

# **THE ‘RIGHT TO THE CITY’ IN THE POST-WELFARE METROPOLIS.**

**COMMUNITY BUILDING, AUTONOMOUS INFRASTRUCTURES  
AND URBAN COMMONS IN ROME’S SELF-ORGANISED  
HOUSING SQUATS**

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BY

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# **The 'right to the city' in the post-welfare metropolis. Community building, autonomous infrastructures and urban commons in Rome's self-organised housing squats.**

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## *Abstract*

In the city of Rome, the housing crisis has reached emergency proportions as part of an interrelated and ongoing crisis of social reproduction intrinsic to the process of neoliberal restructuring in the prolonged aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. Part of this crisis are the estimated that 10,000 people are currently living inside more than 100 previously empty buildings, of both private and public ownership, that have been occupied and self-renovated by the squatters as an autonomous response towards their condition of severe housing deprivation.

These numbers present a continuum with the connotation of Rome as a self-made city in which Housing Rights Movements have historically represented a catalyser for thriving urban struggles. This thesis contends that nowadays housing squats represent spaces where the 'right to the city' is re-appropriated through the autonomous regeneration of unused urban ecologies, the commoning of social reproduction, and the crafting of urban commons. It aims at contributing to the field of studies of Critical Organisation Studies, Urban Studies and Urban Geography concerned with urban squatting and the organisational forms adopted by grassroots urban movements within the current phase of post-crisis, post-welfare neoliberal restructuring.

The analysis is structured around the interviews, fieldnotes and visual materials collected during a one-year long activist-ethnography carried out inside two housing squats affiliated with the Movement Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz. Chapter 1 contextualises squatting for housing purposes within a broader crisis of social reproduction in relation to the notion of 'right to the city'. Chapter 2 describes the epistemological, methodological and ethical challenges intrinsic to the chosen activist-ethnographic approach for its subjective orientation and scope. Chapter 3 contextualises the historical, geographical and legislative framework pertaining squatting within which the Movements operate. Chapter 4 describes the social composition of the squatters and the initial process of community-building. Chapter 5 recounts the making of the squats into autonomous infrastructures where producing manifold urban commons. Chapter 6 discusses the different strategies of local activism and networking implemented by the squatters. Chapter 7 narrates the role of squatters as part of the Housing Rights Movements for contending 'right to the city', problematising it in relation to the forms of activism and organisation they configure.

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*“Prima di sgomberarci sgomberatevi il cervello/noi siamo la comunita’ toglietevi il cappello!”*  
*Daje Roma Meticcia! #stopsgomberi #oralecase*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |               |
|---|---------------|
| <b>ABSTRACT.....</b>  | <b>1</b>      |
| <b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>  | <b>2</b>      |
| <b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>   | <b>6</b>      |
| <br><b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>  | <br><b>8</b>  |
| CHAPTERS' OUTLINE.....  | 12            |
| <br><b>CHAPTER 1. A THEORY ABOUT THE REPRODUCTION OF HOUSING SQUATS IN THE</b>    |               |
| <b>NEOLIBERAL CITY.....</b>   | <b>16</b>     |
| FOREWORD: THE CITY, A PROJECTION OF NEOLIBERAL VS. AUTONOMOUS                     |               |
| SOCIETY ON THE GROUND.....  | 16            |
| NEOLIBERAL URBANISATION: RESTRUCTURING AND DISPOSSESSING                          |               |
| THE COMMONS.....  | 19            |
| PRIVATISING HOUSING, INDIVIDUALISING (AND INDEBTING) SOCIAL                       |               |
| REPRODUCTION.....   | 20            |
| GRASSROOTS URBAN MOVEMENTS: INVENTING A NEW MODEL OF SOCIAL                       |               |
| REPRODUCTION.....   | 22            |
| RE-APPROPRIATING AND COMMONING THE 'RIGHT TO THE CITY'.....                       | 25            |
| THE CLASSICAL CITY IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE CITY!.....                              | 29            |
| HOUSING SQUATTERS: EMBODYING LEFEBVRE'S <i>CITAD/INS</i> .....                    | 31            |
| WHY WE NEED THE DEFINITION 'HOUSING SQUATS'.....                                  | 33            |
| PRUJIT'S CONFIGURATION OF URBAN SQUATTING.....                                    | 36            |
| THE ITALIAN WAY OF SQUATTING: BEYOND THE EMPHASIS ON SOCIAL CENTRES.....          | 39            |
| CONCLUSIONS: THE 'SOCIALLY DANGEROUS' URBAN COMMONS.....                          | 43            |
| <br><b>CHAPTER 2. THE ACTIVIST ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD INSIDE HOUSING SQUATS.....</b> | <br><b>46</b> |
| WHAT IS ACTIVIST ETHNOGRAPHY?.....  | 46            |
| IMMANENT RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR AN ENGAGED RESEARCH DESIGN.....                   | 48            |
| NEGOTIATING THE FIELDWORK .....   | 50            |
| COLLECTIVE CONSENT COMES FIRST.....   | 52            |
| WALKING, PHOTOGRAPHING AND WRITING: GET TO KNOW YOUR LOCAL SQUAT!.....            | 56            |
| TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT: THE BURDEN OF FORMAL CONSENT AND TAPE RECORDERS.....         | 59            |
| THE CONTRADICTION POLITICS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING.....                           | 61            |
| THE COLLECTIVE IMPACT OF REPRESENTATION AND DISSEMINATION.....                    | 65            |
| A RESEARCH INSIDE ABOUT, INSIDE, FOR SQUATTING.....                               | 67            |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>CHAPTER 3. SITUATING THE HOUSING SQUATS WITHIN THE SELF-MADE CITY.....</b>   | <b>70</b>  |
| THE CONTESTED GOVERNANCE OF THE SELF-MADE CITY.....                             | 70         |
| BLOCCHI PRECARI METROPOLITANI: THE PRECARIOUS METROPOLITAN BLOCK                |            |
| AGAINST THE SOCIAL REPRODUCTION CRISIS.....                                     | 73         |
| METROPOLIZ AND TOR SAPIENZA: THE TWO FLIPS OF THE SAME COIN.....                | 77         |
| TIBURTINA 770 AND THE <i>BORGATE</i> PIETRALATA/TIBURTINO III: A HISTORY OF     |            |
| STRUGGLES FOR HOUSING RIGHTS.....   | 82         |
| INSTITUTIONALISING THE SQUATTED CITY: THE REGIONAL DELIBERATION OVER            |            |
| THE HOUSING EMERGENCY.....  | 87         |
| THE ARTICLE 5: EXCLUDING THE SQUATTERS' FROM THE LOCAL WELFARE.....             | 89         |
| SOCIALLY DANGEROUS, ORALLY WARNED, PARTICULARLY UNDER SPECIAL                   |            |
| SURVEILLANCE.....   | 93         |
| THE CONFLICT ABOUT THE REPRODUCTION OF THE METROPOLITAN BLOCK.....              | 96         |
| <br><b>CHAPTER 4. BUILDING THE SQUATTERS' COMMUNITY. BEFORE THE EXCEPTIONAL</b> |            |
| <b>MOMENT OF CRACKING.....</b>  | <b>99</b>  |
| FOREWORD: FIRST IMPRESSIONS.....  | 99         |
| WHO ARE YOU? WHY DID YOU COME HERE?.....  | 105        |
| BEFORE SQUATTING: THE (FUTURE) COMMUNITY OF THE DISPOSSESSED.....               | 110        |
| MIGRANTS' MOBILE COMMONS.....   | 112        |
| SQUATTING AS WITHDRAWING FROM THE BUSINESS OF FORCIBLE HOUSING.....             | 116        |
| THE ITALIAN WAY OF (GOING BACK TO) SQUATTING.....                               | 121        |
| BECOM(MON)ING COMMUNITY IN THE MOMENT OF CRACKING.....                          | 126        |
| FROM EXCEPTIONALITY TO ROUTINISATION.....                                       | 130        |
| <br><b>CHAPTER 5. FOR A RADICAL THEORY OF EURYTHMISATION AND AUTONOMOUS</b>     |            |
| <b>INFRASTRUCTURES.....</b>   | <b>133</b> |
| FROM THE SPATIALISED TEMPORALITY OF EXCEPTIONALITY TO EVERYDAYNESS.....         | 133        |
| HOUSING SQUATS AS AUTONOMOUS INFRASTRUCTURES.....                               | 135        |
| 'TUTTI SUL TETTO': THE BARRICADE AS A SPACE OF ENCOUNTER.....                   | 137        |
| THE ASSEMBLY AS THE SITE OF CONSENSUS, COMMUNITY-BASED DECISION                 |            |
| MAKING.....   | 141        |
| FROM DECIDING TO MAKING: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY (AND CARE).....                  | 146        |
| THE SQUATTERS AS MAKERS OF COMMUNITY AND SPACE.....                             | 148        |
| COMMONING THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE AND DEATH INSIDE THE SQUATS.....               | 152        |
| THE SQUAT EFFECT AND THE SPATIALITY OF THE GAZE.....                            | 157        |
| OPENING UP THE ORGANISATIONAL RITES TO URBAN COMMONS AND AUTONOMOUS             |            |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| GEOGRAPHIES.....   | 162        |
| <br><b>CHAPTER 6. HOUSING SQUATS AND THE REDEFINITION OF THE URBAN INSIDE</b>  |            |
| <b>THE BORGATE.....</b>  | <b>165</b> |
| THE SQUATS AS URBAN COMMONS <i>DE BORGATA</i> .....                            | 165        |
| <i>DEGRADO</i> AND CLASS WAR IN TOR SAPIENZA: 'WHO IS TO BLAME?'.....          | 169        |
| METROPOLIZ AND BPM VIS-À-VIS THE RAGE OF THE PERIPHERIES.....                  | 171        |
| FROM SPACE METROPOLIZ TO THE MAAM: THE BARRICADE OF ART TO THE                 |            |
| MESTIZO CITY.....  | 173        |
| AGAINST CULTURAL CLASH, HIPSTERISATION, COMMODIFICATION.....                   | 177        |
| THE MEDITERRANEO ANTIRAZZISTA: "THE CITY BELONGS TO THOSE WHO PLAY IT"...      | 180        |
| THE BAR DEL FORTE, PIETRALATA AND TIBURTINO III: AN IDENTITY LOST              |            |
| BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT.....  | 184        |
| CREATING THE NODO TERRITORIALE TIBURTINA. THE CASE OF THE RUFFO                |            |
| BARRACKS.....  | 187        |
| THE PONTE MAMMOLO EVICTION.....  | 192        |
| A 'LOCAL' OR AN 'URBAN' ISSUE?.....  | 195        |
| THE PROBLEMATIC SCALES OF THE SQUATS' URBAN COMMONS.....                       | 199        |
| <br><b>CHAPTER 7. THE SQUATTERS' ACTIVISM FOR THE 'RIGHT TO THE CITY'.....</b> |            |
| THE SQUATTERS AS POLITICAL ACTORS IN ROME.....                                 | 202        |
| A DIARY OF PERMANENT MOBILISATION.....   | 207        |
| MOVEMENTS INSIDE A CITY IN MOTION.....   | 212        |
| THE CONTRADICTORY GOVERNMENT OF SQUATTING AFTER THE <i>TSUNAMI TOURS</i> ....  | 214        |
| ACTIVISTS AS SUBSIDISERS OF GRASSROOTS URBAN WELFARE.....                      | 217        |
| SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ACTIVISTS: A PROBLEMATIC DISTINCTION.....                 | 221        |
| 'WE ARE ALL SOCIALLY DANGEROUS!'.....  | 224        |
| RETHINKING POLITICAL ORGANISATION, RESCALING THE 'RIGHT TO THE CITY'.....      | 229        |
| <br><b>(OPEN) CONCLUSIONS. FOR FUTURE ACTIVIST RESEARCH ABOUT THE</b>          |            |
| <b>SQUATTED CITY.....</b>  | <b>234</b> |
| STRUCTURING A NEW ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK.....                                    | 234        |
| THE REAL ISSUE AT STAKE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR HOUSING RIGHTS.....                | 236        |
| THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THE SELF-MADE, SQUATTED CITY.....                        | 237        |
| 'RIGHT TO THE CITY', EMPTY SPACES AND URBAN COMMONS.....                       | 239        |
| THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ACTIVIST-RESEARCH JOURNEY.....                          | 242        |
| <br><b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>   | <b>247</b> |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|                    |  |        |
|--------------------|--|--------|
| <b>Figure 3.1</b>  | Map showing the location of Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz<br>(Credits to Maria Di Maggio, architect and BPM activist) | p. 71  |
| <b>Figure 3.2</b>  | Metropoliz ethical city  | p. 73  |
| <b>Figure 3.3</b>  | Map V Municipality   | p. 78  |
| <b>Figure 3.4</b>  | Map of IV Municipality   | p. 83  |
| <b>Figure 3.5</b>  | Housing Rights Movements Manifesto for the Regional<br>Deliberation  | p. 88  |
| <b>Figure 3.6</b>  | Logo campaign “Freedom of Movement,<br>Freedom of dissent”   | p. 95  |
| <b>Figure 4.7</b>  | Metropoliz building  | p. 99  |
| <b>Figure 4.8</b>  | The Malala Graffiti on Metropoliz facade   | p. 100 |
| <b>Figure 4.9</b>  | The Venus of Rugs by Michelangelo Pistoletto   | p. 101 |
| <b>Figure 4.10</b> | Atac placard in Tiburtina 770  | p. 102 |
| <b>Figure 4.11</b> | The Not Here yellow cross  | p. 103 |
| <b>Figure 4.12</b> | Front door Tiburtina 770   | p. 104 |
| <b>Figure 4.13</b> | My first accommodation at 770  | p. 106 |
| <b>Figure 4.14</b> | Bedroom in Tiburtina 770   | p. 108 |
| <b>Figure 4.15</b> | The Ecuadorean gauguas de pan  | p. 115 |
| <b>Figure 4.16</b> | Kitchen of a Roma family   | p. 118 |
| <b>Figure 4.17</b> | Kids with camping tents in Tiburtina 770   | p. 126 |
| <b>Figure 4.18</b> | The game room in Metropoliz  | p. 130 |
| <b>Figure 5.19</b> | Barricade of tiers in front of Tiburtina 770   | p. 137 |
| <b>Figure 5.20</b> | Placard-making laboratory with kids at Tiburtina 770   | p. 141 |
| <b>Figure 5.21</b> | The assembly room of Metropoliz  | p. 143 |
| <b>Figure 5.22</b> | General cleaning day in Tiburtina 770  | p. 148 |
| <b>Figure 5.23</b> | An original slaughterhouse’s fuse in a Metropoliz’s house  | p. 149 |
| <b>Figure 5.24</b> | The living room of my house in Tiburtina 770   | p. 151 |
| <b>Figure 5.25</b> | Habesha coffee at Tiburtina 770  | p. 154 |
| <b>Figure 5.26</b> | The poster of the Gran Pollada in Metropoliz   | p. 156 |
| <b>Figure 5.27</b> | Kid playing in Metropoliz’s assembly room  | p. 158 |
| <b>Figure 5.28</b> | The empty garden of Tiburtina 770  | p. 161 |
| <b>Figure 6.29</b> | Opening day of Metropoliz’s museum (MAAM)  | p. 165 |
| <b>Figure 6.30</b> | Tiburtina 770 and Tiburtino III inhabitants in front of the local<br>church during a local anti-racist rally         | p. 167 |
| <b>Figure 6.31</b> | Poster by Blocchi Precari Metropolitani for a local assembly<br>in Tor Sapienza                                      | p. 169 |
| <b>Figure 6.32</b> | The Space Metropoliz rocket in Metropoliz  | p. 173 |
| <b>Figure 6.33</b> | Birthday cake for Metropoliz’s squatting anniversary   | p. 175 |
| <b>Figure 6.34</b> | Visitors in the corridor of the MAAM   | p. 177 |
| <b>Figure 6.35</b> | Sit-in in front of Rome’s penal court for the Salini vs.<br>Metropoliz’s trial’s first hearing                       | p. 179 |
| <b>Figure 6.36</b> | The football field of Metropoliz   | p. 181 |
| <b>Figure 6.37</b> | Celebrations during the Mediterraneo Antirazzista football<br>tournament   | p. 182 |
| <b>Figure 6.38</b> | The bar del Forte in front of Tiburtina 770  | p. 184 |

|                    |  |               |
|--------------------|--|---------------|
| <b>Figure 6.39</b> | The demonstration “Accogliamo ma guarda come stiamo!”  | <i>p. 187</i> |
| <b>Figure 6.40</b> | First public assembly of the Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina at the Pietralata tube station (1 <sup>st</sup> March 2015)                   | <i>p. 189</i> |
| <b>Figure 6.41</b> | Annual memorial rally for Fabrizio Ceruso (6 <sup>th</sup> September 2016)   | <i>p. 191</i> |
| <b>Figure 6.42</b> | Bulldozers demolishing the Ponte Mammolo shantytown (11 <sup>th</sup> May 2015)  | <i>p. 192</i> |
| <b>Figure 6.43</b> | Policemen preventing the former inhabitants and demonstrators to access the Ponte Mammolo shantytown                                   | <i>p. 195</i> |
| <b>Figure 6.44</b> | Demonstration of the Ponte Mammolo shantytown’s evictees in front of the IV Municipality offices (13 <sup>th</sup> May 2015)           | <i>p. 196</i> |
| <b>Figure 6.45</b> | Visitors and kids inside Metropoliz  | <i>p. 199</i> |
| <b>Figure 6.46</b> | Football game between refugees and inhabitants of Tiburtino III  | <i>p. 201</i> |
| <b>Figure 7.47</b> | The squatted Central Registration Office (25 <sup>th</sup> January 2015)   | <i>p.202</i>  |
| <b>Figure 7.48</b> | Protest camp in front of the Minister of Infrastructures (28 March 2017)   | <i>p. 204</i> |
| <b>Figure 7.49</b> | Demonstration in the city centre against the Mafia Capitale mob scandal (31 <sup>st</sup> January 2017)                                | <i>p.206</i>  |
| <b>Figure 7.50</b> | The flash mob inside the Lazio Region headquarters (10 <sup>th</sup> February 2015)  | <i>p. 207</i> |
| <b>Figure 7.51</b> | Banner on the rooftop of the Basilica Madonna di Loreto (23 <sup>rd</sup> April 2015)  | <i>p.208</i>  |
| <b>Figure 7.52</b> | The squatted Hotel Gemini at the Tiburtina station (18 <sup>th</sup> July 2015)  | <i>p. 209</i> |
| <b>Figure 7.53</b> | Squatters on the roof of the Colle Monfortani building (8 <sup>th</sup> December 2015)   | <i>p. 211</i> |
| <b>Figure 7.54</b> | Camping tents in front of the squatted Acqua Marcia building at Garbatella   | <i>p. 216</i> |
| <b>Figure 7.55</b> | The #kidzbloc demonstration (16 <sup>th</sup> October 2015)  | <i>p. 218</i> |
| <b>Figure 7.56</b> | BPM’s squatters public general assembly at Tiburtina 770 (15 <sup>th</sup> September 2015)   | <i>p.221</i>  |
| <b>Figure 7.57</b> | ‘Siamo tutti socialmente pericolosi!’ banner in front of the Piazzale Clodio penal court (14 <sup>th</sup> July 2016)                  | <i>p. 224</i> |
| <b>Figure 7.58</b> | The red book of special surveillances  | <i>p.227</i>  |
| <b>Figure 7.59</b> | Demonstration of Housing Rights Movements’ in Porta Pia (22 <sup>nd</sup> July 2015)   | <i>p. 230</i> |
| <b>Figure 7.60</b> | Sit-in in solidarity with the private market evictees (30 <sup>th</sup> June 2015)   | <i>p. 232</i> |
| <b>Figure 7.61</b> | Head of the demonstration in Piazza della Repubblica against the Mafia Capitale scandal (18 <sup>th</sup> June 2015)                   | <i>p. 233</i> |
| <b>Figure 62</b>   | The protest camp inside the Basilica SS. Apostoli after the eviction of the squat in via Quintavalle 88 (17 <sup>th</sup> August 2017) | <i>p. 242</i> |
| <b>Figure 63</b>   | Refugees protesting after the eviction of the housing squat of via Curtatone/Piazza Indipendenza (23 <sup>rd</sup> August 2017)        | <i>p. 246</i> |



## INTRODUCTION

The study of geography as the scrutiny of artificially discrete spatial entities has been considered for a long time as 'exact science'. Otherwise said, spatial investigations were inscribed in the realm of quantitative analysis, since they were supposed to measure and systematise the finitude, hence the definiteness, of space in its global as well as localised scales. Nevertheless, a burgeoning trend within Human Geography, and Urban Studies in particular, have contributed to fundamentally challenge the assumption of rationality underpinning spatial sciences by analysing extensively how spatial boundaries are inherently porous, mobile, and constantly subjected to conflicted processes of transformation and redefinition. The city has been one of the paramount sites for observing this phenomenon, whereby the contested governance of settlements and inhabitancy (squatting included) represents one of the main 'battlefields' around which this conflict is structured. This is to say that housing is central to the definition and mapping of 'cityness' and its correspondent geographies. Furthermore, the prevailing forms of housing, as well as the correspondent patterns of homeless, represent nowadays the possibly more visible reifications in global cityscapes of the dramatic consequences of the nowadays decennial financial crisis begun in 2008.

