (Petrillo 2017, 148; our translation).

Third, Italy has long been considered the country of homeowners *par excellence* (Allen et al. 2004; Filandri et al. 2020) – slightly less than four households out of five live in a home they own. Critical housing studies have long argued that the promotion of homeownership has been one of the linchpins of neoliberalization (e.g. Lundqvist 1992; Jacobs and Manzi 2013), part and parcel of the transition toward an asset-based welfare policy (Rolnik 2013; Di Felicianantonio and Aalbers 2018).<sup>6</sup> From a different perspective, comparative studies have emphasized the importance of homeownership in ‘familistic’ Southern European systems, where inter-generational support has historically counter-balanced the absence of universalist housing policies (Allen et al. 2004; Arbaci 2019). In short, a general agreement exists over the role homeownership has had in stemming social conflict in Southern Europe. As summarized by one of our interviewees:

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.cantiere.org/](http://www.cantiere.org/) and <https://housingnotprofit.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> In Italy, the promotion of homeownership has been implemented through the deductibility of mortgage interests (introduced with Decree of the President of the Republic 917/1986) and the sale of public housing to tenants (Laws 513/1977 and 560/1993).

In the 1980s, things were quite different, it looked like we had abolished poverty! [...] I mean, in a country where 80 percent of families were homeowners, well, we all thought that poverty wasn't a thing anymore (head of department, ATC Central Piedmont).

And yet, this cannot explain the Italian peculiarities in the recent re-politicization of housing, for the very simple reason that the Italian homeownership rate, though high, is not peculiar as it remains within European averages and slightly below those of other Southern European countries (Filandri et al. 2020, fig. 4.1). Italy is a country of homeowners, indeed, but definitely not *par excellence*, fostering us to seek more nuanced explanations of the absent politicization of housing in Italy.

### **3. Epistemological and methodological notes**

Our epistemological strategy is exploratory case study analysis. The selection of the case is based on Flyvbjerg's insights (2006) on how to theorize from case studies: Turin, former national industrial capital, is at the same time 'paradigmatic' of the Italian context, that is, a case that 'highlight[s] more general characteristics of the societies in question' (idem, 232), and a 'critical' case, that is, one that has 'strategic importance in relation to the general problem' (idem, 229). Despite its peculiar characteristics, Turin is paradigmatic of the Italian case in the specific sense that simplistic explanations of the absent re-politicization of housing do not apply (see previous section): first, the city suffers from significant housing problems, aggravated in the aftermath of the global economic crisis; second, it has a long history of contentious politics; and, third, the nationally high rates of homeownership cannot explain differences at the Southern European and local scale. At the same time, the existence in Turin of articulated housing policies built up by a complex network of public and private actors (Caruso 2017), a characteristic of a handful of Italian cities, makes Turin a critical case for testing the capacity of institutional action, though insufficient to solve housing problems, to stem social conflict.

Method-wise, our main source of evidence is 15 in-depth interviews or focus groups (see Table 1), carried out in June and July 2019, with key actors identified among different levels of government (Region, Metropolitan City, Municipality), the non-profit and social entrepreneurship sector, advocacy and activist groups, and scholars. Interviews, which lasted between 31 and 97 minutes, were transcribed and analysed thematically.



**Table 1. List of interviews and focus groups**

<i>Government</i>	1	int.*	Head of department, Region Piedmont, Directorate Social Cohesion*
	2	int.	Head of department, Region Piedmont, Directorate Social Cohesion
	3	focus	Head of department, ATC Central Piedmont (public housing management body) Head of department, ATC Central Piedmont
	4	int.	Head of department, Metropolitan City of Turin, Directorate Territory and Transportation
	5	int.	Councilman, City of Turin
	6	int.	Councilwoman, City of Turin
	7/8**	int.	Head of department, City of Turin, Directorate Public Housing
<i>Non-profit and social entrepreneurship</i>	9	focus	Executive, Compagnia di San Paolo (bank foundation) Project manager, Compagnia di San Paolo
	10	int.	Project coordinator, Fondazione Sviluppo e Crescita (bank foundation)
	11	focus	Architect, I Luoghi Possibili Architect, Architects without Borders Turin
<i>Advocacy and activism</i>	12	int.	Union representative, SICET Turin (tenants' union)
	13	int.	Activist
<i>Academia</i>	14	int.	Researcher, Turin University
	15	int.	Researcher, Polytechnic of Turin

\* This interview was not recorded and we used the notes taken by the interviewer.

\*\* Two interviews were carried out with this interviewee, at the beginning and end of the fieldwork.

**Source:** authors' elaboration

Additionally, we carried out an exploratory participant observation with activists. To enter the field, we both used contacts provided by personal acquaintances involved in activism and contacted the most active *centri sociali* (socio-political and cultural spaces) in the city. We found that, during the last few years, most activist groups have de-prioritized housing (see Section 5). Additionally, the participant observation was made difficult by several years of state repression of social movements (see, e.g., Chiaromonte 2019), which has weakened the latter and made activists quite reluctant to share information with strangers, especially with regard to actions, like squats, that are criminalized in Italy – and this is a crucial reason we decided not to carry out formal interviews with activists from *centri sociali*. In summary, we collected one interview with an activist that has supported the struggles in two housing squats (see Table 1) and four informal conversations with activists that took place during public events (a football tournament organized by one of the *centri sociali*, a seminar, and an open day organized in a squat). Because of the limits of the participant

observation, we will use the insights above all to document activities explicitly mentioned by activists. Finally, we took advantage of the longstanding experience of one of the authors, who has been researching housing policy in Turin, and screened original documents on the policies and programmes we describe.

In terms of analytical strategy, in line with the exploratory nature of the study, we allowed arguments to emerge from the thematical analysis of the interviews and notes from the fieldwork, inductively building the three arguments through which we explain the absent politicization of housing in Turin.

#### **4. The case study: Turin**

Turin (890.000 inhabitants), capital city of Piedmont Region, is a second tier city with a strong industrial past (Caruso et al. 2019). It has long been the Italian ‘one-company town’ for the presence of FIAT and the powerful automotive sector, which has not only structured the economy but also its demographic and social characters. After the heyday of the Fordist industrial model, the economic transition brought about the need to reinvent the city’s economic future and image. Since the 1990s, the city had been questioning its identity by promoting institutional innovations through planning and urban policies: the masterplan was updated, inserting large urban design projects to develop vacant industrial areas linked to the railway system; forms of strategic planning and engagement of local actors were implemented; and the city launched extensive urban regeneration programmes for its deprived neighbourhoods, with integrated and area-based approaches (Governa et al. 2009; Rossi and Vanolo 2013).

Despite the significant growth of some sectors, above all the universities, the transition of Turin toward a service-oriented city was only partially successful (Vanolo 2015). This became particularly evident due to the global financial crisis, which hit a labour market already under stress particularly hard, resulting in growing redundancies, unemployment and inequalities. Economic hardships have in the long run contributed to the erosion of the consensus for the centre-left elite that had governed the city since the early 1990s by embracing, and leading, the national ‘third way’ transition of former Partito Comunista Italiano (see Caldarola 2004, 77 and 113; Belligni and Ravazzi 2013). In 2016, M5S won the municipal elections, capitalizing on the discontent of peripheral neighbourhoods, and especially the most deprived and marginalized ones (Cepernich et al. 2018).

This background is crucial to understanding the complex changes in the field of housing. Despite large private real estate investments in the masterplan’s development areas, up until 2008 the housing market was not characterized by overall growing prices (Governa and Saccomani 2009). The crisis affected the housing market, increasing housing hardships. On the one hand, housing prices have been falling, and as of today real estate prices are among the lowest in northern and central Italian metropolises (Davico 2019a, fig. 4). At the same time, the crisis deepened longstanding differences and polarization among neighbourhoods (Davico 2019a, fig. 8) – some districts (e.g. Barriera di Milano) are characterized by low prices and the presence of

many unsold buildings, while others have seen reinvestment, for instance Vanchiglia and San Paolo, in connection with the growth of universities (Coccorese 2018).

On the other hand, low prices did not mean absent or even reducing housing hardships. On the contrary, growing poverty and unemployment meant that difficulties with loan repayments and rents have been rising, while the local market was less and less able to give answers to the needs of vulnerable households (Governa and Saccomani 2009; Davico 2019a, 2019b). As we have seen at the national level, housing hardships are particularly intense for migrant populations – for instance, in 2019, 36% of public housing units were assigned to non-European migrant households (Città di Torino 2019). Moreover, the general lack of systematic policies supporting refugees' access to housing has been considered to be a trigger for squatting practices (Bolzoni et al., 2015).