On the one hand, the protrusive sight of urban emptiness is the more tangible manifestation of the escalating patterns of social and spatial marginalisation characterising the everyday life experience of a growing number of urban inhabitants who endure the consequence of widespread austerity, indebtedness and impoverishment. On the other hand, these urban voids epitomise spaces of possibility where articulating the incessant, yet often concealed conflict pertaining the subjects entitled to appropriating, reorganising and ultimately re-using the urban space. Indeed, whenever these spaces are squatted, put in common and subtracted to financial speculation, they do not only inscribe in the city points of recuperation, but relational nodes of new geographies and alternative forms of urban citizenship (Marchini and Sotgia, 2017). In the light of these considerations, this thesis represents an effort to narrate this grassroots formation of the city from the standpoint of those spaces squatted for housing purposes (or, as I define them in this dissertation, *housing squats*) that are located in the Italian capital city of Rome. The latter represent a peculiar case within studies concerned with urban development (see Insolera, 1962; Villani, 2012) and even urban forms of squatting (i.e.

Squatting Europe Kollektive, 2014; Vasudevan, 2017) since its development and cartography have been historically shaped by the conflictual dialectic between autonomous forms of settlements and institutional attempts of co-optation and governance.

The dissertation starts from the belief that, contrariwise to what the celebre architect and urban development' historian Italo Insolera (1962) argued in a paramount anthology about the urbanistic history of Rome, this metropolis is not only inherently modern, even though its urban development has been uneven, unmanaged, and often uncontrolled. It actually represents a paradigm for urban contemporariness, whereby the conflict revolving around the right to inhabiting and governing the commons of its saturated urban commons represent a global scale challenge involving both governmental entities and grassroots urban movements. Besides, what makes the case of Rome distinctive is precisely the historical function played by squatting and informal settlement in defining the cartography of the 'official' city, alongside the unprecedented proportions that the housing crisis has reached in Rome in the years following the 2008 crisis. Indeed, according to the more recent available data, the waiting list for public housing has reached the unprecedented number of 10,000 applicants, whilst another 13,000 are waiting for the confirmation that their application has been filed, which in some instances can arrive one or even two years after the submission (Capozzi, 2016; Gaita, 2017).

On top of that, the historic average allocation rate of public housing lodgings in Rome is of 300 per year; yet, in 2015, only 60 have been made available for the suitable assignees of the 2013 list (Unione Inquilini Roma, 2015). This means that, with the average rate of allocation, it would take more than 33 years to empty the existing lists, whilst with the 2015 figures it would take about 165 years. And this number would exclude the people who are currently waiting, as well as the possibility of future applicants. Yet, in a city like Rome, this is a quite unrealistic scenario. Indeed, while 10,000 families are currently waiting for a house, every year since 2014, an equal (or even larger) number of families has been subject to the procedure of executive forcible eviction; one inhabitant in every 272 in Rome nowadays is bound to be evicted. In 90% of cases, this is due to so-called 'inculpable arrearage' (in Italian *morosità incolpevole*), that is the occurring inability to pay rent instalments due to lack of sufficient income (Gaita, 2017). 10,000 is also the number of 'historically' squatted public housing apartments in Rome that have not yet been regularised despite four amnesties since 1999; and the number is quite likely underestimated, considering that another 1300 are squatted

every year by individuals and families, even with the aid of organised crime associations, defined in the Italian vulgate as “racket” (Puccini, 2016, p.99-103).

These figures are even more relevant in the light of two intertwined aspects. On the one hand, the austerity and emergency-oriented management of the housing crisis have further curtailed the possibility of accessing to welfare-based forms of social housing, thus making the privatised market the primary provider of inhabitancy accommodations in Rome (Puccini, 2016; Gaia, 2017). At the same time, the impossibility of supporting themselves within the marketised housing circuits of rents and mortgages pertains nowadays social sectors that used to belong to the middle, working class. These working-poor, precarised urban inhabitants are indeed experiencing unprecedented forms of social marginalisation, and even actual poverty, that are constantly feeding the housing crisis and adding up to the numbers of those in need for social housing. This lack of correspondence between the housing demand and the existed offer reifies into Rome’s cityscape in tens of thousands empty residential blocks and apartments, that once again attach to the many industrial, once productive sites dismissed and abandoned because of the de-industrialisation first, and the 2008 crisis afterwards.

Hence, the dimensions of Rome’s housing crisis, and the wide availability of unused urban voids, provide a first explanation of the reason why an increasing number of individuals and families have decided to opt for an historically effective solution to their condition of severe housing deprivation, if not actual homelessness: squatting collectively with the political and organisational support of Housing Rights Movements. As previously introduced, squatting in different forms is certainly not a novelty in Rome, nor is the presence of Housing Rights Movements as prominent actors and propellers of social mobilisation within the urban political arena (see Squatting Europe Kollektive, 2013, 2014; Nur and Sethman, 2017). Nevertheless, the escalating magnitude of the phenomenon in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis has provided a new momentum to squatting for housing purposes, hence bringing the management of the housing emergency at the core of the mainstream political agenda in quite compelling terms. Indeed, according to most recent figures provided by the former Home Office Minister Angelino Alfano during parliamentary question time in December 2015, there are about 105 *housing squats* in Rome. In this piece of work, the definition of ‘housing squats’ covers the private or public vacant buildings, occupied and inhabited collectively by groups of individuals and families in a condition of severe housing deprivation with the political and organisational support of Housing Rights Movements.

Once again, these numbers represent an understatement for they fail to comprehend all those forms of unauthorised settlement that are less visible because of their independence, temporariness or deliberate invisibility. Nevertheless, they alone display a clear tendency towards organised squatting that constitutes an actual way of producing space and dwelling the city. And, if consolidated, it configures unprecedented maps of the city and social reproduction that need to be reckoned with, both socially and politically. Nevertheless, the political, social and even cartographic importance of self-organised housing often fades in the light of both media and academic analyses that, with either benign or derogatory intentions, tend to frame housing squats through the lenses of emergency, temporariness and marginalisation. This thesis aims at re-establishing this denied centrality by adopting the perspective of Housing Rights Movements and the squatters mobilised with them, who I consider central political and social subjectivities for contending ‘right to the city’ and access to urban commons in the prolonged aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis.

To this purpose, it engages with ethnographic forms of narration and analysis for narrating the forms of social reproduction, grassroots organising that the squatters deploy since the moment of cracking into a place and constituting themselves a community, to their consolidation as part of a broader political and social network inside the city. In order to provide the necessary depth to the analysis, the thesis focused on two particular squats affiliated with the Housing Right Movement *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani* (Metropolitan Precarious Block), *Tiburtina 770* and *Metropoliz*. Hence, it provides insight into the daily constitutions and making of these spaces of alternative inhabitancy through my double positionality of activist and researcher, confronted with the benefits, intensity, limitations and responsibility of politically committed social research. Indeed, my interest in this topic has been nurtured by my background as an activist engaged in housing rights even during the years of my Bachelor and Master degree, alongside the activism inside squatted social centres and student mobilisations.

Consequently, this thesis' contribution does not come from a supposedly neutral and objective standpoint, but from a situated political perspective. Academically-wise, this thesis engages primarily with the intersectional fields of studies interested from a situated standpoint to the function exerted by the contemporary urban squatting in the Global South, and Southern Europe in particular (see Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014; Vasudevan 2015, 2017). Besides, it intersects into the interdisciplinary debate that interrogates Critical Urban studies, Urban Geography and Critical Organisation Studies

about the current relevance of the Lefebvrian 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1991). Given its emphasis upon re-appropriation and cityness, the thesis and its theoretical framework also intervene in the ongoing debate concerned with the materiality, constitution and condition of possibility of urban commons (i.e. Harvey, 2012). Lastly, the thesis represents a contribution to the analysis of the daily workings and social reproduction of grassroots urban movements beyond the dissection of single events and timeframes. Its ambition is not only to have an impact on social sciences and academic analysis. My primary hope is to positively affect a change of direction in the generally criminalising policy-making about squatting by underlining the housing squats' double role as containers of housing emergency and vehicles of sustainable urban regeneration.

Hence, this thesis is nurtured by the rooted conviction that, as researchers dealing with socially sensitive issues, it is our responsibility to disavow the forced posture towards equidistance and objectiveness that for a long time has been a methodological requirement for attaining credibility and even ethical approval for empirically-based social sciences. Indeed, nowadays the articulations of neoliberal capitalism and urbanisation has become pervasive and biopolitically violent, from borders to our city centre, to the point of transforming neutrality in actual complicity to the side of the oppressors, to paraphrase Desmond Tutu's famous words. Besides, it is nourished by the hope of providing a sensitive contribution to the reflection about how to combine political activism, and the methodological rigour required for reliable fieldwork analysis. From this perspective, this thesis is not meant to be an uncritical apology of housing squats, nor a romanticised account of what it means to live into housing squats. Rather, it constitutes an as honest as possible critical account of the challenges faced by these communities in the light of the relevance of the housing issue for the social reproduction of a neoliberal model of governance and urbanisation. In a nutshell, his thesis aims at being a snapshot of a situated reality from which giving back to squatting for housing purposes in the city the centrality it bears for the constitution and transformation of the urban fabric.

## **Chapters' outline**

Following this analytical intent, the thesis is structured in order to provide as many elements useful to the analysis of this phenomenon in the city of Rome, starting from the

moment of ‘cracking into’ a place to the management of everyday life, ending up with the problem of how the ‘right to the city’ that the squatters articulate through their existential, organisational and political forms, vis-à-vis the constant threat of eviction, dissolution or commodification. Chapter 1 is a literature review, addressing the main ideas constituting the thesis' theoretical scaffolding. Firstly, housing as a cornerstone of neoliberal social reproduction, and therefore the housing emergency as a crisis of social reproduction within a frame of neoliberal urbanisation. Secondly, a re-appraisal of Lefebvre's notions of the ‘right to the city’ and urban citizenship (see Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]), and how it relates to the notion of the urban commons. Thirdly, why it is necessary to introduce the notion of *housing squats* to complement the existing taxonomies of urban squatting (e.g. Prujit, 2013) that fail to account for the complexity and processual nature of the forms of life and struggle deployed inside of housing squats.

Chapter 2 addresses the methodological journey I made during the yearlong fieldwork. In particular, it is mainly devoted to describing the methodology I chose, *activist ethnography* (see Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Colectivo Situaciones, 2005; Hale, 2006; Juris, 2007; Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014), in the light of the criticalities it may present in terms of positionality of the researcher, its relation with the notion of truth and participatory commitment to the field and the participants. The process of getting access to the field, the data-collection techniques used, and the broader ethical issues related to this kind of research design are discussed in relation to the specific context in which I was immersed, the squatters' social composition and the political dilemmas entrenched in the future dissemination of the project.

Chapter 3 leads up to the empirical section of the thesis by contextualising the environment in which the Movements operate, starting from the acknowledgement that Rome is a self-made city (Cellamare, 2014) in which squatting and informal settlements have been constituent part of the elaboration of housing policies, as well as of the planning of the officially mapped urban space. I start from a description of the logic underpinning the foundation of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, rooted into the political conflict immanent to neoliberal urbanisation in a post-welfare, post-crisis urban fabric. I then discuss the history of the *borgate*<sup>1</sup> where Tiburtina 770 and Metropolitani are located (respectively, Pietralata/Tiburtino III and Tor Sapienza) from the standpoint of their

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<sup>1</sup> *Borgata* is a word used especially in Rome for signalling areas with a prevalence of purpose-built public housing districts where working class and the poor were usually allocated and/or displaced (see Chapter 3 for further specifications).

historical profile, ongoing socio-political characteristics and relation to the thriving history of Housing Rights Movements. Lastly, I describe the contradictory ways in which entities involved in Rome's governance (in particular the State, Region, City Council and Municipalities) operate in order to tackle the renewed drive to squat for housing purposes. Firstly, the *Extraordinary Deliberation for Housing Emergency* issued by the Lazio Region as a way of acknowledging the Movements' motivations; then, Article 5 of the 2014 National Housing Plan, and the use of individual and extra-judicial repressive devices, as a governmental effort aimed at impairing the subjective reproduction of the squatters and the practice of squatting altogether.

The following empirical Chapters are structured according to a particular moment of the 'life' of a squat, and the specific challenges connected to existential and organisational modalities it entails. Also, they embed my personal experience as a researcher living inside a housing squat and getting involved in the everyday life of the place, drawing upon interviews, pictures, episodes and excerpts gleaned from my fieldwork diary. Chapter 4 analyses the different aspects immanent to the crisis of urban social reproduction that led the squatters in the first place to their decision to occupy, under the political tutelage of Housing Rights Movements. This is crucial in order to account for the complexity of the process of community-building stemming from the exceptional quality of the moment of 'cracking', and that is analysed through the notion of *mobile commons* (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013) and *eurythmisation* (following Lefebvre's notion of eurythmia [2004]). Chapter 5 recounts the forms of social reproduction and the organisational rites are consolidated as everydayness unfolds, as well as the making of the housing squats as autonomous infrastructures (see Larkin, 2013; Papadopoulos, 2014). This process is discussed in relation to the different spatial and subjective layers entrenched in the experience of squatting and that affect the maintenance of the squats; in particular, I focused on the tendency towards self-enclosure and relegation that I defined as the "squat effect".

Chapter 6 addresses how the squatters open up the spaces they inhabit to the production of urban commons directed to other dispossessed urban dwellers living inside the city, and how their actions redefine the scales of the urban space through their engagement in coalescing with other subjects engaged in the struggle for the 'right to the city', starting from the local level of proximity. In particular, I describe the different ways in which Tiburtina 770 and Metropolz weave networks of solidarity and make themselves recognisable in the territories where they are located. In the case of

Metropoliz, this involves transforming the squat into a self-managed museum and in a monument of autonomous urban regeneration. In the case of Tiburtina 770, it entails adopting a mimetic strategy towards the political legacy of the surrounding territory, and becoming the promoter of a local political network. In both cases, I delineate how the implications of these ways of articulating localised politics affect the broader level of the city, and how the squatters conceptualise the distinction between local and urban. In particular, I underline that these particular approaches are related to the ways in which the squatters conceive the city as the product of the autonomous geographies (see Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Vasudevan 2015a, b), stemming from their intersectionally different everyday life and experience of the urban fabric.

Chapter 7 concludes the empirical analysis by describing the squatters' action inside the city as part of the Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, and within the broader network of Housing Rights Movements *Movimento per il Diritto all'Abitare* (Movements for the Right to Habitation). In particular, I focus on the contentious politics they deploy in respect to three pivotal issues: squatting and anti-eviction campaigns; the application of the Extraordinary Deliberation for Housing Emergency; the repeal of the Article 5 of the Housing Plan. This bird's-eye view on the multi-scalar layers of mobilisation enacted by the Movements, and the production of space they design, leads to problematising the forms of social and experienced activism that are peculiar to Movements like BPM in this particular historic conjuncture during which the squatters and the activists are criminalised and sanctioned as 'socially dangerous' urban dwellers. Last but not least, these forms of activism are analysed in relation to their implications pertaining to the conundrum of political organisation and the maintenance of the Movements' legacy inside the city as for the struggle for 'right to the city'. The main reflections upon these issues, my contribution and the possibilities for further research on the subject matter are summarised within the (open) Conclusions.



## **CHAPTER 1. A theory about the reproduction of housing squats in the neoliberal city**

### **Foreword: the city, a projection of neoliberal vs. autonomous societies on the ground**

According to Lefebvre (1996, p.109), ‘the city [is] a projection of society on the ground’. It is an *oeuvre*, a creative space stemming from multifarious productive processes that are eminently political (see Lefebvre, 1991; Fourier, 2013, p.443). Therefore, the multifarious ways in which the city is inhabited are the materialisation of the relationships of power, social hierarchies and economic processes shaping social reproduction. In this thesis, the latter is understood as the immediate site for accumulation composed by ‘all the activities necessary for the reproduction of human life – from housework to subsistence agriculture, to the production of culture and care for the environment’ (Federici et al., 2012, p.55; Vishmidt and Federici, 2013). Furthermore, it is ‘a process rooted in a dynamic of power, largely functioning through a division of labor’ (Serra, 2015) embroiled in intersectional lines of subjectivation (class, race, ethnicity, gender, culture, migratory status, sexual orientation and so on). Housing, as the symbol and lexical root of household, is not only involved in social reproduction, but on the urban level becomes one of its most important articulations and points of rupture.

Starting from these premises, in this chapter I discuss the reason why the ongoing housing crisis in cities like Rome should be read first and foremost as a crisis immanent to neoliberal urbanism and social reproduction. Hence, I contend that the action of Housing Rights Movements, the creation and maintenance of housing squats, and the daily forms of social reproduction and contentious politics they deploy, starting from their intersectionally multifarious social composition, altogether prefigure a reappropriation of commons and means of reproduction (Federici, 2004; Serra, 2015). As well as this, they produce prefigurative politics from the moment of ‘cracking’ onwards, since they envision, enact and nurture autonomous forms of life that are alternative to capitalist ones by creating autonomous geographies (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Vasudevan, 2015) as spaces of possibility, establishing the conditions for their development and leaving these possibilities open (Fournier, 2002, p. 191- 3). In this thesis, the use of the notion of autonomy and autonomous geographies is embodied by these spatially and temporally situated collective projects and sets of social relations (Kokkinidis, 2015b, p.849),

combining anticapitalist theories and principles with everyday praxis (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006) in order to drive and shape 'social transformation by creating alternative material articulations and ontological struggles' (Kokkinidis, 2015a, p.429). Indeed, autonomy is a hallmark for manifold activities and multi-scalar forms of activism that, through alternative organising, counteract the effects of globalisation and capitalism by emphasizing demands for social justice, solidarity and alternative modalities of living.

Besides, autonomy here betokens those everyday activities and relational modalities that foster the creation of political, affective and solidarity bonds according to non-hierarchical, cooperative, consensus-based decision-making patterns of organisation as vital to maintaining autonomy and nurturing deliberation under conditions of plurality (Kokkinidis, 2015a, p.431). As a consequence, autonomous geographies are spaces that are 'simultaneously anti-, despite- and post- capitalist' (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010, p.475). Therefore, they are the sites where autonomy unfurls by combining resistance and creation in everyday activities through a set of local actions whose goal is to extend themselves across multiple spatial scales by disseminating and proliferating their experience, political discourse and imaginary (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Kokkinidis 2015a, 2015b). Autonomy and autonomous geographies stand for being 'part of a vocabulary of urgency, hope and inspiration' witnessing 'where we are, and a projection of where we could be' (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006, p.731) and exploring the practicalities of multiscalar influence through the exertion of resilience, pragmatism and reflexivity about situatedness, feasibility and contradiction as part of engaged action.

As such, the autonomous geographies produced by housing squats are the constitutions of alternative realities, materialising a belief in prefigurative politics (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006, p.738) and utopian visions. The latter are understood as politics of hope, risk and responsibilities that shatter the presumed inevitability of neoliberal and capitalist forces by bringing into being new forms of sociabilities, regaining the control over our daily experience of the world, and creating the conditions for keeping these possibilities open for further development (Fournier, 2002; Parker et al., 2014a, b). This way of conceiving the bond between squatting, social reproduction and urban space in relation to the squatters and Housing Rights Movements' actions is elaborated in order to reappraise the notion of 'right to the city' as the right to use of the urban space, to prioritise use value over the exchange one and, lastly, to produce urban space (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]; Fournier, 2013; Vasudevan, 2017) in the context of the post-welfare, post-crisis urban fabric.

Lastly, I contend the necessity of coining the new definition of *housing squats* for describing the re-appropriated spaces where these new forms of life flourish, since previous categorisations of squatting (e.g. Prujit, 2013) fail to account for the complexity of the forms of life and the multiple subjectivities involved in these forms of reclaiming housing rights. Indeed, whereas scholars have engaged in analysing these topics, spaces squatted for housing purposes have been rarely put under rigorous theoretical scrutiny. Indeed, they are often framed as inherently precarious compounds of marginality, since they were created out of conditions of severe material deprivation, and dismissed as such. Although necessity is a fundamental component in the creation of housing squat, it is only part of the story. Indeed, the analytical separation between ‘political’ and ‘emergency’ forms of squatting is quite artificial, given that in the context of the post-welfare city autonomous forms of common life and alternative sociabilities are both a necessity and a desire for those urban dwellers who need to cope with the economic, environmental, ecological, social consequences of the crisis of capitalism which began around 2008 (Fournier, 2013; Kokkinidis, 2015; Vasudevan 2015a, b). Housing squats epitomise the interplay of autonomy and coercion underpinning the commoning of alternative social reproduction (Linebaugh, 2008; Federici, 2010), as shown by daily organising and multi-scalar contentious politics developed by squatters and activists from the moment of ‘cracking’. This is to say that housing squats are more than deprivation-based settlements. They are an urban commons created through the regeneration of empty spaces in an highly saturated and contested urban environment, where manifold commons (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2014, p.45) are produced in the guise of alternative subjective relations with the urban space, new modes of organising reproductive work, sociabilities and non-commodified production and exchange (see Harvey, 2012; Galdini, 2015; Kokkinidis, 2015a; Huron, 2015; Di Felicianantonio, 2016; Mudu and Aureli, 2016). This awareness is also a crucial theoretical tool for grasping the logic underpinning Housing Rights Movements' contentious politics inside the urban space, as well as the governmental response framed as a backlash against ‘socially dangerous’ acts and behaviours. In order to unpack this argument, I start from analysing the role played by housing in relation to neoliberal urbanisation, and its articulations in the ongoing context of crisis.

## **Neoliberal urbanisation: restructuring and dispossessing the commons**

Neoliberalisation, as Pinson and Journal (2016) argue, is not merely an economic process. It has to be considered primarily as a process of a political nature, entailing the creation of new institutional arrangements and the re-engineering of State governmentality in order to infuse into all social spheres with market and entrepreneurial ethos and discipline. As David Harvey (1985; 1989) points out, neoliberalisation as an entrepreneurial model of social and economic development has also affected urbanisation and the modalities for articulating urban governance, especially as a consequence of the recurrent crises which began to beset capitalist economies from 1973 onwards. Furthermore, it has to be understood as the product of the dramatic reorganisation from a Fordist-Keynesian model of political economy to a deindustrialised model of production, and the progressive dismissal of a welfare-based model of social citizenship (see Marshall and Bottomore, 1992) in favour of market rationality, privatisation and competition amongst individuals as the organisational bedrocks of society.

Therefore, neoliberalisation is in an osmotic relation with the city as a site of production and extraction of surplus, whereas their interweaving defines urban spatial arrangements, sites of accumulation, and the daily life of its dwellers, according to spatially-grounded processes involving a plurality of actors with different goals and agendas (Harvey, 1989, p.5). In particular, neoliberal urbanism is characterised by a profound degree of spatialised social inequalities engendered by processes of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003) and the conversion of commons into exclusive private properties as one of the main modalities of generating surplus (see Mayer, 2013, p.3; Mayer et al., 2016, p.334). Consequently, the transition of housing policies along entrepreneurial and market-oriented lines has played a major role in re-organising society as a whole according to competitive and individualistic orientations and in diminishing redistributive tendencies (see Brenner 2004a, b).

Indeed, insofar as inequality has always been a constitutive element of capitalism, the social pact underpinning welfare capitalism aimed at mitigating its most vicious and endemic effects by designing ‘an active state that through different means of intervention improved housing conditions, reduced housing costs for the lower classes, and took a firm grip on urban planning’ (Thörn et al., 2016, p.33). The welfare state as a biopolitical normative order would in this way establish a model of a patriarchal and racially-segregated family prone to consumerism and co-optation into the mass

production line. In exchange, the State and corporate responsibility would provide all the relevant means for social reproduction (e.g. education, healthcare, overall social provision). This would foster the myth of a progressive and increasingly equal capitalist organisation of society, while eschewing social conflict by subsuming some of its more pressing demands and mitigating the less bearable social contradictions (Marshall and Bottomore, 1992; Fraser, 2016).

### **Privatising housing, individualising (and indebting) social reproduction**

The progressive (and even contradictory) transition towards neoliberalisation has determined not only a shift in public policies from an interventionist state to market-oriented *laissez-faire* for the vast majority of welfare provisions, housing included. In addition, social reproduction has been commodified and made the individual's responsibility, generalising indebtedness as one of the privileged forms of exploitation and social disaggregation. Indeed, every individual is the primary unit charged with securing for themselves the means of their own social reproduction, instead of relying on the State and the support of a wider society (Vishmidt and Federici, 2013). As fundamental parts of the welfare state model, public forms of housing have thus been progressively residualised and even socially stigmatised as a manifestation of laziness and dependency on society and the state (see Stedman-Jones, 2012).

This has been paired with a change in the public rhetoric about the legitimate and desirable forms of dwelling the city: whereas commodified modalities of housing become the norm, the sociabilities embroiled in public, welfare-supported forms of housing have become a form of undesirable dependence, besides being stigmatised as one's incapability or unwillingness to be self-entrepreneurs (see Mayer, 2013, p.4). In these ways, the multiple forms of indebtedness connected to housing have been used as devices of subjectivation and exploitation at all the levels of society, from the nation state (whose social provisions have been curtailed in the name of efficiency and austerity) to the individual caught in the stranglehold of daily indebtedness (see Lazzarato, 2013; Fraser, 2016). Indeed, the financialisation of housing has significantly contributed to socialising consumer credit and debt as the normal forms of consumption, and in the embroilment of capital's movement in everyday life (Martin, 2002).

As housing has rapidly become a commodified good included in a cycle of dispossession, a certain dual model (commodified vs. privatised) of social reproduction in the realm of the multiple-earner family has been socialised (see Fraser, 2016, p.104), together with a specific set of activities, attitudes, emotions, behaviours and relational patterns related to the maintenance of daily life (Laslett and Brenner, 1989, p.383-4). Lastly and consequently, the capability of supporting oneself within a privatised market of housing has become a measure of the *homo economicus*' status on the ladder as well as a form of social validation, whilst depending on welfare and benefits becomes a stigmatised form of living and dependence on the larger society (Foucault, 2008; Martin, 2002, p.146). This shift is underpinned by the idea that every willing individual can be the primary maker of their own fortune without needing the state to provide them with any of the means of their social reproduction. So, the individual who accepts privatised forms of housing is 'the intangible partner of *laissez-faire* [...] the correlate of a governmentality which will act on the environment and systematically modify its variables' (Foucault, 2008, p.270-1).

Nonetheless, the prolonged aftermath of the 2008 crisis and the explosion of the debt bubble have shown unequivocally that the structure of the housing market was designed in order to maximise financial profit while failing indebted populations, whereas 'the commodification of urban life and the financialization of the city are intimately connected to manifold exclusions' (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2014, p.40). The pauperisation of broad segments of population (including those who used to be part of the middle class), the precarity of the labour market and the structural lack of affordable (let alone public) housing have brought to the surface in many urban contexts (including Rome's) new housing requirements that cannot be fulfilled within a system designed to foster inequality and profit as a social zero-sum game (see Mudu, 2006; De Angelis, 2010; Puccini, 2016). To confirm this, the neoliberal response to the economic shock caused by the implosion of the financial system has been the radical reimposition of the DLP formula (Deregulation – Liberalisation – Privatisation) along the same lines of austerity that had been questioned at the outset and during the height of the 2008 economic crisis (Federici et al., 2012, p.59; Hodkinson, 2012, p.424).

Predictably, the housing sector has not been immune from this process of capitalist restructuring. Whereas public housing and welfare cushions at large have been subjected to further cuts, dismissal and reduction as economically untenable, the short circuit produced by answering to a crisis of neoliberal governance with an enforcement

of its underpinnings has crystallised the ferocious inequalities encroached into the privatised market: enclosure and gentrification; the diffusion of patterns of spatial segregation and forcible displacement; severe housing deprivation; and, as a *redde rationem*, homelessness (see Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014; Thörn et al., 2016). This is to say that the housing crisis is unrolling as endogenous to neoliberal social reproduction, marking the social unsustainability of a biopolitical system predicated upon specific class relations and labour arrangements, genderised division of labour and commodified regimes of care presupposing the independence of individuals and their families from the help of others, including the state in the guise of welfare (see Caffentzis, 2002; Fraser, 2016).

This also explains why, nowadays, the housing crisis is not only affecting the ‘usual’ urban poor (i.e. migrant and transient populations, those already surviving on welfare benefits), but also those subjects (including the middle class) who had adapted to the capitalist modality of dwelling the city. As a counterpoint, the evidence that this crisis cannot be solved within the system itself is fostering the flourishing of manifold grassroots movements and ontological forms that, according to the interstitial and resilient nature of autonomy, envision and experiment with daily forms of post-capitalist commoning life and social reproduction in constant interplay with the environment where they are immersed (see Gibson-Graham, 2006; Linebaugh, 2008; Federici, 2010; Harvey, 2012; Fournier, 2013). In the context of Rome, Housing Rights Movements have contributed to these efforts by producing autonomous geographies and urban commons by re-appropriating housing through squatting (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Huron, 2015; Kokkinidis 2015a, b; Di Felicianantonio, 2016; ; Mudu and Aureli, 2016; Vasudevan, 2017). Hence, their current action requires a precise theoretical scrutiny in the light of the neoliberal urban environment within which they are operating, beyond their thriving history rooted in the struggle for public housing.

### **Grassroots urban movements: inventing a new model of social reproduction**

According to the theoretical scaffolding elaborated in the previous sections, the ongoing housing emergency cannot be merely read as a marginal phenomenon, nor as the outcome of some individuals' attempts to live on the shoulders of society, causing the economic

effect of widespread poverty, as the anti-welfare rhetoric about social ‘scroungers’ wants to imply. It ought to be read first and foremost as a crisis immanent to overall neoliberal social reproduction, understood as ‘a 'general crisis' that also encompasses economic, ideological and political strands, all of which intersect with and exacerbate one another’ (Fraser, 2016, p.99). Indeed, as discussed in the previous sections, housing is a centrepiece of neoliberal urbanism, whereas its management and governance define mainstream ways of dwelling in the city and the dominant relations of power in the urban fabric. On one hand, a certain model of market-oriented, privatised housing and the anti-welfare rhetoric ensure the conditions for sustaining accumulation; on the other hand, the excess of capitalist accumulation has destabilised the very processes on which this social reproduction relies, making access to the market housing market inaccessible for a growing population of people.

This has also determined the attrition of the set of ‘activities of provisioning, care-giving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds [...] forming their *habitus* and the cultural ethos in which they move’ (Fraser, 2016, p.100) that it engenders. In other words, the housing crisis, stemming from the untamed primacy of economic production and profit over the minimum requirements of income and social sustainability, has overridden social reproduction to the extent of forcing diverse urban subjects to organise collectively. Indeed, creating urban commons autonomously has become an imperative in order to cope with the need to reorganise reproductive work as well as the division between public and domestic space, care workload, social division of labour, and so on (see Bresnihan and Byrne, 2014). Therefore, social movements struggling for housing and including ‘right to the city’ as their political agenda are not demanding a reform of the system, nor conducting a purely ideological conflict for the sake of experimenting with radical political alternatives.

Indeed, they are part of the grassroots urban movements demanding a radical reorganisation of the relation between production and social reproduction, along with no borders, free healthcare and education, basic income, labour rights, environmental justice and an equal distribution of public services (Fournier, 2002; Federici, 2010; Fraser, 2016). As such, they are facing the quite pragmatic challenge (and I would say the necessity) to envision and experiment with new commons, forms of life and social reproduction within context-dependent urban arrangements. They also aim at regaining control over our daily experience of the city, and creating the conditions for keeping these possibilities open for further development inside, despite and against the neoliberal model of society (Fournier,



2002; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Parker et al., 2014a, b).

This is to say that, with their actions of re-appropriation and processes of community-building, Housing Rights Movements proactively contrast the capitalist ‘enclosure’ of commons, which is not only understood as alienation of land and public spaces. They also destabilise the enclosure of social relations, intimacy and emotions that characterises neoliberal social reproduction by producing forms of commoning that enable a sharing of the means of reproduction and create cooperative forms of self-organised sustenance (Federici, 2004; Linebaugh, 2008; Kokkinidis, 2015a; Serra, 2015). Then, the re-appropriation of what I define later in this chapter as *housing squats* brings into being ‘forms of life in which political activism is not separated from the task of our daily reproduction, so that relations of trust and commitment can develop that today remain on the horizon.’ (Vishmidt and Federici, 2013). Indeed, these re-appropriated spaces become sites where envisioning, experimenting and negotiating on a daily basis the commoning and reappropriation of different aspects of social reproduction and division of labour take place: household; carework; consensus-based decision-making under conditions of plurality (see Kokkinidis, 2015a, b); and so on.

While supporting these and other daily mobile commons (Papadopolous and Tsianos, 2013),<sup>1</sup> the squatters materialise the possibility of ‘concentrating changes at the point of reproduction’ (Serra, 2015) and create new forms of sociality and economies of solidarity (Federici *et. al.*, 2012; Kokkinidis 2015a, b). The variety of urban commons they produce in these spaces, the daily sociabilities, and the rooting in specific local contexts, allow the squatters to create networks of solidarity around them by deploying diverse forms of direct action that have already characterised other grassroots urban movements in Europe. These include: big political events (e.g. rounds of simultaneous squatting in multiple locations as the so-called *Tsunami Tours* described in Chapter 3); strategic use of violence and riots (e.g. in case of unauthorised demonstrations and police intervention); alliances with other autonomous political bodies (e.g. autonomous trade unions); informal sociability; cultural happenings (e.g. organisation of exhibitions and book presentations inside housing squats); formal dialogue with urban governance on different institutional levels (from the State to the single municipalities; contingent resistance (e.g. in the case of eviction) (see Thörn et al., 2016).

Hence, the ‘life-cycle’ of a housing squat from the moment of ‘cracking’ to an

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<sup>1</sup> This will be the overarching concept of Chapter 5 in order to discuss the primary processes of community building in the first weeks following the moment of ‘cracking into’ a new building.

eventual eviction engenders a complex and continuous interplay of autonomy and coercion in generating alternative forms of life and organisation. Insofar as the decision of squatting stems from a condition of necessity, the modalities of creation of new forms of life in-common are determined by the squatters' choice about how to maintain the squat in the light of the urban context where they immersed. The logic underpinning their actions, indeed, is that 'neoliberalism does not only land in cities or impact urban governance; cities are basically crucial cradles of neoliberalization, providing fundamental material bases for this process, but also for its contestation' (Pinson and Journal, 2016, p.139). This is the reason why this literature review proceeds by proposing a reappraisal of the Lefebvrian notion of 'right to the city' ([1968] 1996) as a contentious daily politics of encounter and production of space deployed within the specific sets of territorial arrangements produced within the ongoing crisis of neoliberal social reproduction affecting the post-welfare, post-crisis urban fabric.

### **Reappropriating and commoning the 'right to the city'**

The concept of 'right to the city' as elaborated by Henri Lefebvre in his late 1960s masterpiece *Le droit à la ville* ([1968] 1996) relates to the scholar's long-lasting interest in the centrality of the city in the capitalist system, and to his understanding of the city as an *oeuvre*. In his conception, the city is not a static and reified container of social processes, nor a governmental artefact; rather it is a work of art crafted by the daily actions of urban dwellers who should be therefore entitled to inhabit, re-appropriate and produce the urban space (including central areas) on their own terms, while remaining unalienated from urban life and its means of (re)production. The 'right to the city', therefore, is characterised by a radical openness that encompasses a plurality of rights, including the demands of tantamount grassroots urban movements (Fournier, 2002) struggling for social justice as autonomous from capitalist exploitation (Federici et al., 2012, p.55-7) within the urban fabric (see Attoh, 2011, p.674).

Despite its wide emancipatory potential and flexibility in linking even disparate (and mutually contradictory) kinds of rights, the concept of 'right to the city' has been subject to criticism, for example for its assumption of a particular urban environment and capitalist period (namely Fordism). In particular, according to authors like Antonio Negri

(2014a, b), the concept was bound to a model of urban fabric where the intensity of accumulation by dispossession was not nearly comparable to that which neoliberalism has generated in recent decades. Besides, the revolutionary figure that Lefebvre appointed for exerting the 'right to the city' was the working class, which has been radically disassembled during the transition to a post-Fordist mode of the production of the urban space. According to this kind of criticism, the notion of 'right to the city' may not be a useful analytical tool for analysing the contemporary action(s) of urban movements, because the conditions under which it was formulated are no longer in place.

On the other hand, the Marxist urban sociologist David Harvey has been the leading author of a critical study field qualifying 'right to the city' not only as an extant demand, but as a fundamental concept for framing the burgeoning rise of autonomous experiments of urban commoning within the urban-rooted crisis of capital, and its attempts of reorganisation (Harvey, 2008; 2012). Indeed, Harvey underlines the importance of the concept of 'right to the city' for highlighting the manifold urban commons and organisational capabilities deployed by the urban proletariat that, as the scion of the Fordist working class, becomes the revolutionary subject which might deepen capital's contradiction, according a Marxist dialectical understanding of history. Lastly, Harvey suggests exploiting the political and ethical centrality of the notion of human rights in order to elevate 'right to the city' to the realm of inalienable and collective rights. Indeed, as he puts it, the 'right to the city' in this guise can be a powerful tool for challenging the individualistic, property-based and competitive logic of neoliberalism by empowering collectively dispossessed urban dwellers to 'claim some kind of shaping power over the process of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and to do so in a fundamental and radical way' (Harvey, 2012, p.5).

The theoretical reappraisal of the notion of 'right to the city' which I present in this thesis integrates this debate from the standpoint of the 'right to appropriation' that Lefebvre encouraged the working class to prioritise in order to gain back the means of their everyday (re)production, alongside pursuing a politics of scale in restructuring citizenship and the dominant modalities of political participation (Lefebvre, 1996; Purcell, 2002; Grazioli, 2017a). Indeed, according to my activist research experience in Rome, the requiem for 'right to the city' is theoretically premature, especially considering its popularity as a political claim among grassroots urban movements. Yet, conceptualising the 'right to the city' as a human right can be misleading for a number of reasons. Firstly, it implies framing the array of subjective experiences of the city lived by

diverse dispossessed urban dwellers according to universal principles and understandings of the world (see Stephenson and Papadopoulos, 2006, p.143). Secondly, human rights are usually appointed to the individual as a human being disembodied of their subjective traits, whilst the 'right to the city', it can be argued, should encompass plurality and collectivity as the underpinning principles of urban experiments of commoning life and housing (see Attoh, 2011).

Indeed, the Housing Rights Movements' social composition is made of extremely different groups of people that, along differential lines of urban social reproduction, have found themselves in the situation of needing to put their life in common and coalesce with other grassroots movements claiming the 'right to the city' and urban commons in manifold (and sometimes incommensurable) ways (see Attoh, 2011). And indeed the squatters as urban dwellers, are not the prototype disembodied individuals upon which human rights are designed. They rather resemble and embody Lefebvre's notion of the *citadins* (1996); the subjects who have earned the right to transforming the urban fabric from their daily experience of the city life and routines. This is to say that the autonomy they exert and the autonomous geographies they produce constitute urban commons that counter the neoliberal tendency to disempower and alienate urban dwellers from the means of their daily (re)production (Purcell, 2002; Lazzarato, 2012). For these reasons, in this thesis the 'right to the city' is conceptualised as a collective, grassroots and situated contentious politics of encounter that produces autonomous geographies through the commoning of the daily means of urban social (re)production (see de Certeau, 1984; Purcell, 2002; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Merrifield, 2011; Vasudevan 2015a, b).

Put this way, the 'right to the city' is a generative analytical standpoint for observing how the dispossession and enclosure of space and social reproduction operated by neoliberal urbanisation is countered by grassroots urban movements that, through their daily action and inhabitation of the city, redefine the urban scales by producing new autonomous geographies, while prefiguring new political and social subjectivities (see Pickerill and Chatterton, 2010; Martínez and Cattaneo, 2014; Thörn et al., 2016). Developing this, I argue that the 'right to the city' is an operational prefigurative politics that operates on three main levels. Firstly, it unearths the logic underpinning the devastating effects of global capitalism on the daily materialities of many urban dwellers previously subjectified as indebted individuals. Secondly, it shatters the presumption of neoliberalism as an inevitable, natural and thus unrivalled force (Fournier, 2002, p.197).

Lastly, it engages with the process of producing the space for materialising utopian visions that are not a blueprint for a perfect society, but situated and grassroots attempts of opening spaces of possibility, and establishing the conditions for their development and maintenance (see Fournier, 2002; Pinson and Journal, 2016).