While the population is slowly decreasing (about -1% from 2010 to 2018), eviction numbers show the effects of the crisis (Città di Torino 2019, 26). In 2014, the worst year, 4,700 families lost their homes, 17% more than the previous year and double that of 2004 – in the vast majority of cases, evictions were ordered because of rent arrears. 2014 was followed by a decreasing trend, with around 2,200 evictions in 2018. Demand for public housing is also very high: between 2012 and 2016, the Municipality opened a call, collecting about 14 thousand validated applications.<sup>7</sup> The Municipality owns around 17,700 flats and manages to allocate around 500 per year, of which slightly more than 250 through the waiting list<sup>8</sup> – i.e., emptying the waiting list would take decades.

According to regional regulations (Piedmont Law 3/2010), the city's socio-assistance service can recommend households in need – a category called 'housing emergency' (*emergenza abitativa*), attributed in situation of eviction or repossession. These emergency requests, in most cases related to rent arrears, have been steadily growing since 2001, when they were ~700, to 2019, when they were ~900 (the peak was once again in 2014, with ~1100 requests) (Città di Torino 2019, 85).

Finally, homeownership can only marginally explain the absent politicization of housing in Turin, for two reasons. First, because rental contracts are more prevalent in big cities, and Turin is no exception: in 2018, 64% of families owned their home, against ~75% at the national level (Città di Torino 2019, 25). Second, because homeownership *per se* does not solve housing distress, especially in contexts like Turin.

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<sup>7</sup> A new call opened, with a new administrative procedure, in 2018, when 4,480 requests were collected. Whether this decrease of requests is due to reduced needs or lacking trust in the chance to be attributed a house will be clearer in the next years.

<sup>8</sup> The others are used for the *emergenza abitativa* (see below) and other emergency situations.

Problems come from homeownership too. If you consider studies on poverties produced by housing, it's quite clear: there are a lot of poor homeowners, those who have hard times for paying the mortgage, or those that accepted, a couple decades ago, a trade-off toward worst neighbourhoods or toward low quality housing because of a market made quite rigid by controlled rents (head of department, Metropolitan City of Turin).

Those that had bought their [council] flats often came back [to public housing] as tenants, because they couldn't pay the mortgage (head of department, ATC Central Piedmont).

In short, though poverty is overall more diffused among tenants than homeowners, it is in big cities like Turin – where, for instance, most public housing flats were sold to tenants – that poor homeowners are concentrated (Filandri et al. 2020, 87-90); and housing burdens are significant among poor, indebted homeowners (Filandri and Pauli 2018).

This brief collection of data shows that, despite housing prices being relatively low in terms of the national comparison, Turin is characterized by serious housing needs and the overall incapacity of public housing to solve them – therefore excluding the possibility that absent politicization could be due to the absence of housing hardships in the case of Turin.

## **5. Explaining the absent politicization of housing in Turin: three themes**

### **5.1 Multilevel and multi-actor housing policies**

In my opinion, precisely because Italy has not been capable of giving any response [to housing problems] at the national level, [...] this has stimulated the multiplication of a number of experiments and, yes, a variety of experiences (executive, Compagnia di San Paolo).

With housing policies having been de-prioritized for several decades and scarce national resources being used to fund public-private partnerships (Caruso 2017; Poggio and Boreiko 2017), Italy has long lacked a universalist housing policy. However, a complex patchwork of policy approaches has emerged since competence over housing has been devolved to regions (Decree-Law 112/1998). The territorial inequalities

of the country made the scenario particularly complex (see Filandri and Autigna 2015). As discussed above, Turin is no exception: on the one hand, available public housing is overwhelmed by demands; and, on the other, market regulation, which could ease a household's burden in the free market, is a national competence that has long been abolished.<sup>9</sup>

And yet, despite scarce resources overall, our interviewees generally agreed that a complex multilevel network of actors, both public and private, from the city to the regional level, has built up an articulated system of responses that has been effective in dealing with the most acute impacts of the housing crisis. In the words of a councilwoman from the City of Turin:

The most important thing, the core [of our mission] is to try... to prevent people from being evicted, to ensure that they don't lose their homes; in short, to put a halt before the disaster [*patatrác*] happens. [...] This, by the way, is the logic of *salva sfratti* [literally: eviction stopper], [that is,] the [financial] support to paying the rent when income abruptly drops.