This includes also the acts of reappropriation performed by Housing Rights Movements and squatters, whereby they contribute to materialising 'right to the city' by 'withdrawing these spaces from neoliberal utilization for profit-making and disrupting the private property-based logic of capitalist urbanization' (Mayer, 2013, p.6). That is to say that these spaces are produced as urban commons and removed from their previous condition of enclosure by an act of 'cracking' that states in practice that 'ownership is based on human deeds not property deeds' (Linebaugh, 2008, p.45). In fact, the squats' visibility in the city exposes possibilities for autonomous urban regeneration and new forms of citizenship that can stem from the autonomous reuse of empty urban spaces outside of the frame of institutional distribution of resources and formal enfranchisement. Indeed, squatting entails not only the redistribution of housing, but commoning it by regenerating what used to be simultaneously vacant and alienated from the collective at the same time (Martínez et al., 2013; Galdini, 2015; Mudu and Aureli, 2016; Vasudevan, 2017).

Furthermore, the interplay of autonomy and context-based coercion underpinning these ways of practising the 'right to the city' and generating new urban commons destabilises the neoliberal model of citizenship and subjectification from a double standpoint. Firstly, the patterns of housing and spatial segregation involve quite diverse urban dwellers, associating them in an unprecedented proximity of marginalisation. Yet the common experience of struggling for re-appropriating housing and (re)gainning a liveable space in the city dissolves the sense of helplessness, guilt and lack of hope which hits the *homo economicus* when losing their position on the ladder. It then creates new forms of citizenship and social alliances based on the solidarity stemming from the daily inhabitation of the same common space and the daily necessity of maintaining it through commonised processes of community-building and social reproduction. In the light of all these elements, I move on to discussing how the actions of Housing Rights Movements alter the notion of the city encompassed in Lefebvre's original formulation, first in spatial and then subjective terms.

## **The classical city is dead, long live the city!**

As discussed in the previous sections, the original formulation of the 'right to the city' is engendered in the specific spatial, temporal and political arrangement of the late 1960s city of Paris. Given this contextualisation, it is understandable why Lefebvre ([1968] 1996) sought to encourage those who he considered to be the revolutionary urban subjects (the working class) to reappropriate the city centre in both spatial and symbolic terms. Because of its history, Rome can also fit into the frame of the European city upon which Lefebvre's idea of 'right to the city' was predicated. After all, it is also the capital of one of the world's economic powers, where centralised powers and connected commercial/financial investment can be traced as the epitomisation of neoliberalisation at work (see Cellamare, 2016, p.2). Notwithstanding this, Rome nowadays does not resemble the model of the classical city. It is actually an informal makeshift city (Vasudevan, 2015a), where housing squats represent one of the many autonomous geographies that deconstruct the coordinates of centrality/periphery and show the multi-scalar texture of the urban fabric (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Merrifield, 2011; Sassen, 2015; Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014; Thörn et al., 2016; Nur and Sethman, 2017).

Firstly, Rome's centre is decreasingly relevant as a popular dwelling site, wherein urban planning strategies such as those pursued from the Fascist regime (described in Chapter 3 in relation to my research sites' location) have fostered the displacement of the poor population in order to enhance the city centre's economic value and touristic potentialities. As the new peripheries where public housing was concentrated started to develop, Housing Rights Movements became relevant actors in the political arena by demanding public housing and adequate urban services for the urban poor living in these areas (see Mudu, 2006; Villani, 2012; Cellamare, 2014; Armati, 2015; Nur and Sethman, 2017). Hence, they have had the chance to experience first-hand the shift into housing policies operated as neoliberal urbanisation took its place as the dominant modality of urban governance. Furthermore, they have strongly denounced what was unveiled by the recent *Mafia Capitale* and *Affittopoli* scandals<sup>2</sup>, namely that the

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2 For further information and references see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mafia\\_Capitale\\_investigation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mafia_Capitale_investigation)

conjunction of the decline of state welfare and the permanent housing crisis have been a great opportunity for lucrative business deals, especially in the last twenty years (Armati, 2015; Puccini, 2016).

In response to these altered conditions and territorial articulations, Housing Rights Movements have chosen to adopt a polyphonic place politics that demands the right to produce autonomous geographies in Rome's peripheries, while retaining their thriving legacy for contesting the biases affixed on them as compounds of social marginality and territorial degradation (see Thörn et al., 2016, p.30-1). This political strategy, as Chapter 6 discusses extensively, holds together the local level and the claim for the dignity of life into peripheral areas, with claims addressed to different levels of governance (Municipalities, City Council, Region and even State government) symbolically represented in the city centre. Furthermore, it fosters the deployment of multi-scalar political practices and alliances with other grassroots urban movements that deconstruct binary (and boundary) understandings of the urban space along the dichotomies centre/periphery and local/urban. Indeed, the Movements and squatters' urban commons, and the autonomous geographies they produce, also affect their perception of the different territorial levels of the city, making them redefine what they consider 'local/territorial' and 'urban/central' according to their peculiar daily experience of the urban space.

Therefore, thinking about the 'right to the city' from the standpoint of the action of Housing Rights Movements sheds a light upon the diffuseness of the contemporary neoliberal urban fabric, while showing the opportunity for diversifying and multiplying the contentious political strategies aimed at contrasting the inequalities produced by neoliberal social reproduction and urban management. It also entails deconstructing the classical understanding of the city implicitly based on bounded (and therefore hierarchical) organisation of its space. Indeed, every empty space of the multi-scalar city can become a site which is included in the movements' autonomous, polycentric geographies of the city, while the peripheries become the centre for experimenting with new urban commons, whilst also retaining the Movements' historical legacy. Lastly, adopting these Movements' political standpoint in re-appraising the notion of the 'right to the city' in the light of the ongoing housing and social reproduction crisis means assuming the symbolic death of the classic city and its geographical coordinates. This in turn demands that we turn to elaborating upon Lefebvre's criticism of the city's paramount subjective figure: the formally enfranchised citizen.

### **Housing squatters: embodying Lefebvre's *citadins***

One of the biggest conundrums within Lefebvre's analysis of 'right to the city' is his powerful yet somewhat undetermined critique of the citizen as the appointed subject for exerting a transformational power over urban space (Purcell, 2002). Indeed, in Lefebvre's original work the definition of the subject who should actually claim a 'right to the city' is mainly conflated with the working class. Yet, with hindsight, the Fordist class as imagined during the Fordist era was not only a monolithic subject unified under the class flag; It was also an exclusionary subjectivity inasmuch as it mostly encompassed Western, white, indentured men, also assumed to be the main recipients of welfare provision (see Marshall and Bottomore, 1992). Furthermore, welfare (including public housing) has been continuously used by the state to control the means of social reproduction while maintaining the conditions of capitalist accumulation of profit. Therefore, the working class as the revolutionary urban subject failed to evolve into the unitary struggle for the 'right to the city' by including all those urban dwellers that are marginalised on the basis of intersectional differences other than class, such as gender, ethnicity, race, culture, sexual orientation, educational background and so on.

This may seem enough to validate the critique of authors like Antonio Negri (2014a, b), who claim that that the 'right to the city' nowadays is politically and socially unsubstantiated. Their argument contends that the transformation of the working class into the urban proletariat as theorised by David Harvey (2003, 2012) conceals the mutations that have occurred in the substance of citizenship, as well as in the articulation of the social division of labour nowadays. Nonetheless, Lefebvre himself offered a toolbox for overcoming the theoretical impasse caused by the exclusive focus upon the status of class. Indeed, Lefebvre retained the emancipatory and open potential of the notion of 'right to the city' in his critique of citizenship as the formal entitlement to producing urban space. Indeed, he proposes the theorisation of the *citadin* ((Lefebvre, 1996, p.34) as the urban inhabitant enfranchised to decision-making and production of urban space simply by their practice of 'living out the routines of everyday life in the space of the city' (Purcell, 2002, p.102).

Hence, Lefebvre's notion of *citadin* implies two assertive considerations in



respect to the materiality of citizenship within the urban environment. Firstly, it roots the knowledge necessary for transforming urban spaces into the everyday experiences and routines of the dispossessed urban dwellers inhabiting the city regardless of their status, instead of relying onto institutional expertise and established positions. Secondly, the conceptualisation of the *citadin* as an open subject furthers the interest of a community that is not continuously enlarged on the basis of daily commonalities, networks and sociabilities (Purcell, 2002, p.102; Makrygianni and Tsavdaroglou, 2015, p.167). This openness is indeed embodied in the housing squatters' extremely heterogeneous social composition. Indeed, as *citadins* re-appropriating 'right to the city' and creating autonomous urban geographies, they include multifarious urban dwellers who have previously experienced material deprivation and spatial segregation within the post-welfare, post-crisis urban fabric: documented and undocumented migrants; asylum seekers and refugees; ethnic minorities; native citizens disregarded by the residual forms of welfare; families and individuals subjected to evictions and foreclosures; precarious workers and students; and so on.

From the moment of 'cracking' collectively into a place, this scattered composition of marginalised urban dwellers constitutes themselves as a collective subjectivity and a community that produces spaces and manifold commons in many different ways. At first, they radically re-signify an abandoned and unproductive space into a lived and 'commoned' one, thus altering the urban scape and modalities of (re)production (see Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Bresnihan and Byrne, 2014; Galdini, 2015, 2016; Huron, 2015; Vasudevan, 2015 a,b; Di Felicianantonio, 2016; Mudu and Aureli, 2016; Grazioli, 2017b). Then, they produce manifold commons, since they start to envision and practice alternative modalities of life and organising for supporting their daily life and maintaining the squat. Lastly, they multiply commons by connecting with other grassroots urban movements struggling for 'right to the city' in order to legitimise their presence and support to the broader action of Housing Rights Movements inside the urban space.

Therefore, the housing squatters' can be deemed to all intents and purposes one of the epitomisations of Lefebvre's *citadins* in the contemporary, post-Fordist urban fabric. The preceding sections have thus reappraised Lefebvre's original 'right to the city' as a contentious, daily politics of encounter practised by diverse *citadins* through the re-appropriation of the means of their daily social (re)production, using the multifaceted aspects entrenched into squatting for housing purposes as a theoretical compass. So far, I

have framed these spaces within the ongoing crisis of housing and social reproduction through the already existing categories of urban commons and autonomous geographies. Yet their theoretical relevance within this thesis requires us to coin a definition that can mark their specificities in these respects. In the following section, I propose to use *housing squats* as this definition, explaining why it is needed to complement (and possibly question) already-existing taxonomies of urban squatting.

### **Why we need the definition “housing squats”**

In this thesis, I deploy the term *housing squat* to describe the forms of re-appropriation and commoning of housing practised by Housing Rights Movements and squatters inside the autonomous geographies they produce within post-welfare, post-crisis Rome. But what is the theoretical contribution brought by this definition to the realm of the scholarship investigating urban grassroots movements and diverse forms of squatting? The basic definition of squatting encompasses two main aspects: the violation of established ownership, be it a private individual, a corporation or a public entity; the lack of consent by the owner to the reuse of the empty building (Cattaneo and Martínez, 2014, p.2). This seemingly loose definition is still functional to opening up categorisations of what squatting is in the city to quite diverse ways of re-appropriating empty urban space, as well as to different modalities of materialising anti-capitalist ethical coordinates of housing inside the city (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Hodkinson, 2012). Indeed, as a fairly easily replicable practice, squatting is becoming an increasingly relevant way of territorially multiplying the points of crisis and conflict to capitalist social reproduction within the city, including the issues of housing and spatial segregation (see Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014).

Yet, its conceptualisation, enactment and purpose are heavily dependent on the context where the squatting occurs in terms of the diverse articulations of neoliberal urbanisation, and the specific subjective arrangements it produces (see Harvey, 2003; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Thörn et al., 2016). Hence, in order to be appropriately operationalised, the basic definition of squatting as the non-consensual reuse of a previously empty building needs to be augmented with the situated description of the multiple kinds of squatting enacted by grassroots urban movements and dispossessed urban dwellers. In this thesis, my goal is to account for the specificity of the type of

squatting for housing purposes enacted by Housing Rights Movements in Rome. As previously argued, they are relevant not only because of their large presence (over 100 at the time of writing). The demands and struggle for 'right to the city' deployed in the capital, Rome have become a blueprint for other movements concerned with housing rights in other Italian cities. Indeed, they have foregrounded the common actions and campaigns of the Italian Housing Rights Movements' network *Abitare nella crisi* (Inhabiting inside the crisis) which includes grassroots urban movements ranging from every Italian latitude and longitude, from Trento to Palermo.

At this point one may argue that there are already plenty of categorisations and accounts of urban squatting, given that squatting has been a quite prominent act of struggle for the 'right to the city' deployed by social movements in recent decades, and in particular since the crisis exploded in 2008, laying out the conditions for demanding the reappropriation of commons and space inside the city. Also squatting for housing is not unnoticed by scholars and activists concerned with many different aspects of social reproduction and urban life, ranging from freedom of movement and mobility (given that migrants are often involved into this form of squatting) to social movements and grassroots organising. Even though diversified, these classifications rely on some distinctive patterns: 'configurations' (Prujit, 2013); squatters' residential trajectories (Bouillon 2009, 2017); goals and available resources (Aguilera 2011, 2013); ideological background and range of actions available (Péchu, 2010); degree of politicisation, relationships with institutions and their purpose in relation to mainstream forms of housing (Fuller and Jonas, 2003); territorial context (e.g. Southern European cities) and anti-capitalist orientation (Piazza, 2012).

Within these taxonomies and the analysis of autonomous urban geographies, as Bouillon (2017) notices, 'political' types of squatting (i.e. social centres, see Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Squatting Europe Collective 2013, 2014) have been prioritised in the analytic focus over the housing approaches, despite the numeric predominance of the latter. Although perhaps unwittingly, this approach ends up establishing a hierarchy of importance, almost implying that squats made for housing purposes are not as relevant in terms of producing urban commons and alternative forms of social reproduction, since they are created out of the coercion imposed by material deprivation. Nonetheless, this type of assumption must be problematised according to three relevant caveats. Firstly, they provide a static categorisation of squatting by crystallising the initial conditions and purpose of its creation, instead of focusing on

commoning as a process. Secondly, they tend to conceal the intersectional differences and purposes in squatting characterising the social composition of housing squatters by emphasising their shared housing deprivation. Lastly, they tend to separate analytically political and ‘necessity’ squatters, thus undermining the politicisation of the alternative forms of social reproduction and autonomous geographies they envision and produce daily.

This is not to deny the condition of material deprivation underpinning the decision to squat in the first place. Indeed, the political ideology of activists engaged in Housing Rights Movements is overt, and so is the fact the vast majority of the squatters did not make this call out of the intention to experiment with anticapitalist forms of living, but were rather compelled to squat due to the impossibility of supporting themselves any longer within the housing sector as it is organised within neoliberal social reproduction. Nonetheless, as the following empirical chapters describe extensively, compelling daily materialities are addressed through the exertion of an inventive autonomy that produces forms of commoning life that are then negotiated and adjusted in everyday life according to consensus-based and plural modalities (see Kokkinidis, 2015a, b). Furthermore, as the examples of Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz show, every squat decides autonomously the best strategies for creating local networks of solidarity with other grassroots movements and social subjects active in the terrain of ‘right to the city’, while contributing to the broader mobilisations of Housing Rights approaches.

In conclusion, the categorisation of squats based upon static temporal patterns and established degrees of politicisation fails to elucidate the process through which squats for housing purposes, as urban commons, transcend their function of emergency measures, becoming political arenas and sites for mutual politicisation and experience (see Bresnihan and Byrne, 2014; Bouillon, 2017). On the other hand, the delineation of *housing squats* aims to emphasise the importance of these spaces as urban commons from which manifold commons stem, starting from the reappropriation of housing. It also stresses the processual nature of commoning social reproduction, as well as the continuous interplay of autonomy and coercion it encompasses. In order to explain why it is analytically useful, I analyse some of the most influential categorisations of squatting in relation to housing squats, explaining why the latter cannot be included in them. In particular, I discuss the configurations of squatting elaborated by Hans Pruijt (2013), devoting a particular attention to the one including *centri sociali* (social centres), broadly analysed as the more prominent form of political urban squatting in Italy, Rome

included, during recent decades (see Mudu, 2004; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Piazza 2012, 2013; Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014).

### **Prujit's configurations of urban squatting**

Prujit's (2013) five configurations of squatting have largely influenced the existing literature concerning squatting for two main reasons. First of all, they focus specifically upon the main arrangements of squatting in the urban environment, thus systematising the relationship between the forcible reappropriation of empty spaces and urban management. Secondly, these configurations attempt to find common political ground among diverse experiences of squatting enacted in Europe in recent decades (in particular the Netherlands, the UK, Germany and Italy). This allows us to overcome the impressionistic approach to the phenomenon of squatting, providing it with a sociological accuracy that might further enhance comparative analysis. Thirdly and lastly, Prujit includes in his definitions squats made out of necessity as well as those stemming from an overtly political/countercultural intent, in order to analyse how their trajectories can be overlapped, separated or patterned over time according to a series of features. Nonetheless, as the following analysis discusses, the type of housing squats created by Housing Rights Movements do not fit in any of these configurations, even though they present characteristics of each of them.

Firstly, the mismatch between the forms of squatting for housing practised in Rome and Prujit's configurations stems from the benchmarks underpinning his taxonomy: informal organisational patterns; participants' mainly middle class descent; a mixture of cultural and political goals; multiple forms of activism and embedding into diverse movements (Prujit, 2013, p.21). The resulting configurations of squatting are the logically consistent combinations of these features that are supposed to remain traceable over time as long as the squat exists. Nonetheless, the purposefulness and maintenance of a housing squat cannot be assumed, as it depends on the development of the daily process of commoning deployed by squatters in response to their needs, as well as the environment in which they are immersed. Furthermore, the assumed class separation between different kinds of squatters is at odds with the empirical evidences I have collected about the housing squats' social composition, as well as with the forms of *social activism* I describe in Chapter 7 as the outcome of the daily political socialisation occurring inside these

spaces. The following examination of Prujit's configurations is preliminary to framing what I observed during my fieldwork along these two lines of criticism, combined with the emphasis on social reproduction.

### *1. Deprivation-based squatting*

This involves subaltern classes suffering severe housing deprivation, defined as being virtually incapable of finding other options than living in a homeless shelter. This kind of squatting is generally tightly-organised and can be performed in either small groups or bigger cohorts. One benchmark of this configuration, Prujit contends, is the clear-cut distinction between the squatters and the core group of activists that, as the theoretical premise assumes, are mainly middle class and highly-politicised subjects who, in this case, practice squatting on someone else's behalf to provide them with temporary housing solutions (e.g. refugees, homeless families etc.). Because of the necessity underpinning this type of squatting, it is generally more susceptible to institutional co-optation or even transformation into a licensed form of squatting.

### *2. Squatting as an alternative housing strategy*

This type of squatting is practised mainly by urban dwellers who could also belong to the middle class, but who find themselves short of affordable housing options (e.g. students seeking cheaper accommodation after living in rented rooms or apartments). On the one hand, these subjects may undergo public de-legitimisation because they are not in a condition of acute deprivation. On the other hand, their background fosters an easier inclusion within other urban grassroots movements, since the class and cultural distinction between the activists and squatters is much more blurred. The outcomes achieved from these alternative housing strategies can range from legalisation to eviction, and depend on the squatters' capability to publicly defend their action as being the outcome of the lack of affordable and accessible housing.

### *3. Entrepreneurial squatting*

Social centres and free spaces are the prototypes of this configuration (and are discussed in the next section in more detail). They set the infrastructure for a wide range of self-organised grassroots activities, for those who frequent it have a

heterogeneous composition in terms of class background, ideological framing and degree of openness towards the collective. Indeed, as Prujit (2013, p.31) contends, these spaces tend to swing between the temptation of producing a 'ghetto' mentality and normalisation as conventional enterprises running a business in order to guarantee an income to those who manage them.

#### *4. Conservational squatting*

This is considered as a tactic kind of occupation for preserving the urban landscape by impairing the processes of capitalist accumulation stemming from the enclosure of a portion of space, the top-down re-qualification of a certain area of the city, or the transformation/demolition of a building. Hence, this type of squatting aims mainly at impairing gentrification and the patterns of spatial segregation stemming from it. According to Prujit, the main promoters of conservational squatting are middle-class subjects, such as students and professionals, who had the opportunity to educate themselves about the history of their neighbourhood and decide to defend it by preserving existing public space and building consensus amongst the regular inhabitants in order to compel urban planners and institutions to change course.