This is achieved through a number of interventions, which can be grouped into four fields (for further details, see Caruso 2017, ch. 3):

- financial support and vouchers for families struggling to pay rents (in the free market or public housing) or mortgage instalments, funded by the Region (Regional Law 3/2010; Decision Regional Council 4-8049/2018) and bank foundations (Compagnia di San Paolo and Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio Torino);
- several forms of temporary housing in public-private partnership – in Italian, dubbed *housing sociale* – funded by bank foundations and Piedmont Region, and managed by Turin municipality or non-profit actors – e.g., Compagnia di San Paolo promotes its own housing programme (Programma Housing), which supports forms of temporary housing and funds the activities of several associations;
- responses to the 'housing emergency' (see previous section) by the municipality, which uses units of council housing and *housing sociale* to host (for up to 6 months) households that have lost their homes and are waiting for the assignment of stable public housing;

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<sup>9</sup> At the end of the 1970s, in the aftermath of mobilizations for labour rights and better living conditions, the Rent Act (Law 392/1978) introduced the *equo canone* (literally: fair rent). Rent regulations were contrasted by landlords, who often responded by shifting investments toward other sectors. The *equo canone* was eventually abolished (Law 431/1998).

- and several forms of rental housing agreements, supported by fiscal incentives and managed through the mediation of municipal agencies (Agenzie Sociali per la Locazione, regulated by Decision Regional Council 4-8049/2018), non-profit real estate agencies (e.g., Stesso Piano, promoted by Compagnia di San Paolo) and tenants' unions (e.g. SICET).

Despite the intervention of bank foundations (mainly as supportive funders) and the non-profit sector (active agents on the ground), this strategy is framed by municipal and regional programmatic documents (see Regione Piemonte 2007; Città di Torino 2008) and centred on the coordination of the municipality – virtually all interviewees agreed on the crucial role played by a head of department at the Directorate for Public Housing.

There are no systematic measures of the impact of these interventions in Turin. Filandri and Autigna (2015) measured the impact at the regional level and compared it with that of public housing, concluding that the latter, even if insufficient overall, is quantitatively much more significant than the former. The results may be slightly different in Turin, where most measures other than public housing have been developed (but also most public housing is concentrated). Still, the overall 'size' of the interventions we have listed above remains quite limited: Davico and Gullino (2017, 185-186) recently counted some 50 projects of *housing sociale*. Of these, 51% had fewer than 10 beds and only 15% had more than 50, for a total of less than 1,000 users. The comparison of these figures with the figures around housing needs (see above and Davico and Gullino 2017, 186) confirms that they can only address a small part of the housing problem.

What these interventions do quite effectively is to unpack housing needs and target narrow, specific categories of beneficiaries, as explained in an interview by a researcher based at the Polytechnic of Turin:

We tried to crunch some data, including the public expenditure by the City, the presence of volunteers in the care sector and the crucial role of bank foundations, above all Compagnia di San Paolo. The resulting picture, once compared with the ten main Italian metropolises, is quite unique; and this is the reason why social conflict has not exploded in Turin in horrific ways.

Turin's multilevel, multi-actor housing policy is effective where the potential for social conflict is particularly high: in situations of eviction and repossession; supporting middle-class households squeezed out of the market by sudden losses of income, but who are not poor enough to get public housing – dubbed, in Italy, *la zona grigia*, the 'grey area'; improving the meeting of supply and demand. Not by chance, the field where this strategy is less effective, namely the housing needs of recently arrived migrant populations and asylum seekers, is also the one where conflict, to which we shall now turn, is fiercer.