#### *5. Political squatting*

This is a political strategy used by activists engaged in anti-systemic and contentious politics in order to produce a direct confrontation with the state. According to Prujit (2013, p.36) this last configuration is radically distinguished by the previous ones, as it engenders its own logics and identity-building of the group of squatters as a revolutionary vanguard seeking territorial rooting to foster social mobilisations. As an example, Prujit presents the type of squats practised by Italian extra-parliamentarian formations during the Seventies. However, according to the author, the outcome of political squatting is still mostly disappointing for the squatters themselves, either for external driving forces or endogenous conflicts that force the participants to divide or withdraw from the political arena.

Drawing upon the previous synthesis of Prujit's configurations, I propose that the type of squatting practised by Housing Rights Movements' squatting in Rome cannot

fit exactly into any of these, because of three main analytical issues: the processual nature of commoning and crafting squats as autonomous infrastructure; a social reproduction analysis as amenable to complementing a class-based one; and the inherently political nature of the urban commons stemming from housing re-appropriation in the light of the ongoing crisis of neoliberal urbanisation and reproduction. In order to do so, I proceed to a comparative analysis with *social centres* as a kind of urban squatting that in the Italian context has attracted greater theoretical attention in respect to their capability of deploying anti-capitalist, contentious politics and producing urban commons. By marking the differences and commonalities with housing squats in respect to some relevant aspects, I conclude by framing why the delineation of *housing squats* is needed in order to complement the analytical toolbox concerning urban forms of squatting in the post-crisis, post-welfare neoliberal urban fabric.

### **The Italian way of squatting: beyond the emphasis on social centres**

Although social centres also exist in other geographical contexts (see Adilkno, 1994; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010), they have managed to gain particular attention in the Italian political and urban landscape because of their territorial pervasiveness and resilience as ‘oases’ for pursuing radical contentious politics after the deterioration of the autonomous movements that gained momentum between late 1960s and 1970s, and underwent massive repression afterwards. These squatted spaces are especially visible in the city of Rome, where more than 20 can be counted across different quadrants of the city, including the city centre (see Mudu, 2004). As politically radical subjects, social centres have also been one of the more prominent promoters of the anti-globalisation movement in its Italian articulation, as well as the protagonists of the dramatic days of the 2001 Genova G8 summit. Their slogan of the time, ‘Another world is possible’, predicted the forthcoming disruptive effects of globalisation and financialised economy, alongside dissent over global wars and neoliberal imperialism (see Piazza, 2012; Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014).

Nonetheless, their attractiveness does not only depend upon the contentious politics they deploy, but also on the alternative forms of sociability, economy and social cooperation they emphasise. Indeed, their rootedness in diverse territorial contexts (from



gentrified central areas to working class suburbs) has fostered the experimentation of a plurality of activities capable of involving a multifarious composition of occasional visitors, sympathisers and habitués, besides the activists that participate in them (and sometimes help to organise them). These can include: street art and artistic laboratories in general; self-managed theatres; concerts; the so-called *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* (ethical purchasing groups<sup>3</sup>); making the venues available for diverse forms of infopoints, counselling and legal assistance (e.g. against domestic abuse, migrant and refugees support); headquarters for non-profit associations and cooperatives; and many others. This combination of radical political positioning, resilience to a hostile political environment, social inclusiveness and territorial rootedness has attracted the interest of many scholars concerned with urban grassroots movements, as well as their examples of how urban commons are articulated inside Italian cities (see Mudu 2004, 2014, 2015; Piazza, 2013).

Indeed, housing squats and social centres present some similar features as for the way in which they produce manifold urban commons through squatting and the political background underpinning their creation. Indeed, activists of both movements generally share a radical left-wing ideology (to the extent that especially the youngest Housing Rights Movements' activists can be involved in both the types of squatting). Secondly, consensus-based decision-making and commoned self-production of space are the basis of both types of squats' internal management. Furthermore, housing squats develop counter-cultural activities similar to those offered by social centres, if their infrastructures allow them to do so<sup>4</sup>. As for the modalities of articulating contentious politics inside the city, they share some political features: the tactical use of violence; the creation of Temporary Autonomous Zones (*TAZs*), flash mobs and impromptu forms of squatting for pointing out political goals; the pragmatic acceptance of some levels of relationship with institutions, especially on a local and municipal level (see Romano, 1998; Mudu, 2004). Lastly, both types of squatting entail a discourse about the legitimacy of autonomous urban regeneration as a counter to the enclosure of common spaces, gentrification and the overall phenomena of spatial segregation.

Whereas these commonalities often lead Housing Rights Movements and social centres' networks to produce common political discourses and joint initiatives inside the city that lead mainstream media accounts to conflate them, they in fact diverge in many

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3 See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gruppi\\_di\\_Acquisto\\_Solidale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gruppi_di_Acquisto_Solidale)

4 e.g. Metropolit, my second research site, which I explore in Chapters 3 and 6 especially

ways, which should be accounted within for descriptive accounts of how squatting is articulated in a city like Rome. The first and most obvious fact is that the vast majority of social centres are not inhabited by their squatters and activists. Yet, the first more relevant distinction pertains the nature of the class division existing between housing squatters and activists vis-à-vis the social centres' composition. The second one concerns the different processes of political subjectivation underpinning the original decision to squat, as well as the manifold urban commons and alternative forms of social reproduction deployed. Indeed, as introduced in the previous sections, a static class division between squatters and activists as presupposed by the configuration of *deprivation-based squatting* cannot be seen inside housing squats, nor an established politically subjective line as described by the *political squatting* category.

Housing squats are undeniably inhabited by families and individuals who turned to Housing Rights Movements in the first place because they were undergoing a condition of severe housing deprivation for a plurality of different reasons. Yet, from the moment of joining the Movement on, the squatters are involved in each step entailed in the process of squatting, from the organisation of the initiatives prior to the 'cracking' to the organisational steps which follow. Indeed, as Chapter 4 recounts, the activists do not simply remain inside the squat to supervise internal management. Their presence is especially crucial during the first weeks, in which the risk of impromptu eviction is extremely high. Also, they help to set up the consensus-based ground-rules for the assessment of the occupied infrastructure, the allocation of spaces, and the overall securing of the 'newborn' squat. After this time has passed, the management of daily life and organising is in the hands of the squatters' (rather than the 'activists') autonomy and negotiating capacity, although they have to abide to some non-negotiable standards as a precondition for plurality (e.g. antiracism and non-discrimination; a ban on lucrative activities in common spaces and room's trade-off) (see Kokkinidis, 2015b, p.822-8).

As the process of commoning life unfolds into everyday routines, the squatters who are more involved in internal management and networking with the Movement experience political socialisation that leads them to become *social activists*<sup>5</sup>. This entails becoming proactive members of the urban Housing Rights Movements, fostering networking with other grassroots urban movements struggling for 'right to the city', and envisioning new commons that may open up the space of the squat to the local community

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<sup>5</sup> This definition is discussed and problematised in Chapter 7.

as well. The processual nature of the political subjectivation experienced inside housing squats, therefore, does not elide the class and political distinctions that may exist within housing squats. This process is about finding daily modalities to attune them, along with the different social reproductive aspects that might have led the squatters to the decision of resort to this kind of unlawful housing arrangement in the first place. Indeed, as the previous theoretical framing discussed, housing can be an intermediate need or satisfier for retrieving indirect income from the money spared from the payment of rent/mortgage and bills, to redirect on different aspects of social reproduction, like affording higher education, private healthcare, sharing care workloads, and so on (Federici, 2010; Cattaneo and Martínez, 2014).

Yet including these motivations within the configuration of *alternative housing strategy* would be undermining, insofar as it does not account for the role of housing within the broader social reproduction crisis. Nor can some of the manifold commons the squatters develop inside housing squats be considered amenable to including them within the *entrepreneurial squatting* configuration. Indeed, both the informal economies (e.g. squatters offering services as hairdressers or painters) and forms of self-funding (e.g. open dinners and movie projections) developed in the squat are exclusively aimed at the securing of the squat's necessities and the building's maintenance. Lastly, the urban commons crafted by the squatters create autonomous geographies and forms of grassroots urban regeneration that overlap with the message associated to the last category of *conservational squatting*. And indeed, the environmentally sustainable and non-speculative re-use of neglected urban ecologies (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011) underpins the activists' actions, along with the demand for equality in housing rights (Galdini, 2016; Di Felicianantonio, 2016; Mudu and Aureli, 2016). The function of a squat does not restrain to its conservational potential, for it is included in a broader discourse about the 'right to the city' and how neoliberal urbanisation disrupts this 'right to the city' through a certain model of social reproduction (Grazioli 2017a, b).

To wrap up these considerations, I contend that the descriptive category of *housing squat* is needed in order to recognise the specificity of Housing Rights Movements' occupations by other kinds of urban squatters present in the Italian and Roman context, even though they present infrastructural similarities and political commonalities. In particular, this category aims to point out three specific aspects. First of all, the role of squatting within a broader crisis of social reproduction, that therefore mixes up the aspects embedded in every configuration of urban squatting here analysed

here. Secondly, the processual nature of commoning in housing and creating further forms of commons for recasting the 'right to the city', vis-à-vis the static understanding of the temporal trajectory of a squat. Thirdly, the dynamic subjectivation and political subjectivation occurring as the everyday life in which these spaces unfold, and which shapes the ways in which these previously subaltern urban dwellers become visible presences and relevant political actors inside the political and social arena with their unprecedented and proliferating forms of life, organising and inhabiting of the urban fabric.

### **Conclusions: The 'socially dangerous' urban commons**

The forms of squatting produced by urban grassroots movements as occurring within Housing Rights Movements are framed in this chapter within the analysis of multifarious ways of producing urban commons currently enacted within highly saturated and conflicted urban environments (see Bresnihan and Byrne, 2014; Huron, 2015). They are also framed as an autonomous response to the crisis of social reproduction affecting the neoliberal logic of urbanisation, which is failing to provide solutions for absorbing the unbearable social and spatial inequalities created within diverse governmental scales of the urban fabric (State; Region; City Council and Municipalities; private stakeholders) (see Sassen, 2015; Pinson and Journal, 2016). Hence, the purpose has so far been describe housing squats as a theoretically relevant form of commoning life and to recast the 'right to the city' as a daily, contentious politics of encounter. The latter is made manifest through autonomous geographies and prefigurative politics that set new ethical coordinates for dwelling in a city based upon social needs instead of the rule of profit and accumulation by dispossession (Lefebvre, 1996; Fournier, 2002; Purcell, 2002; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Linebaugh, 2008; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Federici, 2010; Hodkinson, 2012; Parker et al., 2014). In other words, the Housing Rights Movements have acknowledged the changing conditions unfolding since the crisis began in 2008, and adapted their contentious politics accordingly. Whereas the dismantling of welfare, the enclosure of commons and patterns of housing segregation are also the product of governmental assent, the movements have shifted their focus from public housing to the autonomous regeneration of empty public and private buildings. In so doing, they reach

three fundamental goals. Firstly, they unearth the structural nature of the housing emergency affecting Rome. Secondly, they hold the institutions accountable for the choices they have made in governing the city by maintaining their position as relevant actors in the political arena. Thirdly, they open up spaces for experimenting with diverse ways of dwelling in the urban environment and developing grassroots activism by embracing the diverse necessities epitomised by their heterogeneous social composition beyond the shared condition of stark material deprivation. This way of demanding a 'right to the city' and commoning happens by re-appropriating the means and sites where neoliberal social reproduction and division of labour occur and accumulate profit, and therefore happen at the direct expense of a capitalist system that is already undergoing a deep crisis of legitimacy and endurance (Caffentzis, 2002; Federici et al., 2012).

Given what is at stake in the act of squatting for housing purposes, it is not surprising that, as the following chapters discuss extensively, housing squatters and activists 'are sitting ducks for the forces of repression' (Martínez et al., 2013, p.15). In particular, their heterogeneous social composition is targeted for experimenting with multifarious repressive devices whose basic common denominator is to impair the replicability of 'socially dangerous' politics and behaviours such as squatting for housing purposes, as Chapters 3 and 6 in particular describe. Once again, a solid framing of squatting within urban commons and the broader crisis of neoliberal social reproduction helps us understand politically and theoretically why a similar effort is practised against movements who have a thriving history not only of contentious politics but also of co-operation with institutions in shaping socially-oriented public policies, as the case of the *Regional Deliberation* presented in Chapter 3 (Armati, 2015; Caciagli, 2016) portrays. Indeed, if we undermine the ideological impact of housing for neoliberal social reproduction as a material and subjectivating leverage, we fail to grasp what is at stake in the conflict revolving around the tactics and strategies envisioned in order to recast the 'right to the city' through acts of re-appropriation that multiply urban commons.

Indeed, the argument that squatting is merely an act dictated by an arbitrary opposition to the rule of law is a quite inconsistent one, whereas the dramatic figures of housing emergency in Rome are obvious even to the more inattentive, or conservative, observer. Only when we adopt a more rounded perspective concerning the overall function of housing inside the city do we understand that the descriptor 'socially dangerous' is not an insult, but the verification of a fact. The fact that this squatting is undermining the conditions upon which mainstream housing and private ownership are

articulated entails destabilising the bedrocks and pre-conditions of capitalist reproduction, subjectivation and accumulation from which spatialised inequalities stem. In this respect, this thesis advocates for the importance and necessity of these ‘socially dangerous’ urban commons within a city like Rome, for legality and justice are blatantly two quite inconsistent things, especially in a system structurally established on the maintenance of inequality. This claim has also shaped the choice of *activist ethnography*, discussed in the following chapter as the most appropriate methodology for researching on the ground the points I have addressed, while maintaining a firm ethical and political commitment towards the action of these movements, and the forms of commoning they manage to create against all odds.

## **CHAPTER 2. The Activist Ethnographic Method inside housing squats**

### **What is activist ethnography?**

The experience of being a researcher and an activist inside spaces like Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz is an intimate, committed and thought-provoking experience. Living there, indeed, demands a questioning of the way we experience everydayness and relating to others in what we have internalised, akin to what is discussed in the previous theoretical chapter, as the privileged space of intimacy and individual fulfilment, that is, our home. Insofar as many spaces are communal and many activities are shared, the co-squatters, from children to adults, tend to knock on your door at every time of day and night to offer you a meal, or to ask for help with problems that might occur. Hence, there is nothing like feeling exhausted, squeezed in time and drawn (albeit reluctantly) into the frenzy of a daily life such as this to challenge every internalised notion of private space and, most of all, privacy. Indeed, the experience of community, space and sharing I have made in the housing squats is in no way comparable to what one could experience in 'mainstream' and normative forms of dwelling. It demands not only mobilising continuously, but being permanently questioned about one's notion of personal and individual boundaries in the management of daily events, encounters and relationships (see Scheper-Hughes, 1995).

Because of this, I asked myself many times whether I had lost the grip on my research, how to account earnestly for the experience I was living, and also how I could contribute to leaving a legacy to the community I had joined in my double guise of activist and researcher. Nonetheless, now that my fieldwork is completed (but my activist role is not!), and against all odds, I definitely think that the type of committed research I engaged with was the only ethical choice I could possibly make, considering my own subjectivity and the topic of my research: the daily organisational practices of housing squats' dwellers in order to claim the right to the city. Indeed, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes piercingly asks, 'What makes anthropology and anthropologists exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and even political) stand on the working out of historical events as we are privileged to witness them?' (Scheper-Hughes, 1995, p.411). This modality of combining social science, activism and political commitment to the field that I deployed during my

year-long fieldwork is therefore what many anthropologists and ethnographers have termed *activist ethnography*. This definition draws upon the groundwork of activist research provided by Charles Hale, concerning his involvement in the landmark case of the Awas Tingni tribe vs. the Nicaraguan State as ‘a method through which we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results’ (Hale, 2006, p.97). Admittedly, this a quite challenging definition for the ‘ethical’ policies ruling research throughout neoliberal academia nowadays, as well as for the notion of the social scientist (and anthropologist) as a neutral spectator who is supposed to produce valuable and generalisable accounts of reality. On the other hand, this is first and foremost a type of ethnography personally engaged, politically committed, and collaborative in nature, during which the researcher generates practical, embodied and situated knowledge by staking their positionality and using their own body as the primary research tool, on top of being the site of where embodied emotions and feelings manifest themselves (Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Parr, 2001; Colectivo Situaciones, 2005; Juris, 2007; Martínez, 2014).

The goal of activist ethnography, therefore, is to unearth the logics and the dispersed subaltern knowledges underpinning autonomous practices and forms of living in the space (including those enacted by grassroots urban movements) in order to trigger critical reflections that could be relevant in both academic and militant milieus, by outlining an embodied engagement in direct action and everyday practices (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003; Juris, 2007; Martínez, 2014; Russell, 2015; Apoifis, 2016). Given this bodily involvement into spatial and subjective situatedness, activist research has no object, inasmuch as it disavows positivist epistemology and the assertion that the social scientist should produce neutral accounts of a supposed truth. Rather, the activist-researcher claims that any kind of knowledge produced by the means of research is inherently partisan and purposeful. Hence, their enquiry does not aim at generating quantifiable knowledge and rules, since the scope of the research is to contribute to nurturing the situated and contextual development of the autonomous forms of life they have investigated (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003; Russell, 2015). Based upon these methodological premises, in this chapter I outline how I have practised the activist ethnography methodology inside the



housing squats Tiburtina 770 and Metropolitiz, affiliated to the Housing Rights Movement ‘Blocchi Precari Metropolitani’. In the first section, I recount how the epistemological foundations of activist ethnography have been consistent in relation to my subjective and political orientation towards the research design and the formulation of the research questions. I also describe the way in which I accessed the squats and gained the consensus of my fellow-squatters and activists to participate to my project by establishing mutual trustworthiness and involvement as a foundational principle of my fieldwork. Then, I address the different ethnographic techniques I used for collecting data, as well as the reflections I developed as for the implications of the multiple levels of consent and engagement entrenched in the nature of my project and the political milieu I was immersed in. The last sections are devoted to discussing the relational ethics encompassed by my activist ethnography, and how I addressed them in terms of politics of representation and dissemination.

### **Immanent research questions for an engaged research design**

As Juris and Khasnabish (2013b, p.372-3) contend, ethnography entails from the outset a partially subjective pursuit and interest in human actions, the acknowledgement of the partisan nature of grounded research and the researcher's reflexivity in the interactions and relationships with others on the field. Additionally, I had to confront the set of problems connected to activist research design, underpinning epistemology, ethics and techniques to deploy in the field in order to investigate the role of everyday practices in the Housing Rights Movements' composition (see Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006, p.731). Indeed, activist ethnography is a different methodology than participant observation, whereas the latter still implies a supposedly detached and description-oriented demeanour (see Smith, 1990). On the opposite, ‘as a minimal requirement, activist ethnographies must always stress the inseparability of knowledge and action, which impel them to be self-consciously interventionist in approach’ (Routledge, 2013, p.267). Hence, activist ethnography is a modality of research that presupposes the entanglement of a subjective orientation, the

engagement with shared emotions of activism, and a collective, horizontally-based process of critical reflexivity inside the praxis (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003; Routledge, 2013; Russell, 2015). Furthermore, activist ethnography offers the possibility of forging bonds of solidarity and developing critical reflections with the subjects involved in the research in order to actively contribute to realising the value of justice underpinning their political and existential modalities. Therefore, 'it implies a concern with action, reflection, and empowerment (of oneself and others) in order to challenge oppressive power relations' (Routledge, 2013, p.251). This active commitment centres on the belief that, whenever confronted with extreme inequality and autonomous ways of coping with it, the ethnographer/social scientist is somehow forced to leave behind the founding axiom of anthropology, which is the equality of all human beings in the sight of anthropology (Scheper-Hughes, 1995, p.416). The reason for this is that, as Smith (1990) argues, activist ethnography entrenches as an epistemological and ontological premise the assumption of social realities as inherently problematic and the contradictory. Yet, they should be analysed through an epistemology of participation that is concerned with the multifarious ways in which things are done within situated and autonomous geographies that, in turn, are produced within a space-relational frame (de Certeau, 1984; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Mason *et al.*, 2013).

This is to say that this methodology is inherently related to the rhythm stemming from the intersection between the self-organised squatters peculiar routines, and the uneven, dissonant pace of the surrounding urban space. Insofar as this rhythm is attuned through a constant adaptation to unfolding contingencies, resilience should be also the fundamental approach adopted by the researcher when redefining the questions and goals of the research in the process of engaging with everyday life and direct action. Indeed, as Russell (2015) argues, activist ethnography can be understood as the gradual acknowledgement and focus upon a specific contradiction, inconsistency or paradox emerging in the contextual contingencies into which an autonomous political and social milieu is immersed. Once the ontological/epistemological/political problem is targeted, activist ethnography can be mastered as the entanglement of collective theory and everyday praxis (see Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). The purpose is thus to collectively craft a theoretical and political toolbox which can also be used for enhancing activists', grassroots

urban movements' and engaged academics' resilience in the practice of organising everyday life, while furthering the production of grassroots knowledge. This is to say that rhizomatic social movements' practices cannot be addressed as mere case studies, for they produce situated bodies of knowledge and concepts that shape the activist-researcher's analysis of the problem, as well as the collective debate over its resolution (Casas-Cortés et al., 2013, p.214-5; Routledge, 2013, p.253). In my case, because my activist-research design was admittedly partisan and scope-oriented, my goal was to explore housing squats' modalities of furthering autonomous geographies, urban commons and contributing to the struggle for the 'right to the city' ( Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Vasudevan, 2017) from the standpoint of the squatters and the activists of the Housing Rights Movements. Besides, my goal was to delineate the modalities through which they create networks of solidarity and cooperation with other dispossessed urban dwellers and grassroots urban movements (see Fournier, 2002). Therefore, the critical methodology I adopted within my project is constituted by at least three main modalities: (1) collective reflection about the forms of life and autonomy emerging within social movements; (2) analysing the movements' goals, tactics and strategies within a situated spatial context; (3) describing how they interact and network with other subjects and political entities (Juris, 2007, p.173-4). These aspects were refined into the following research questions:

1. *What are the autonomous spatial practices and organisational forms that housing squats' dwellers in Rome devise in order to practice the 'right to the city'?*
2. How does the squatters' everyday organising influence the political alliances they develop with diverse political subjects (e.g. autonomous trade unions, local groups, social centres) struggling on the terrain of the 'right to the city'?
3. How do these practices contribute to rethinking the categories used to conceive of notions of space in the urban environment?

## **Negotiating the fieldwork**

In order to answer these questions, I decided to conduct a one-year-long ethnographic

fieldwork in housing squats in Rome, and especially in those affiliated to the movement Blocchi Precari Metropolitani (whose peculiarities I discuss in the following Chapter 3). Whereas the choice of Rome and then Blocchi Precari Metropolitani as the subject of my research was deliberate, the choice of the research sites (Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz) was negotiated during the preliminary stages of the fieldwork. Indeed, I opted for Rome in the first place because of the remarkable relevance of the phenomenon of squatting for housing purposes. As for the getting in contact with the Housing Right Movement Blocchi Precari Metropolitani (BPM), I relied upon my activist network in Italy. Indeed, during my bachelor degree in Milan and Master in Bologna respectively, I had been involved in social centres that approached the struggle for housing rights, and that were part of the same network *Abitare nella Crisi* of which BPM was one of the main promoters. Then, my social and political network has been my “gatekeeper” for getting in touch with some BPM activists in Rome, and for a preliminary fieldwork visit in mid-November 2014, during which I visited my first choices as research sites, Metropoliz and 4 Stelle.

Indeed, my original intent was to scrutinise these two housing squats for they are located in the same borough (Tor Sapienza), and present similar features in terms of public profile and recognisability to the general public. The plan was to live in either one of the two from January 2015 onwards, subject firstly to availability of space and secondarily to the squatters' consent. Yet there were no empty spaces where I could be accommodated in 4 Stelle, so I and the BPM activists I met decided to opt for Metropoliz. Again, in early January, it emerged that the space that I could have occupied had been left pretty much in disarray by the previous ‘lodger’, and would have required time-consuming and expensive refurbishment. Then, the activists informed me that the housing squat Tiburtina 770 had a spare room in the basement floor that I could arrange fairly easily. Also, the inhabitants had already given their preliminary consent to hosting me. After my arrival in mid-January 2015, I then came to realise that this particular housing squat was extremely interesting with respect to my research interests for a number of reasons.

Whereas it was similar to Metropoliz in terms of number of families, ethnic composition and basic internal organisational practices, it presented quite different features in terms of strategies of political and social relations with the surrounding neighbourhood. Therefore, analysing these differential choices would have allowed me to shed a light upon

how the practices of networking and forging solidarity networks are deployed by housing squats affiliated to the same movements on the grounds of their situated infrastructures' features, social composition and territorial location. Therefore, I decided after some weeks I spent living inside Tiburtina 770, I decided to replace 4 Stelle as a research site, and to turn my possibly temporary accommodation into Tiburtina 770 into a stable one. Once I settled in Tiburtina 770, I gradually started to integrate myself as an inhabitant at first, and then as an activist. Yet especially during the first months, the pace of my participation as an activist did not match the rhythm of my data collection. Indeed, I had to progressively understand acknowledge the multiple layers of consent concerned involved into the initial access to the squats as a researcher, and to work on them accordingly in order not to spoil the bonds of mutual trustworthiness, commitment and recognisability I was progressively establishing.

### **Collective consent comes first!**

When it comes down to doing research inside squatted places, taking into account collective consent is crucial in order not to be treated with wariness or, worst, being perceived as a threatening person for the collective. As I said, the bedrock of my political reliability relied on my prior activism in Bologna and Milan as well, for it made me someone already 'known' and therefore trustworthy to be integrated into a housing squat. On my preliminary visit, I met in person the activists in Rome, and started to create personal and political relationships with them. Although the consent of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani was given and my idea of research was intelligible to them, obtaining the collective consent of the squatters' communities has been a longer and more sensitive process. If, on the one hand, the jargon of politics and comradeship creates more straightforward alliances and sympathies with the activists, on the other hand I had to deploy a deeper emotional intelligence in order to relate with the squatters' heterogeneous social composition. Indeed, if being introduced to the squatters by the activists has been the first step in order to be 'formally' allowed to stay, introducing myself to the assemblies

of Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz became a pivotal passage for legitimising my presence in their eyes.

Indeed, during the assemblies, I did not limit myself to introducing myself, nor did I conceal any detail about the scope and origin of my research project. Indeed, I explained at length my research design and questions, and explained how I got to such an interest. To this purpose, I narrated my activist background and my previous involvement in the struggle for housing rights since my bachelor, and how this affected my choice to pursue an academic career. Besides this, I emphasised my gratitude towards the communities that had welcomed me, and made explicit that I was there not only as an observant researcher, but also as an activist that would have cooperated with them in everyday life and mobilisation as a peer. Lastly, I gave heartfelt thanks to the communities who had welcomed me, and made myself available to help and cooperate with them. As this speech resulted in both cases in clapping, welcoming greetings and invitations for dinner from the squatters, I felt that the first (and thick) layer of ice I had sensed during my first days of permanence was truly broken. Nonetheless, becoming part of the community, and someone whom they would trust to have a confidential, yet recorded interaction proved to be a horse of a different colour.

On the one hand, as a new dweller of Tiburtina 770, I signed up immediately for participating to the cleaning of the communal areas and shared bathrooms of the area where I was accommodated. Besides, I was included in the weekly shifts for monitoring the outer area of the squat<sup>1</sup>; last but not least, I regularly participated in all the communal activities and moments of sociability that customarily involved the squatters (from open parties to the squat's decision-making assembly). My level of engagement inside the squat augmented progressively as I started to be recognised and addressed to as a Blocchi Precari Metropolitani activist. This additional commitment entailed especially being more involved into the organising of internal activities of Tiburtina 770 as part of the *comitato*<sup>2</sup>, whilst also in Metropoliz I became one of the point of reference for dealing with a number of the squatters' daily-life concerns. This involved helping to spread communications,

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1 What in chapter 4 I define as “pickets”.

2 A group of squatters coordinating and supervising the internal works, and whose functions and formation are described in Chapter 4 and 5.

writing down signposts with appointments and meeting points, taking part in direct action issues, as well as tackling problems that the squatters could not cope with by themselves. For instance, I often happened to provide help in sorting out bureaucratic problems arising because of the existing legislative framework against squatters<sup>3</sup> by resorting to the skills and knowledge I had cumulated during my previous years of activism, and developing new ones according to the contingent necessities<sup>4</sup>. Dwelling upon the latter, I accepted to help to run the weekly anti-eviction infopoint located inside Tiburtina 770, supporting the lawyer and the other activists in the counselling pertaining housing and even migration-related legal issues.

As for my role inside Metropolitiz, my positionality as a researcher was more intelligible to its inhabitants, insofar as the space has been studied and walked through from its creation in 2009 by many artists, journalists and even academics interested in its peculiar experience of being a housing squat and self-managed, lived museum at the same time<sup>5</sup>. Besides, my constant participation during initiatives, weekly openings of the museum and other day-to-day activities (e.g. parties, counter-mapping laboratories, weekly ‘social assemblies’ with the individuals and groups cooperating on the maintenance of the internal museum) made me quite rapidly a ‘known’ person who could walk into the area without being stopped and questioned about who I was. More generally, as an activist of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, I took part in assemblies and collective decision-making, represented the movement within public assemblies and meeting, cooperated in managing social media and writing public statements, and arranged public initiatives. I also made personal contacts and acquaintances with activists, artists and academics available for organising cultural happenings and initiatives both inside Metropolitiz and Tiburtina 770 (e.g. presentation of books, movie screenings, gatherings of researchers inside the squats, and so on) (see Martínez, 2014).

As for both settings, establishing a relationship of mutual trustworthiness with the squatters necessitated choosing not to use any covert techniques, nor concealing any detail about my identity even in terms of class background. Indeed, my research design has

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3 Such as the Article 5, whose text and technicalities are discussed into the following Chapter 3.

4 These circumstances are described within Chapter 7 as *social activism*.

5 The genesis and the development of the *MAAM* (Museo dell'Altrove e dell'Altrove Metropolitano/ Metropolitan Museum of the Other and the Elsewhere) are narrated in Chapter 3 and Chapter 6.

entailed a radical openness in adopting an earnest, relational, and collaborative approach to consent. Otherwise said, I had to acknowledge it was a matter not only of individuality, but a collective process whose goal was to establish with the community of squatters and activists 'long-term relationships of mutual commitment and trust, become entangled with complex relations of power, and live the emotions associated with direct action and activist networking' (Juris, 2007, p.165). Consistently with this effort, my identification with the fellow-squatters never distorted the truth that my solidarity was based on my political and ideological imprinting. Hence, I had deliberately chosen to live in there and use my academic, educational and even economic privilege as a white, female, highly-educated early-career researcher with a regular income in the UK for providing insight into a political struggle I strongly sympathised with (Routledge, 1996, p.527).

According to the same commitment to truthfulness, I never tried to dramatise my situation, nor implied that I had decided to live in a housing squat out of necessity. In a nutshell, I decided from the outset to be extremely overt about the political beliefs and personal background in which my research interest was rooted. This is to say that collective consent and mutual honesty had been strictly interwoven throughout my research, and had constituted the bedrock for letting the squatters count on me in 'the assuming of various participant roles such as a facilitator, networker, mediator, accompanier, activist knowledge producer, independent media practitioner, or sympathetic interlocutor; and the enactment of diverse forms of mutual solidarity' (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013b, p. 372). Once collective consent was established, I started undertaking some experiments about how to implement different data-gathering techniques. Immediately, I understood that I had to be quite resilient in adapting my methods to the peculiar circumstances of my fieldwork. In particular, I became aware that my necessity as a researcher to collect data was to be ethically subordinated to the differential levels of possibility and constraints that the squatters had to consider in order to participate to the project when considering their differential statuses, identities and materialities. As I made my commitment in this respect unequivocal, I managed to acquire trustworthiness and familiarity as a fellow-squatter, an activist a researcher.

Indeed, the squatters and the activists cannot be conceived as homogeneous entities, but rather as polycentric, in motion assemblages of extremely diverse urban



dwellers that are constituted as social and political communities through the daily, resilient negotiation of the modalities of their commoning of contentious politics and alternative forms of social reproduction (The Free Association, 2011; Casas-Cortés *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, in the same way in which they set up in progress the conditions for their daily living, they also establish the boundaries for the processes of enquiry and knowledge production that might occur within their circuits. This is to say that the dissemination of a catchy story, or the craving for details who can add, can never override the need to preserve the integrity and legal conditions of the safety of the single squatters, the activists and the movement as a whole.

So, I had to find my own way of combining the ethnographic techniques I planned to use with these contextual limitations in order to retain the subjective orientation of my research (Russell, 2015, p.224-6), as well as a solid relational ethical approach to the Movement which I had joined. This meant adjusting my methods to the pace of everyday life in order to investigate the role of everyday practices in Housing Rights Movements' constitution, whilst adopting all the necessary precautions in order not to cause any discomfort or damage to anyone (see Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006, p. 731; Black, 2012, p. 21). In the following sections, I describe in depth how I combined a critically rigorous research approach to the resilience required by the choice to be an activist ethnographer inside a context such as housing squats (see Routledge, 1996; Juris, 2007; Russell, 2015).

### **Walking, photographing and writing: get to know your local squat!**

As getting familiar the spatial situatedness within which grassroots movements operate is crucial to any activist research design, ethnographic 'ambling' was really important to me in order to understand the ordinary life of the neighbourhoods where the squats were situated. When inspecting the space of the squats and the neighbourhoods where they are located, I adopted at a slow pace that would allow me to collect materials as many fieldnotes, pictures and other additional data as possible (see Duneier, 1999; Black, 2012). For this reason, at least twice a month I would sweep the 5 kilometre distance from

Metropoliz to Tiburtina 770 (and vice versa) on foot. On the other hand, during the participation in direct action and demonstrations I was forced mostly to adopted mostly non-reflexive modalities of walking through space, that led me to capture snapshots of something that caught my attention in those particular circumstances (such as recurring symbols, the confrontation with riot police, graphic banners, and so on). Through the combinations of these different types of walk into I collected the pictures that are included in the ethnographic Chapters 4-7, that aim at portraying the diverse components of the life inside housing squat. To this purpose, they mostly capture three combinations of temporality and spaces: the everyday life inside the squats; the housing squats' buildings and their surroundings; demonstrations and political initiatives organised inside the city. So, they aim at showing the diverse components of the life inside housing squats, as well as what captured my visual attention throughout the fieldwork. Also, the differential perspectives on reality they offer (from the pictures of the architectural structure of the housing squats to daily life objects) represent also the diverse levels of intimacy and knowledge I felt towards those spaces, and my being comfortable with taking pictures thereof.

This is the reason why I can say that the pictures I collected, especially during the first two-three months in Rome, have a more impressionistic or posed feel, whilst those taken later in the fieldwork portray my increased familiarity with my everyday environment, as well as my deeper attention towards smaller details (Black, 2012, p.22-3). This is to say that the pictures represent once again quite a partisan, situated and subjective account of what solicited my own attention and emotions. This is consistent with Warren's idea that photographs, like other ethnographic material, ought not to be considered as factual mirrors of reality, but as carriers of a situated and contingent meaning 'generated through the context it is viewed or made within' (Warren, 2005, p. 873). Due to the necessity of having to very quickly capture particular snapshots of everydayness or particular junctures in political events, most of the images included inside the thesis have been shot with a smartphone instead of a professional camera. These pictures have been later used to complement my written impressions about the field and events I was involved in, and have taken mostly three forms: fieldnotes; fieldwork diary; and what I have called the 'fieldwork diary board'.

As diverse ethnographers agree, fieldnotes are the textual representation of a subjective positioning towards the fieldwork and the research questions orienting it. Hence, they involve a critical effort of making sense of reality, interpreting its features, and writing down what the researcher deems more relevant in a particular moment through a situated standpoint towards the world (see Eriksson *et al.*, 2012). During my year-long fieldwork, I filled a number of notebooks with the more disparate inputs, impressions and on-the-go scribbles that I did not have time to write down properly during a particular moment of the day due to the fast pace of the events around me and my involvement in their occurrence, but that I felt important to develop as soon as my packed schedule of activist-ethnographer would have allowed me to. This happened especially in the case of particular events in the squatters' community (e.g. contested internal assemblies, collective cleaning, discussions in the corridors), during random informal interactions occurring in everyday moments of sociability, and especially amidst moments of direct action and demonstrations in which I was participating.

So, I often used to take advantage of my spare time and the (rare) moments during which I was alone (e.g. commutes on the tube or the bus, my lunch-break, late night) to transcribe quick notes and keywords on my notebook. Then, I would later adjust, expand and file them in the fieldwork journal and in the fieldwork diary board (which contains an agenda-style list of the pivotal events and mobilisations that occurred during the year I spent there) that I also digitised on my encrypted laptop (see also Black, 2012; Apoifis, 2016). As much as these materials have been very relevant for grasping the sense of the broader context I was experiencing, the relational part of the data-gathering process was the more relevant for being able to recount the contentious politics, political relations and daily forms of social reproduction developed by the squatters according to their spatial, political and even infrastructural contingencies. Following this logic, the following section describes the challenges I faced in collecting interviews and writing down informal interactions, and thus how I adapted the more consolidated ethnographic techniques within the context in which I was immersed.

## **Take it or leave it: the burdens of formal consent and tape recorders**

Overall, during the year I spent on fieldwork and in some occasions afterwards, I collected about 30 in-depth interviews/interactions involving squatters living respectively inside Metropolitiz and Tiburtina 770, the activists of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, and other subjects cooperating with the Housing Rights Movements within their local political networks. Informal conversation occurred in diverse circumstances (from demonstrations to day-to-day interactions) sometimes replace formally recorded interviews, whilst other times they were used in addition to them (see Smith, 1990, p.641). Indeed, I often happened to ask my interlocutors their permission to report bits of an informal interaction, if I was not spontaneously encouraged by them to do so, whenever particularly funny or relevant anecdotes came up in the conversation. In all these cases, and with each and every one of my ‘interviewees’, looking after the relational aspect of consent was crucial in order to mutually adjust my willingness to ask questions and clarification with their subjective postures and circumstances. This is to say that the ethical concerns involved in the interaction with individuals entailed relational skills and forms of reciprocation (see Gillan and Pickerill, 2012) that could not be fulfilled with the mere signing of an informed consent form.

In both in the case of activists and squatters, consent was given informally in the vast majority of the cases, because the idea of filling papers was perceived as weird (if not suspicious) by those who considered it as a counterpoint to the principle of anonymity and the privacy of the interaction I was promising. The most frequent question I was posed was why I was anonymising the research if someone could retrieve their full names, date of interview and location details (Apoifis, 2016, p.7), for instance during an eventual eviction. Honestly, as an activist, I could not be but sympathetic with these objections; however, due my research requirements, I decided to find a middle ground that could suit everyone's necessities and concerns, and focused on getting at least informal consent and explaining the whole procedure I adopted for storing, analysing and anonymising my data. If the signing of the informed consent form required negotiation and flexibility on both sides, using the tape recorder during one-to-one interviews was a far more controversial issue. Indeed, I reckoned it was perceived as a potentially “dangerous” object throughout my

fieldwork, and even when my own trustworthiness and reliability were no longer questioned.

Whereas the activists were more familiar with being interviewed with tape recorders for example by journalists and academics, the squats' dwellers (especially Tiburtina 770's ones) appeared often uncomfortable when it came down to recording my interactions with them. Whilst these problems were partly sorted by mutually adjusting to each other's needs, other biases and fears could not simply be overcome, and led me to adapt my interviewing techniques according to the circumstances and the person. In the first place, I waited a couple of months for scheduling recorded interviews after having undertaken a 'test interview' two weeks after my moving in Tiburtina 770 with the woman living beside my door. Despite the trust and incipient bond of friendship between us, she froze in front of the recorder, and did not manage to speak for more than five minutes of interview. Off-record I then asked why she felt so uncomfortable, and she raised different issues: firstly, the fear that this would not be completely anonymous; she was not sure about whether other Blocchi Metropolitani activists would listen to them (although I thought I had my obligations as a researcher explained quite straightforwardly and clearly); lastly, she felt compelled to be discursively performative as her words and voice would remain on record.

After writing down these issues and consulting with my supervisors, I came to the conclusion that my fellow squatters needed to be more familiar with me in day-to-day interactions before letting me access the private space of their houses with in-depth questions and a recording device. Additionally, even when I got closer with the majority of the people living in Tiburtina 770 and Metropolitani, I devised some additional precautions that might make them feel more comfortable in front of the recorder. Firstly, I scheduled the interview at least one week beforehand. Secondly, I would disclose the general topic of the questions in advance (e.g. concerning social reproduction, migration, activism and so on) so that they could get into the mindset and not put 'on the spot' about complex issues. Once the time of the actual interview arrived, I would introduce them to the whole process, explaining in detail the function of informed consent form, why I was writing down general biographical notes, the function of the notepad alongside the recorder, and so on. Yet, despite this care, some interviewees still perceived the use of the recorder as problematic

if not overtly threatening, because this device is associated in the experience of many urban dwellers (and especially of migrants) with monitoring, surveillance and overall social engineering (see Black, 2012, p.20-1; Staid, 2014, p.14).