## 5.2 Conflictual practices: fragmentation and absence of dialogue

The main Italian blue-collar metropolis, Turin experienced, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, intense conflict, particularly in the fields of labour, social rights and housing (e.g. Piraccini et al. 1974). Deindustrialization, since the 1980s, has not only jeopardized the economy of the city, but has also transformed its contentious politics. During the 1990s, on a par with the global emergence of the *altermondialist* movement, a complex galaxy of *centri sociali*, socio-cultural and political spaces active in global and local politics, emerged throughout Italy (Barzano and Gallini 2000). Crucial to the trajectory of these actors in Turin has been, since the late 1990s, the participation in the environmental conflict in the nearby Susa Valley, sustained by the so-called No TAV movement (TAV stands for *Treno ad Alta Velocità*, High Speed Railway), and particularly the toll paid to decades of criminalization (Chiaramonte 2019).

Long-term fragmentation and weakening of movements have influenced the position of housing within contentious politics. Activists from one of the *centri sociali* with whom we interacted – one of the longest-standing in the city whose political background is self-defined as *autonomia* (autonomy) – told us that they had supported several squatter households in the previous years. However, since all squats had been cleared, the households had lost the will to keep fighting, and the *centro sociale* had progressively prioritized other activities. The other *centro sociale* – self-identified with an *antagonista* (antagonist) political background – organizes a help desk for households in housing distress. At the time of our fieldwork, some activists from this *centro sociale* were also supporting two housing squats promoted by, and hosting, migrant households and asylum seekers: Ex MOI, which counted more than a thousand squatters at its peak and was cleared late in 2019, is a complex of residential units built for the 2006 Winter Olympics and afterwards abandoned; Spazio Popolare Neruda still hosts about 120 persons in an abandoned municipal building. In both cases, the role of *centri sociali* has been that of supporting politically (and often legally) the struggle of squatters, and organising socio-cultural activities and fundraising events (see Migliaccio 2016, for a journalistic account).

In summary, in the field of housing, traditionally conflictual actors have recently prioritized, if not exclusively pursued, the support for squatting practices. A head of department at the City of Turin, interviewed, told us that 41 council flats were occupied illegally as of June 2019, against an average of 15/20, before 2016/2017 (see also Città di Torino 2019, 96); and explained this growth with the support given by activists to squatters. At any rate, squatting is less prevalent in Turin than in other major cities like Milan, Rome or Palermo, where hundreds, even thousands, of public flats are occupied. According to the same civil officer and those we interviewed at the ATC, these small numbers are due to the effective management of public housing, where the rate of empty apartments is always quite low.

But have squatting and other conflictual practices contributed to building the foundation for a re-politicization of housing? Here, we found mixed outputs. To begin with, squatters and their politicized supporters in Turin have very rarely engaged in dialogue with other actors in order to contribute to an institutionalization of their understanding of the problem of housing – e.g., to foster the legalization of the

squats. Though, as anticipated, our ethnography does not allow for generalization of all social movements in the city, all the activists we interacted with showed no interest in cooperating with institutional actors. The latter, which are driven by a legalistic understanding of squatting as a crime, have clearly expressed that they have no interest whatsoever in liaising with squatters.

Let's be honest, illegally occupying [*occupazioni abusive*] [in council flats] [...] means taking a home from someone on the waiting list (head of department, Region Piedmont).

I cannot take a person from a squat and give them a council flat, they would be illegal forever. Should they stop being illegal squatters, should they move to, say, an aunt, move their residency to the aunt[']s place], [only] then could I put them onto a path [to public housing]. [...] A bully, a person that takes, often in an organized way,<sup>10</sup> something they have no right to... Because, let's take a look at the characteristics of those persons: in some cases, they are those that 'my wage is insufficient to have a house big enough!', it's not just destitute people [*disperati*] (councilwoman, City of Turin).

*Interviewer: What I am trying to understand is whether, like them or not and all their contradictions notwithstanding, are squatting practices politicising housing [porre il problema].*

Indeed, but [our union] is doing it as well! Is it useful politicizing [housing] in that way? It exploits the poor wretches [*poveretti*], it does! [...] They put the poor against the poor, and ultimately those who vote 'Italians first!' get to win. I mean, if you take 50 refugees and bring them to a squat, no one will vote [left] in that area (union representative, SICET Turin).

These excerpts summarize a number of ideas that are quite widespread among our interviewees, including those actors that loosely pertain to the centre-left of the political spectrum, like the tenants' union representative and the councilwoman.<sup>11</sup> The criminalizing argument and the representation of squatting as a war of the poor against the poor, work as a barrier to the dialogue between institutional actors on the one hand, and squatters and the movements that support them politically on the other.