The experience, then, of interviewees freezing and choking in front of the recorder, occurred in several other occasions after the first experience with my 'neighbour'. If the problem was related to performance anxiety, it would be enough to disguise the recorder, for instance under a fruit basket, in order to make it less visible. Otherwise, I decided to prioritise the comfort of the interviewees and to turn off the recorder and just write down interview notes. Lastly, in order to stress the absolute anonymity and confidentiality of the interactions I collected, I would refuse to let other people listen to the recorded interview (for instance spouses, siblings, relatives or friends) even if asked so by the interviewees themselves. The demeanour I adopted in the data collection exemplifies the challenges that are at stake in a relational, situated and political methodology as activist-ethnography, whereas every stage of data-gathering entails deploying emotional intelligence and sensitivity in order to respect the welfare and subjectivity of the participants with whom I was sharing my daily life as well. The following section recounts how this ethical rationale and political sensitivity has been also applied to the phase of systematising my data, and the extent to which data analysis itself has been intrinsic to the fieldwork.

### **The contradictory politics of ethnographic writing**

The nature of my activist ethnography and of my subjective orientation obviously also affected my data analysis, since the relational reflexivity I adopted in the stage of data collection had to be transferred at the moment of the interpretation and transcription. First of all, the moment of analysis and the fieldwork itself could not be disentangled, insofar as the data, and their qualitative connotation, were inherently bound to the situated, relational context of their collection. This is consistent with the epistemology of participation and everydayness in social movements' constitution (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Mason *et*

*al.*, 2013) that underpins my original research design, and with the sensitivity towards them ingrained in my decennial activist background. On the grounds that the importance of certain events or details depended upon their situated contingency, in the majority of the cases I had to contextualise on the spur of the moment those seemingly petty details and micro-events that would set the tone of the types of alternative social reproduction and autonomous, contentious politics I was involved in within housing squats and movements. For this reason, the development of fieldnotes into the fieldwork diary, and the categorisation of visuals, occurred mostly during the year of fieldwork.

It is relevant to underline that here, ‘systematising’ my notes stands for arranging them in a set of coherent and complete sentences, and eventually creating integrative memos (Emerson *et al.*, 2011, p.162) linking together different sets of events and interactions. Later, I could complement them by adding pictures and eventually including references to literature that could help me frame theoretically what I had empirically observed. The process of ethnographic writing therefore entailed creating a connection between divergent temporal, spatial and political scales of experience and reflexivity in order to make sense of the ethnographic picture I was attempting to compose. In this respect, the fieldnotes represented the more challenging bit of collected data, for they were often scribbled compilations of words and sketched sensations on paper. As for their analysis, I adopted a two-steps strategy. I used the “diary board” for tracking down the date and basic header describing the events or facts I had witnessed. Then, I developed their narration in the extended diary combining of theoretical considerations, political reflections and emotional feedbacks that thus combined an emphasis on theoretical and political implications, as well as on everyday praxis and feelings (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Russell, 2015). The output contained in the Chapters 4-7 reproduces this approach to the data and their interpretation. I also adopted a quite similar interpretive method when I engaged with the analysis of both the informal recorded interviews and informal interactions I had collected. Admittedly, it was quite different from what I planned while compiling my research design, inasmuch as I had predicted to deploy a certain degree of formality and systematisation in the coding of the interviews (Kvale, 1996). Nonetheless, as soon as I dealt with the “spurious” nature of my data I realise that I had to devise my customised method of analysis and transcription in order to embed the interviews into my

ethnographic writing in a meaningful way. Once again, resilience became the linchpin for organising my work (see Duneier, 1999; Black, 2012).

First of all, I had to cope with the fact that I could not use computer softwares for transcribing and encoding, since the vast majority of my interviewees were not Italian native speakers. This is to say that, even though the Italian language was the operational one for the day-to-day interactions inside the squats, and therefore for the interviews/interactions as well, its use could not be transcribed by using coding systems that presuppose a certain degree of language mastery and knowledge. Indeed, in their daily life as well as when interacting with me, my fellow squatters and interviewees used a mixture of languages and diverse dialectal jargon that could not be captured or rendered through transcription software, and whose meaning was often clarified and negotiated during the interview itself (Colectivo Situaciones, 2005; Apoifis, 2016).

Given the complexity of the discursive and interpretive layers ingrained in the interviews and their length (that reached up to ninety minutes of recording), I did not proceed to the full transcription of each one, for it would have been excessively time-consuming and redundant. Instead, after listening to each recording even several times as a whole, I proceeded to writing down their content using keywords for recuperating the context by generating an *ad-hoc* pocket of meanings for interpretative purposes (Kvale, 1996, p.203-4). Also, I helped myself with the written notes I had in order to recall the specific factual and emotional setting of each interaction. According to this preliminary outline, I selected the paragraphs that were more relevant for the argument I was developing in each ethnographic chapter, translated and then transcribed them verbatim. The criteria for assessing the relevance of my collected materials pertained to the degrees of integration between my theoretical arguments and the multiple arenas of action in which every person was involved and situating their narration. Hence, whenever possible, I attempted to delineate a self-contained pocket of meaning or to account for a specific bit of reasoning upon a certain subject matter, yet being careful not to diminishing the complexity of the interviewees' personalities and biographies to mono-dimensional and stereotyped narrative patterns (see Burdick, 1995, p.381). In the process of integrating interviews and within the main body of my thesis' text, I clearly perceived the dissonance between the polyphonic "chaos" ingrained into the interviewees' multiple languages and



discursive regimes, and their ‘operationalisation’ into the Academic English jargon. My feeling was that, in the attempt of disseminating a piece of work sympathetic with the cause of Housing Rights Movements and urban squatters in Rome within the circuits of Anglo-Saxon academia, I was unwittingly enforcing a normative, dominant hierarchy in discursive regimes that opposed tangible class and cultural barriers to the vast majority of my fellow-squatters and activists. First of all, I was inevitably reducing the complexity of the idioms and mixed languages I heard and used in a translation into a supposedly universal language, the UK English idiom. Hence, this issue was immanent to the politics of representation that pertain the academic milieu, as well as to my contradictory positionality and subjective posture within the fieldwork and even afterwards as an activist-ethnographer (see Eriksson et al., 2012).

Secondly, the use of the academic style of writing, and the recourse to the British language for systematising the information I had collected, was inherently exclusionary for the non-English squatters and activists in reading and commenting upon my writing and transcriptions. Therefore, after reflecting about how to tackle this discursive regime without impairing the comprehension of my thesis, the best negotiation I came up with in the process of analysis and transcription was not to attempt to retain the pace of the original structure of the conversation, even though this can result in a fragmentation of the discourse and in a lessened grammatical coherence. Also, in order to maintain the original tone and atmosphere of the conversation, I chose to leave inside the text some idiomatic expressions that were emphasised or used frequently during the discussion. Nonetheless, adopting these narrative tricks did not resolve all the contradictions intrinsic to the relation between academic research and activist commitment that cannot be resolved even within partisan methodologies such as the activist ethnography.

Indeed, no matter how I “manipulated” the body of my text, I had to compile it according to the dominant discursive modalities, class and culture-based hierarchies that rule the process of knowledge production and circulation within neoliberal academia. While reflecting upon them, I reckoned that the best I could do was to foster reflexivity upon these contradictions in as many academic contexts I could (from seminars and workshops to conferences), using as ethical and epistemological compasses the principles of reciprocity and situatedness underpinning the activist-ethnographer's research design

(see Gillan and Pickerill, 2012, p.138-9). Yet, the more important (and generative) discussion for negotiating with these issues occurred, once again, with the squatters, the activists and possibly other researchers that are currently engaged in the same field of research.

Nevertheless, to be honest, I was never asked by any of my participants to double-check the content of what I wrote, for they trusted me and my way of interpreting things as a comrade. Whenever I published something in Italian (i.e. Grazioli, 2017b), I shared the .pdf with them and received mostly general feedback and appreciation from everyone. Also, they got a deeper insight in my theoretical approach and detailed methodologies during the research workshops I organised with other activist researchers inside Metropolitiz from 2016 onwards. Yet, I felt throughout the process of writing that I owed to these people something more than being trustworthy in not feeding the derogatory propaganda against squatting and activists. I wanted to have a genuinely positive outcome onto the ongoing debate about urban squatting, and the relationship between squatting, new housing and planning policies into a city like Rome. Consequently, I needed an even closer cooperation and dialogue with them in order to juggle with the ethical dilemmas entrenched in the politics of representation, processes of dissemination and production of impact internal to the academic milieu (Gillan and Pickerill, 2012), and in order to elaborate an as much as possible dialogical and cooperative process of knowledge production with them (Martínez, 2014, p.19).

### **The collective impact of representation and dissemination**

Authors concerned with activist research have stressed that the ethics involved in this particular methodology ought to be embodied, contextual and based on the linchpin of reciprocity in each phase of the knowledge production process, from the negotiation of the condition of access to the research sites to the verification and dissemination of the final product (see Routledge 1996, 2013; Hale, 2006). Indeed, the main ethical dilemmas entrenched in an activist research project pertain the relevance that the knowledge

produced should have towards the movements in which the researcher is engaged, and the voices they should enhance in the process of dissemination (Gillan and Pickerill, 2012; Martínez, 2014). Hence, the ethical standards involved into this kind of ethnography transcends the good academic practices related to the individual consent of the participant and the securing of anonymity and confidentiality, whereas they are about a field of commitments that are not accountable within academic regulations (Hale, 2006, p.105). This is say that I had to confront the multiple ways in which the impact of the research could affect Housing Rights Movements in terms of its politics of representation and dissemination (Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Gillan and Pickerill, 2012; Russell, 2015).

Throughout my research project and in the writing phase, I reflected at length about the kind impact I wanted to reach through the dissemination of my research. The first one is to debunk criminalising or marginalising narration of squatting for housing by describing the richness of the existential and organisational practices deployed inside housing squats in Rome. Secondly, my goal is also to back eventual public policies who might acknowledge the autonomous regeneration stemming from squatting as one of the few rational and sustainable ways of regenerating the cityscape and responding to housing needs without further degrading urban ecologies. Lastly, I aim at contextualising the role of squatting for housing in furthering the reappropriation of “the right to the city” of the dispossessed urban dwellers inside a neoliberal and conflicted urban fabric as the one of Rome. To this purpose, I had to find a balance between different epistemological and intellectual registers that might enlighten contradictions and critical conundrums within the movements (see Hale, 2006, p.115), and the necessity not to disclose details that could give rise to negative consequences during the dissemination process.

Once again, the dialogue with other activist researchers, my fellow-squatters and comrades, was crucial in order to address the articulation of practice and theory underpinning the production of radical knowledge within neoliberal academia (see Burdick, 1995; Colectivo Situaciones, 2005; Russell, 2015). On the one hand, we have collectively extensively discussed the potentialities offered by academia for legitimising in a different light the regularisation (if not downright institutionalisation) of squatting for housing purposes. Indeed, academia can be a site where demonstrating that, within highly saturated and exploited environments like Rome, the autonomous regeneration of urban

empties represents a viable and sustainable option for tackling with the rampant housing deprivation crisis and its emergency manifestations<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, I had to undertake an individual reflection about the the dual loyalties intrinsic in my role as activist-researcher, the exclusionary nature of the academic pathways of dissemination towards the vast majority of my fellow-squatters and activists (Pickerill, 2008), and the inherently individual nature of my career advancements thanks to this research (Hale, 2006; Juris, 2007; Gillan and Pickerill, 2012; Apoifis, 2016). The conclusive remarks about this subject matter are summarised in the following section.

### **A research about, inside, for squatting**

This chapter has tried to portray to what extent the research project I chose to carry out “raises crucial issues of representational, ethical and political practice within (and without) academic enquiry, the consequences of which remain to be played out in multiple avenues of affinity within the crucible of conflict” (Routledge, 1996, p.528). In particular, my intent was to problematise the analytical depth enabled by such an insight into the field in the light of the necessity to design a research framework that would allow me to critically scrutinise two main elements. Firstly, the role of everyday social reproduction in the Housing Rights Movements' constitution and political elaboration (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Juris and Kasnabish, 2013b). Secondly, how this combination of political elaboration and everyday practices affects their modalities of struggling for the ‘right to the city’ inside the post-welfare urban fabric of Rome through squatting for housing purposes (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003; Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014; Russell, 2015; Vasudevan, 2017).

More in detail, the previous sections describe how my research project was conceived and developed throughout my doctoral degree according to the intent of developing a critical approach engaged with the practice of urban squatting within the

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<sup>6</sup> This is one of the main arguments addressed in the struggle for the implementation of the Regional Deliberation for Housing Emergency that I describe in the following Chapter 3 and within Chapter 7.

Housing Right Movement Blocchi Precari Metropolitani in Rome. Also, they explain why, in consideration of my activist background, I decided to explore first-hand the everydayness of squatting for housing purposes by spending my year of fieldwork as a fellow-squatter (see Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014) living into the housing squat Tiburtina 770, while spending regular daytime inside Metropolitiz. Given my subjective and posture towards the subject matter, from the moment of elaborating my research questions to the writing of my findings in completed pieces of writing, being an activist ethnographer has implied first and foremost elaborating my own situated methodologies and research strategies for “researching about squatting, for making collaborative research with squatters, and advancing public understanding of squatting” (Martínez, 2014, p.19) as practised in Rome.

The previous sections have tried to describe the ethnographic techniques I have deployed since my first visit on the field in November 2014, contextualising them within the peculiar ethical, relational and political dilemmas ingrained in the making of committed research within grassroots urban movements that deploy contentious politics and illegal activities such as squatting. In particular, they have been analysed in relation to four diverse steps of the research process: the access to the fieldwork where I decided to live as a squatter; the collection of the data; the process of ethnographic writing; the phase of the dissemination. The latter aspect was addressed in the light of the challenges and limitations posed by the norms of contemporary, neoliberal academia. The following conclusive remarks upon these issues do not represent an attempt to neutralise these contradictions, for they are immanent to the probably unbridgeable gap between the academic and the activist worlds. Nonetheless, they represent the outcome of an extensive, and still ongoing, process of collective reflection, dialogue and reciprocity with the activists of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and some of the squatters about the role that academic research can play in furthering an alternative knowledge about the Housing Rights Movements' practices of squatting and underlying motivations.

The first is that, in a light of a lucid cost-benefit analysis, the opportunities offered by academic research in terms of furthering the production of alternative discursive regimes about the practice of urban squatting definitely override the looming threats of being misinterpreted, or, to disclose potentially sensitive information from a legal and

political standpoint (Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013; Martínez, 2014; Di Felicianantonio, 2016; Mudu and Chattopadhyay, 2017). Besides, a project like mine can contribute to reflecting upon the modalities of delivering critical analysis within academia in two different ways. Firstly, it contributes to hijacking the neoliberal functioning of academia by circulating radical and anticapitalist knowledge. Secondly, it offers an example of the possible modalities in which researchers can conduct critically rigorous, yet partisan projects, while bridging connections between urban grassroots movements and researchers (Schepher-Hughes, 1995; Routledge, 1996; Juris, 2007; Gillan and Pickerill, 2012). In the light of these considerations, the following chapter seeks to frame the geographical, political, and even legislative context within which Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and the Housing Rights Movements currently operate, and to which also my research designs and goals had inevitably to adapt.

## **CHAPTER 3. Situating the housing squats within the self-made city**

### **The contested governance of the self-made city**

As discussed in the previous chapter, I undertook my activist ethnography in two distinct buildings squatted by the Housing Rights Movement Blocchi Precari Metropolitani (BPM) respectively in March 2009 and April 2013: Metropoliz (located in via Prenestina 913); Tiburtina 770 (via Tiburtina 770). The two places present similar features in the following ways: the affiliation with the same Housing Rights Movement, and therefore the similarity of internal ground-rules (e.g. collective decision-making, management of common spaces, internal organisation and so on); the numeric and social composition of the squatters; the location in neighbourhoods characterised by a troubled legacy in relation to the housing issue. Last but not least, the squats are located in two municipalities of the city that contain higher concentration of housing squats than those listed in official figures: 7 in the Fourth Municipality (Tiburtina 770), and 21 in the Fifth Municipality (Metropoliz), representing more of the 25% of the total number of recognised squats, calculated to be 105 (Puccini, 2016, p. 64-5), although the real number of squats these days are quite likely underestimated.

Notwithstanding, the two housing squats diverge significantly in terms of the original infrastructures of the squatted buildings, and the strategies of socio-political relation they have adopted towards the boroughs where they are located (Tor Sapienza in the case of Metropoliz, Pietralata/Tiburtino III for Tiburtina 770). The organisational details and the forms of articulating contentious politics inside the city are discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. However, this chapter provides coordinates for orienting the analysis of these two housing squats in relation to the contexts in which they are positioned. As extensively discussed in Chapter 1, situatedness is a key concept for interpreting Housing Rights Movements' struggle for housing rights within the crisis of social reproduction that affects Rome's urban fabric. Indeed, they understand and frame the 'right to the city' as a daily politics of encounter, articulated by subaltern urban dwellers weaving political alliances, re-appropriating previously neglected urban ecologies and devising autonomous forms of life in-common and self-organising. In accordance with this theoretical framework, situatedness in this chapter is addressed not as a boundary concept, but as the product of diverse forces and dimensions that comprise the materiality

of the everyday life experienced by the housing squatters.

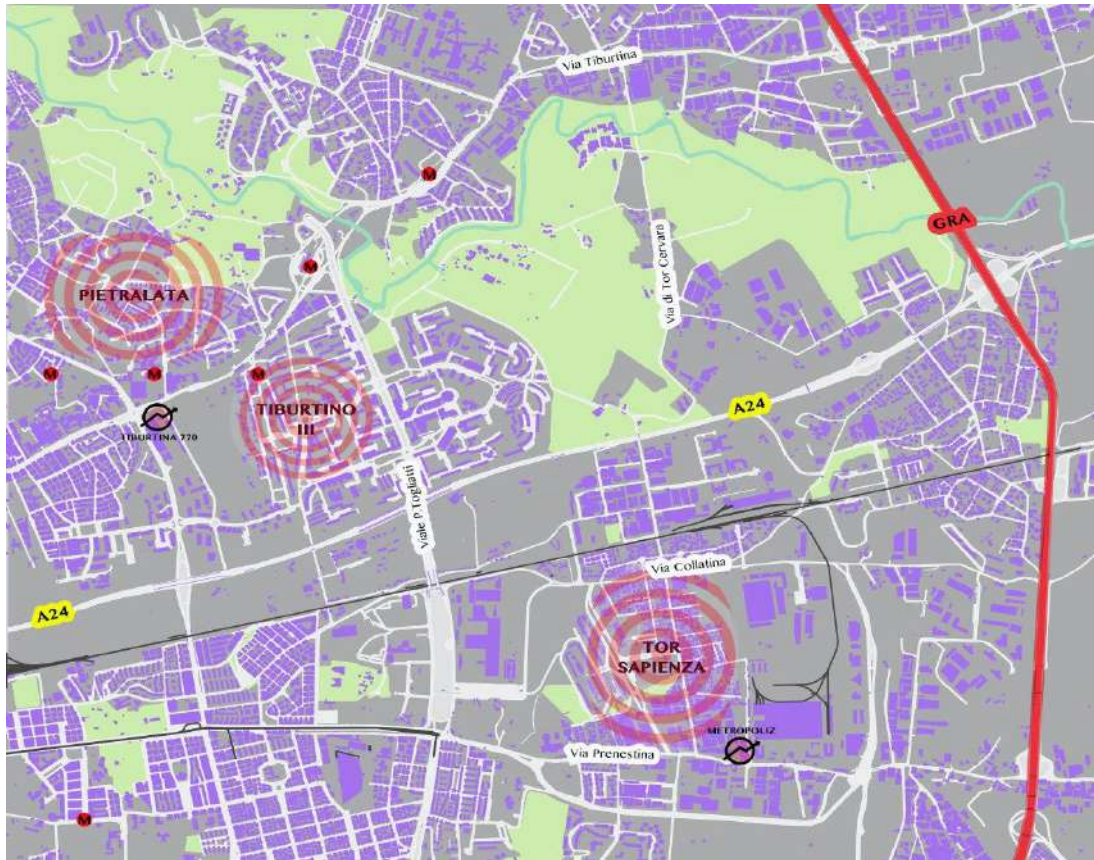


Figure 1: Map showing the location of Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz within the Prenestina and Tiburtina areas (Credits to Maria Di Maggio, architect and BPM activist)

First of all, I locate my ethnography within the political milieu of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, one of the Housing Rights Movements most in the spotlight of the struggle for housing rights in recent years, but whose story is more recent and differs from other Housing Rights Movements like *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa* (City Coordination of the Struggle for Housing), whose history is rooted in the thriving conflict for public housing from the 1980s onwards (see Mudu, 2014; Armati, 2015; Nur and Sethman, 2017). Indeed, BPM was born on the wave of the rising housing crisis affecting the post-welfare metropolis, even before the explosion of the 2007-8 crisis. This political project is analysed in relation to the effort of framing squatting for housing purposes as a way of responding to the crisis of social reproduction affecting the city of Rome, and accounted for theoretically in Chapter 1. I then move on to territorially contextualising Metropoliz and Tiburtina 770, my research sites, in relation to the housing history of the *borgate* where they are located, their current socio-political



context, and the main challenges with which the squatters are confronted in attempting to create local networks of sociality.