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<sup>10</sup> Literally *in modo organizzato*. The interviewee is referring to organized squats and maybe even alluding to the possibility that some squatters may have received support from organized crime (*criminalità organizzata*).

<sup>11</sup> The councilwoman pertains to M5S, but see next section for a discussion of the socio-political composition of the city council.



The tenants' union representative interviewed also bridged housing with ethnic/racial cleavages, fields that are deeply intertwined: on the one hand, as we have seen, housing hardships are particularly intense in migrant and racialized households; and, on the other, recent migrants and asylum seekers have been protagonists of most squats, therefore of housing politics at large. This intersection has influenced the patterns of politicization. In Turin, an excellent example is the clearing of Ex MOI, which did take the national stage, either because it was considered a best-practice example of integration (e.g. Camilli 2019) or because it was criticized as a paternalistic, even violent, intervention (e.g. Migliaccio 2019) – in any case, not represented as an issue pertaining to the field of housing. A similar framing is typical of media discussions about squatting in public housing. A recent article in the local section of *La Repubblica* (Cravero 2020) is emblematic. The title stated: 'Public housing: illegal squats doubled in 2019'. Inside, the article quoted a right-wing member of the Regional Parliament: 'all illegal squats are wrong – explains the party whip of FdI [Fratelli d'Italia] – but those made by Roma people bring with them unacceptable decay [*degrade*] and unbearable living conditions' (apud Cravero 2020, 10).

A unique, to the best of our knowledge, case of cooperation among conflictual and institutional actors is Le Salette, another space squatted in 2014 by some 90 migrants that had left the Ex MOI. The actors involved were the squatters, further activists from one of the *centri sociali* with whom we interacted, non-profit organizations (Architects without Borders Turin and Co-op L'Orso), social entrepreneurs (I Luoghi Possibili) and the local diocese, owner of the building, which granted a gratuitous commodate, allowing the creation of a collective transitory residence (see Cottino et al. 2019; Ferrero 2020). The local government and public administration have been completely absent from the process, as emphasized by the architects we interviewed from I Luoghi Possibili and Architects without Borders Turin. Interestingly, for a case study of legalization of a squat and a successful housing initiative that put together such different actors, Le Salette never made it to the local or national press.<sup>12</sup>

### 5.3 Party politics: 'populist' Movimento 5 Stelle?

At the time of our fieldwork the city of Turin had been governed for three years by a mayor, Chiara Appendino, and a majority from M5S, whose election campaign had been based on the critique of the local centre-left. However, once elected, the new majority did not bring about the radical changes it had promised,

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<sup>12</sup> We searched for news on the online search engines of the local and national editions of *La Stampa* and *La Repubblica*, with no success.

as particularly evident in the field of housing. Despite having won the elections thanks to the peripheral neighbourhoods, not much changed, as explicitly argued by both a member of the local government and a civil officer:

My idea is that, [in policy] like in the kitchen, whatever works should not be trashed [*non si butta via niente*]. You keep it, you give it value and you insist on whatever is working (councilwoman, City of Turin).

The first thing that [the new councillor for Social Policies] said when she met me was: ‘let’s be clear: you keep doing exactly what you’ve been doing so far, until the day I may decide we need to make some changes.’ [She told me] this because, in those days, the papers had sensationalist titles along the lines of: ‘the new council will throw out [*manderà nel cesso*] everything done by the *fouls* [*mattanzoni*] that were governing before!’ The political input I received was just that: the city has been following a policy acknowledged to be among the best in Europe, so we take all the time and pay all the attention we need [to decide] whether we may want to change something (head of department, City of Turin).

As explicitly stated by one of its representatives, in short, the new local government bought into the idea that existing housing policies were effective in addressing the most pressing problems. When pushed to admit that, this effectiveness notwithstanding, existing measures are insufficient to meet the wider scale of housing problems and that there is not a city-wide debate on this issue, another councilman we interviewed thus answered:

*Interviewer: You were appointed, though with your independence, by an M5S majority, a party that won with the crucial votes of peripheral neighbourhoods: how do you see the absence of housing in the political debate, both at the national and local level?*

With a lot of sadness and contradiction, it’s exactly as you just explained it. Still, if you consider the problem – that is, we came to power in a city with a debt of more than 2,700 million euros, which means 250 million euros of instalments in our yearly budget – and compare it with the resources available for housing, the conclusion is quite obvious (councilman, City of Turin).

Two dimensions help make sense of the use of arguments on continuity with the past and fiscal responsibility by members of a ‘populist’ local government: the progressive institutionalization of M5S once it grabbed power (Biancalana 2017); and the peculiar socio-political composition of the city council appointed by mayor Appendino, which is not made up of party cadres but of ‘independents’ picked from the same local elites that the local centre-left come from.<sup>13</sup> The mayor previously worked in finance, for some years for Juventus football club, owned by the historical proprietors of FIAT; the two council members we interviewed are a known professional close to the left bourgeoisie and an expert in social policies that had been working for some of the most important foundations in the city.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

This article set out to explore the reasons that kept Italy apart from the recent trajectory of the politicization of housing in Southern Europe. We focused on the case of Turin, a city paradigmatic of the coexistence of housing problems and activism, and at the same time critical for testing the capacity of housing policy to stem social conflict. We have discussed three themes that emerged from our fieldwork as the possible reasons why the politicization of housing remained limited to conflictual actors and practices. In line with our goal, we will now reconsider our findings *vis-à-vis* the trajectories of other Southern European countries, at the same time as we discuss the extent to which the case of Turin may be generalized on the Italian scale. Importantly, because of the exploratory nature of our study and of the limits of the case of Turin for generalization, the following arguments are preliminary explanations that need to be further tested, including taking a look at other case studies. For instance, further research should query the different relative ‘weight’ that the three arguments would have in different cases.

We started, first, with housing policies. In general, we should remember that, residual as it is, the Italian social housing stock (~5% of the total) is substantially bigger than the ones in Portugal (~2%), Spain (~2%) and Greece (0%) (Goudis 2015). And yet, we have also seen that public housing is insufficient to deal with the overall scale of housing problems in Turin and throughout Italy. In Turin, housing policies address effectively, if temporarily, those problems (in particular, households on the verge of losing their shelter) that

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<sup>13</sup> In Italian municipalities, the mayor, directly elected, appoints the executive city council (*giunta comunale*), which has large autonomy from the elected city assembly (*consiglio comunale*). Different is the composition of M5S in the assembly, where most members are party activists involved in the aforementioned No TAV movement (Biancalana 2017). In fact, several conflicts happened among the executive and its majority.

have been central engines of the creation of social conflict in other countries, with more evidence in Spain, where a wave of repossessions during the economic crisis gave birth to the crucial actor PAH. In fact, nothing similar to the network of policies we observed in Turin exists in Portugal, Spain or Greece. Back in Italy, however, let us remind that this complex housing policy is a peculiarity of Turin – because of the presence of civil officers capable of coordinating the scarcely available public funds and a rich network of non-profit actors – and few other (Northern and Central) cities (e.g. Milan: see Bricocoli and Coppola 2013). This suggests that the following two themes – contentious and party politics – could be more relevant in other Italian cities with less structured housing policies.

We have seen, second, that activists in Turin have not been interested in, or capable of, building up large mobilizations or coalitions with institutional actors – which, from their point of view, reject conflictual practices and are not interested in building these bridges. This is an evident difference when compared with other Southern European countries: in Spain and Greece, social movements have engaged in forms of dialogue and confrontation with newly emerged left-wing parties that ultimately reached power (de Weerd and Garcia 2016; Karaliotas 2019); in Portugal, social movements developed a mix of strategies – both confrontational and dialogic – to influence the centre-left majority in charge since 2015 (Tulumello 2019). Social movements, in Turin and Italy alike, did succeed in scaling up the topic of housing – and, in the exceptional case of Le Salette, in cooperating with institutional actors – where existing policies have almost completely failed (e.g. Camilli 2017; Ferrero 2020), that is, in meeting the housing needs of recent migrants and asylum seekers, and when the latter have been involved in, or have led, the struggle as activists and squatters. And yet, this scaling up happened at a cost: throughout Italy, only when it was framed as a matter of immigration, an extremely hot political topic (see, e.g., Colombo 2018), did housing take the centre of the political agenda (e.g. Camilli 2017; Annunziata 2020). This form of politicization is a double-edged sword: it gives visibility to housing needs in the mainstream political arena, but at the cost that those needs are not perceived as matters of housing policy, but are rather understood as matters of immigration – which, recently, has itself been above all understood as a matter of security (see Tulumello 2017, 31-33; Sigona 2018; Annunziata 2020). Inevitably then, policy solutions have been drawn from the repertoire of either public order (e.g., squat clearing), or humanitarianism and inclusion (e.g. cultural mediation, training; cf. Camilli 2019). In other words, not only does the discursive shift toward the field of migrations imply that, when politicized, housing has often been appropriated by right-wing agendas; but this politicization has failed to build up pressure for, and popular support to, prioritizing housing policy.

Finally, third, we discussed the role of party politics, in particular of the ‘populist’ M5S that has been in power in Turin for the last five years. Turin’s M5S government may have played a role in stemming social conflict by, firstly, providing a political offer for the electorate that could have been more prone to contentious politics; and, then, keeping business as usual, through a double discursive shift: the admission of the effectiveness of existing policies in dealing with most pressing problems and arguments on fiscal responsibility. This is also explained by the fact that the city council was largely made up of local elites,

many of whom had been close to the previously ruling centre-left. In summary, in Turin, a political force that was born out of resentment with established politics ended up constituting a force of continuity, at the very least in the field of housing. Our findings do not allow us to straightforwardly expand this reasoning to the national level, where M5S has governed since 2019, being a powerful actor at the very least since 2013 (when it was the second most voted party). Indeed, M5S has undergone a similar process at the national level: a party born of explicit aversion to traditional politics, M5S has, between 2019 and 2021, participated in three governmental coalitions with all parties, from the centre-left to the far-right. Our findings therefore resonate with, and provide some empirical substance to, the suggestion, by writers' collective Wu Ming (2013), that M5S may have occupied the political space left open by the 'third way' transformation of the Italian left, where conflictual coalitions may have emerged in post-crisis Italy. Granted, this discussion should be complemented by a more in-depth investigation of the role of the centre-left, in Turin and at the national level; and yet it suggests questioning the analytical power of the 'populist' label, which, if anything, does not help to explain the role of M5S in stemming social conflict in Turin in the field of housing. At any rate, our findings show yet another important difference with other Southern European countries. In Portugal, up until 2019, when right-wing 'populist' party Chega elected a representative for the first time, the only news in party politics has been the entrance of traditional left-wing parties (Bloco de Esquerda and Partido Comunista Português) into a coalition with centre-left Partido Socialista – indeed, the left-wing parties were crucial in pushing the national government toward launching new housing policies. In Spain and Greece, as we have seen, parties defined as 'populist' in mainstream political science (Podemos and Syriza) have reached power, but they are explicitly left-wing parties and have embraced the housing agenda; while right-wing 'populist' parties (Vox and Χρυσή Αυγή – Golden Dawn) have not reached power – and the latter was criminalized in 2020.

In conclusion, our main goal was to open some pathways towards an explanation of the dynamics through which housing has been differently (re-)politicized in Southern Europe, by focusing on its absent politicization in Italy – an absence that becomes particularly explicit when housing is reframed through other lenses (migration, security...) and ultimately marginalized. Our three arguments are still exploratory and call for further comparative research within Southern Europe, whose internal differences, long neglected by urban theory, can offer fresh material to build more global and context-attentive urban, housing and political studies. In line with our secondary goal, this discussion has also contributed to further deconstructing the tendency, in comparative housing studies, to set Southern European countries apart from the rest of Europe, and put them within a unique 'box' regarding their housing and welfare dynamics/paradigms (Allen et al. 2004; Tulumello et al. 2018; Arbaci 2019). Our findings contribute to this endeavour in two ways. On the one hand, they show that complex articulations among political, social and institutional conditions at multiple levels (local, national, supra-national) are at the core of extant dynamics of politicization of housing. And, on the other, they suggest the importance of linking housing studies – which have traditionally been overly interested in institutional and policy dimensions (see Vilenica et al. 2019) – with empirical

explorations of contentious urban politics, as the latter, in turn, are crucial to explaining changing housing policies.

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