These contextualisations are grounded in the idea that Rome can be considered as a self-made city historically characterised by squatting as a response to the structural lack of adequate housing for all its dwellers, and especially the less well-off ones (Cellamare, 2014). This definition thus encompasses the idea that the combination between “official” planning and informal ways of settling inside the city has been a constitutive element of the spatial production of Rome, which has never lost its connotation as a makeshift, squatted city (Vasudevan 2015, 2017). Dwelling upon this structural element, the final sections of the chapter are devoted to discussing the more relevant (and ambivalent) legislative tools that have been introduced during the recent years in order to tackle with the socially dangerous reproduction of squatting as a replicable response vis-à-vis the growing difficulty to access public, decent or at least affordable housing in Rome.

This definition, and its assessment in relation to the intersection of neoliberal urbanisation and the unleashing of the crisis introduce the final sections of the chapter, that are devoted to discussing the more relevant (and ambivalent) tools used by Rome's governmental actors for neutralising the battle around housing and squatting, ordering them chronologically. I start from the description of the 'Extraordinary Plan for the Housing Emergency in the Lazio Region and implementation of the Programme for Housing Emergency in Capital Rome', approved by the Lazio regional government in early 2014, and whose approval was greeted by Housing Rights Movements as a landmark achievement. As a counterpoint, I describe the two main repressive tools marshalled against activists and squatters as socially dangerous urban dwellers. Firstly, the article 5 of the 2014 National Housing Plan, which manipulates the functioning of local welfare provisions in order to exclude the squatters from their redistribution. Secondly, I describe the use of the so-called “oral warnings” and “special surveillances” against individual activists deemed to be the ringleaders of the protest. Lastly, the conclusions introduce the following chapter, which concerns the process of community-building and commoning stemming from the moment of ‘cracking’.

## **Blocchi Precari Metropolitani: the precarious block against the social reproduction crisis**

As a Housing Right Movement, Blocchi Precari Metropolitani (Precarious Metropolitan Block, BPM), is more recent than the others with which it is currently working under the umbrella Movimenti per il Diritto All'Abitare (Movements for the Right to Habitation)<sup>1</sup>. For instance, the other larger group, *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per La Casa*, has been part of the thriving history of public housing from late Eighties onwards, and its legacy continues today (see Armati, 2015; Caciagli, 2016). Indeed, Coordinamento was founded in 1988 on the wave of conflict over the construction and allocation of public housing that, as this chapter describes, gained its momentum in the early 1970s in the working class (*popolari*) neighbourhoods of Rome. Another trigger was the murder of the Autonomia Operaia activist Fabrizio Ceruso on the 8<sup>th</sup> September 1974 during the attempted eviction of hundreds of squatted apartments in the area of San Basilio. Since its foundation, *Coordinamento* has prioritised the squatting of public buildings and the self-recuperation of public empty real estate in order solicit the negotiation with the Regional and the City Council administrations for furthering public housing-oriented policies (Armati, 2015).



Figure 2: The signpost "Metropoliz ethical city" 2018 at the entrance of via Prenestina 913 (November 2014)

By contrast, BPM has been conceived and materialised during the grassroots mobilisations of 2007 concerning the harbingers of the economic crisis that

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<sup>1</sup> The political implications of this shift from a housing-related definition of Movements to this new label addressing dwelling in relation the 'right to the city' is addressed within Chapter 7.

would explode in the following year, especially, in the Italian context, against labour precariousness and urban patterns of segregation. In particular, the occasion for the first appearance of the Precarious Metropolitan Block was a social strike called in November by grassroots trade unions, urban movements and extra-parliamentary Leftist formations. Since then, BPM has become a prominent actor in the political landscape of Rome in terms of the practices of urban squatters. Yet its main innovation has been the contextualisation of squatting within the broader crisis of social reproduction affecting the urban crisis, and its intent to carry out the struggle for housing rights as a catalyst for contentious politics concerned with autonomous forms of living and regenerating the cityscape (Mudu, 2014, p. 147; Nur and Sethman, 2017, p. 82-83). The starting point of this political project was therefore to provide continuity to the political imaginary and discourse ensuing from the social strike that united precarious workers and students, unemployed people, migrants, refugees and squatters marching together in the streets with prefigurative yet prophetic slogans about the upcoming economic crisis.

This is to say that BPM's political birth is rooted in the everydayness of the crisis experienced by dispossessed urban dwellers, as well as into a reflection upon the role played by housing and its commodification through the private real-estate market within the neoliberal urban fabric of Rome. These political innovations have resulted into the daily politics and relations that this movement entails with the various social composition of dispossessed urban dwellers that are today experiencing intersectional patterns of housing segregation, deprivation and even homelessness inside the city. So, the political 'manifesto' of BPM is based upon the idea that housing squats are an environmentally and economically sustainable modality not only of responding to the structural housing crisis affecting Rome. They are also virtuous examples of safe spaces, inner "*città meticce*" (*mestizo cities*) where it is possible to create new urban communities and experiment alternative forms of social reproduction and urban citizenship. In a nutshell, the function of the BPM is to forge new bonds of solidarity among those heterogeneous urban dwellers that gather in order to recast right to the city through contentious politics and everyday life experience. Indeed, as one of the founders of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani explains:

[...]The issue of income is articulated using the re-appropriation of housing as re-appropriation of income... Putting a roof over one's head and so solving the blackmail of paying rent and bills is a way of giving more value to the precarious

income that characterises many of those who got closer to the Blocchi experience. [...] During the month of November 2007, few days after the first squat opened in via Volontè, in the Bufalotta zone, a march was reached by a social block that actually carried out the blockade of the street in order to take part in the rally, and introduced itself to the city as the 'precarious metropolitan block'. [...] During the following months, in order to develop this conflictual experience of the block, we thought we couldn't enclose it in such a little, contingent dynamic. Rather, we wanted to convey the idea that this was a reproducible, copyright-less experience. Therefore, passing from the singular 'precarious metropolitan block' to the plural noun BPM has been a natural development. The experience of BPM was then reproduced many times and the squats affiliated to this political gathering increased in number.

(Paolo di Vetta, activist, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2016)

This paragraph of interview clarifies that the political project of BPM represents a political innovation and evolution in comparison to the traditional movements' demand for public housing construction and distribution. First of all, it does not aim either at immediate contact with local or national institutions in order to negotiate the implementation of this objective, although this remains a long-term goal. This resolution stems from the acknowledgement of the extent to which welfare-based forms of housing have become progressively residual in favour of privatised and commodified forms of housing, alongside real-estate speculation (Mudu, 2006; Cellamare, 2014; Di Felicianantonio, 2016; Puccini, 2016). This entails also accepting the dramatic, yet blatant evidence that public housing for everyone is not an achievable short-term political goal today, and especially not in proportion to the urgency dictated by severe housing deprivation as a socially spreading phenomenon. Contextually, they also recognised the loss of representation undergone by the usual socio-political intermediaries that, albeit with manifold contradictions and distinctions, used to also subsume radical demands into their agenda of institutional negotiation, thus guaranteeing a certain degree of social pacification (see Mudu, 2014; Armati, 2015; Caciagli, 2016; Nur and Sethman, 2017).

According to this reasoning, it is not surprising that BPM was not 'founded' as an organisation through a discursive constitution. It was rather performed and shaped into the collective imaginary through the act of squatting as a self-organised, direct and almost anonymous response to the role played by marketised housing in the existential precariousness affecting an increasingly broad portion of dispossessed and newly poor

urban inhabitants. This is to say that BPM was begun from the assumption that housing ought to be contextualised within the contemporary generalised crisis of social reproduction and income. The BPM also took autonomous practices of urban regeneration as the way of addressing in the short-term the most acute level of the housing emergency, while furthering the long-term production and development of multifarious urban commons. Here, then, is a political experience that, starting from the lack of affordable and public housing into a context of an already structural (and artificial) housing emergency such as Rome's, has been articulating innovative contentious politics starting from the performative assertion of being precarious as a uniting, yet not identitarian standpoint equating dispossessed urban dwellers regardless of their status, nationality and boundary understandings of identity.

Hence, the blockade of the streets that marked the first public appearance of the Precarious Metropolitan Block represents the interruption of the fluxes furthering capitalist accumulation, whilst practising reappropriation with the overt aim of recasting the 'right to the city' vis-à-vis the manifold forms of exclusion, exploitation and subjectivation that co-exist within mainstream, neoliberal urban reproduction. Also, it configures prefigurative politics (see Fournier, 2002; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006) inasmuch as it operates a radical resignification of urban precariousness by affirming the possibility of coalescing for reappropriating the dispossessed, enclosed and eventually abandoned parts of the city, and to repopulate them with radically alternative forms of living in-common. This frames the political alliances that BPM have explored with diverse grassroots urban organisations operating on the terrain of 'right to the city', ranging from the past organic bond with the A.S.i.A.-USB<sup>2</sup> to the ongoing cooperation with other grassroots trade-unions and associations as Si Cobas<sup>3</sup> and Campagne in Lotta<sup>4</sup> that emphasise in their actions the condition of migrant workers (including many housing squatters). In conclusion, BPM prefigures squatting for housing purposes as a way of articulating a process of

[...] social trade-unionism which could go out from the workplace and manage to

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2 A.S.i.A.-USB is the acronym for Associazione Sindacale Inquilini Assegnatari (Trade Union for assignees and tenants), affiliated to the grassroots trade union network USB (Unione Sindacale di Base).

3 This is an independent trade union concerned especially with the unionisation of the workers employed within the logistics sector.

4 Campagne in Lotta (Struggling Countryside) is an autonomous collective concerned with the support and organisation of the workers exploited within the farmland sector especially in Southern Italy.

produce inside the city and its neighbourhoods a shift that nowadays is utterly necessary. [...] There are those who call what we are doing social confederation, others call it other names, but the bottom line is that we are currently living into an historical phase when trade-unionism as we used to know it will transform, at least from the standpoint of social conflict, into something that doesn't exist yet... [...] Inside this effort there is no space for hegemonic or co-optation modalities that would impair this autonomous process of social coalition and experimentation. Working for broadening spaces of dialogue and conflict is what we have imagined to be the BPM's function. We are not in love with the political brand, but we are with the idea that underlies it [...].

(Paolo di Vetta, activist, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2016)

This experience of trying to articulate a grassroots form of social, metropolitan trade-unionism to unite the forces struggling for the right to the city and against the existential precariousness imposed by the neoliberal paradigm of social cooperation has spilled over into the daily experience of networking and socialisation of the inhabitants of BPM's housing squats in the peripheries where they are situated, including Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz. In the following two sections, I recount the spatial context where each squat is situated in relation to their boroughs' historical legacy and current socio-political context. An analysis of Rome as a self-made city and a field of tension between capitalist management and autonomous forms of production of space follows in order to introduce the contradictory forms through which governmentality deals with squatting in the mutated context of the post-crisis, post-welfare restructuring of the urban fabric.

### **Metropoliz and Tor Sapienza: the two flips of the same coin**

My first research site, Metropoliz, is one of the oldest Blocchi Precari Metropolitani's squats. Indeed, the building (situated in via Prenestina 913 at the border with the neighbourhood of Tor Sapienza, inside the urban planning area 07-C of the new Fifth municipality<sup>5</sup>) has been occupied on the 28<sup>th</sup> March 2009 by about 100 hundred migrant and Italian families. They had been later joined by another group of Roma families that,

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<sup>5</sup> Administrative subdivision available at:  
[https://www.comune.roma.it/pcr/it/rag\\_gen\\_stat\\_terr\\_mun\\_v.page](https://www.comune.roma.it/pcr/it/rag_gen_stat_terr_mun_v.page)



after the eviction of the institutional Roma camp Casilino 900, camped into the adjacent land, via Prenestina 911, but were soon evicted and then housed inside what had become Metropoliz. The building was the former Fiorucci slaughterhouse, one of the symbols of the thriving Italian food farming sectors. After the closure and transferral the slaughterhouse in 1993 on the via Pontina, the skeleton of the building and the land on which it was situated had been taken over by the powerful builder Salini, currently considered the biggest Italian general contractor in the sector of engineering, currently also undertaking legal action in the Civil Court of Rome against the BPM activists and the squatters living in Metropoliz in order to take back the building<sup>6</sup>.

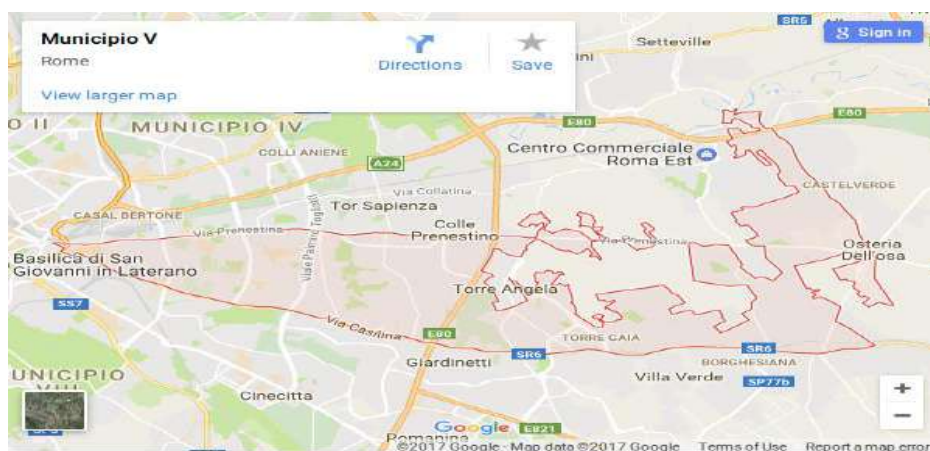


Figure 3: Map of the Fifth Municipality (Source: Google Maps)

Obviously, the struggle of Housing Rights Movements, and Metropoliz's dwellers, against one of the colossuses of Italian capital may seem a contemporary version of David vs. Goliath, lost from the outset. Yet the existence and resistance of Metropoliz is based on some fairly solid socio-political and cultural pillars: the broader frame of Housing Rights Movements' struggles and motivations; the popularity acquired by Metropoliz especially the creation of the *MAAM\_Museo dell'Altro e dell'Altrove di Metropoliz* (Museum of the Other and the Elsewhere of Metropoliz), whose activities are described at length in Chapter 6. And, last but not least, the multifaceted, yet solid bond it has created with the neighbourhood in which it is positioned, Tor Sapienza. Indeed, Metropoliz stands out in a stark, yet dialectic contradiction with how the *borgata* is looking and being portrayed nowadays.

<sup>6</sup> The statement of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and Metropoliz concerning the trial started by Salini entitled 'Dalla parte della città meticcica' ('On the side of the mestizo city') is available here: <https://metropoliz.noblogs.org/post/2016/04/22/dalla-parte-di-metropoliz-citta-meticcia/>. The lawsuit with Salini is discussed also within Chapter 6.

On the other hand, the creation of Metropoliz conceptually refers back to the original history of Tor Sapienza in terms of producing spaces of inhabitation and production out of extremely neglected urban ecologies, starting from struggles and acts of spatial re-appropriation. In fact, in the same way as Metropoliz, Tor Sapienza was not the product of an institutional (or at least legalised) effort of urban regeneration/planning. It was constituted on the impulse of the socialist antifascist land surveyor Michele Testa, that, on the 20<sup>th</sup> May 1923, “inaugurated” the unauthorised *borgata* Tor Sapienza starting from building in an abandoned area near to Tor Cervara the first 25 houses of the *Cooperativa Tor Sapienza per l'edilizia popolare Rurale* (Tor Sapienza Cooperative for rural public housing). The idea arose after Testa's job transfer from Tivoli to the train station of Tor Cervara, deserted at the time due to being a malarial area. Afterwards, encouraged by his socialist ideals and the necessity of decontaminating the area, Testa started a self-managed project of reclamation and recovery of the land.

According to the received history, Testa contacted the few institutional figures present in the area (a doctor, a priest, and a primary school teacher), and he started to plan the project for transforming this rundown piece of land in the heart of Rome's urban countryside into the city's granary, an experiment of self-managed urban planning and production. After piecing together different parcels of land from local notables who were leaving it unused, he contracted a mortgage of 800,000 lire (the former Italian currency) for building the very first housing where rural labourers could live. As for the name Tor Sapienza, Michele Testa was inspired by the presence, at the time, of a building towering all over the area, built in the seventeenth century by the humanist cardinal Domenico Pantagatti, who used it as a free hostel for university students called 'Sapienza Nuova' or 'New Knowledge' (Mattei, 2013).

This unauthorised settlement on a re-appropriated piece of deserted (and theretofore unhealthy) land was then the original nucleus of Tor Sapienza, which survived its founder. Unfortunately, Michele Testa passed away in 1944 after returning to the *borgata* he founded before the fall of the Fascist regime by which he had been fired as a train driver, incarcerated and repressed repeatedly because of its overt critiques of the speculative processes underpinning the Fascist recovery of rural areas. Given his refusal to withdraw his antifascist beliefs, he was sent in internal exile for displaying 'hostile sentiments' towards the Fascist regime (Vannozzi, 2011). During the years following its foundation, the illegal settlement was recognised and incorporated into the expanding urban tissue of Rome. In this respect, the first bus route reaching Tor Sapienza



was established ten years later by the same Fascist administration in 1933 (Villani, 2012).

From there on, it grew in extension and became crowded with additional inhabitants, to the point of becoming one of the most densely-populated boroughs of Rome. Furthermore, from early Forties onwards, the new Tor Sapienza was pinpointed into urban planning as one of the more suitable areas for fostering industrial development, given the abundance of unbuilt spaces, the relative distance from then inhabited boroughs, and also the possibility of recruiting workforce among the inhabitants of the arising neighbourhood (Pietrangeli, 2014, p.221)<sup>7</sup>. This industrial character was retained also in the post-WWII period, although the process of conversion was particularly slow due to the difficult dialogue among the entrepreneurs' representatives and urban planners. Nonetheless, after WWII, Tor Sapienza became dotted by dozens of big and small enterprises that were slowly arising in the area, especially in relation to the food sector (including the beer industry Peroni, opened in Tor Sapienza in 1971, and the Fiorucci slaughterhouse, in the shell of which Metropoliz has been created) and the electronics industry (as the electronic components company Voxson, and the industrial components manufacturer Sicma) (Pietrangeli, 2014, p.247). Predictably, these plants needed to rapidly recruit and employ low-cost workforce.

In the same period, and as a consequence of this mutated scenario, the urban planners started to design local housing blocks that could accommodate the larger number of potential workers. In addition, these schemes were supposed to absorb a broad internal migration arriving from the more deprived areas of Southern Italy (in particular Calabria) and the urban poor displaced by the city centre. These marginal population were crowding into pre-existing *borgate* and unpopulated areas in great numbers with makeshift settlement and shanty-town where they often experiencing appalling dwelling conditions. In the specific case of Tor Sapienza, the first block of public housing was constituted by the IACP (one of the former institutes for public housing) complex Giorgio Morandi, that was meant to absorb part of the population of *baraccati* (inhabitants of shacks) that were settled around the Prenestina train station and the *borgata* Tor Sapienza after being displaced by the Fascist government from the central area of Trastevere (Villani, 2012; Pietrangeli, 2014).

Nevertheless the industrial expansion had quite a limited extension, since the first decreases of manpower in Tor Sapienza's industries can be already traced back to

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<sup>7</sup> Even the Pietralata area, where Tiburtina 770 is located, was included in these urban plans for the same reason (see Pietrangeli, 2014, p.219).

the end of the Seventies. As the industrial development stop, so did housing-oriented urban planning, whilst the concentration of marginal population in the area persisted until nowadays. Hence it can be said that contemporary Tor Sapienza epitomises the combination of neoliberal urbanisation, welfare dismissal and de-industrialisation that was discussed theoretically in Chapter 1. As a response to this progressive spatial and social marginalisation, a flourishing of informal and even illegal economies related to subsistence and housing as well flourished. One textbook example is the the trade in and squatting of public housing apartments especially in the Giorgio Morandi project, which happens to be often mob-related (see Goni Mazzitelli, 2014; Puccini, 2016).

This concentration of marginalised urban dwellers in a relatively small area is also shown in the official statistics concerning the condition of the overall Fifth Municipality. According to the more recent demographic accounts published by Rome's City Council (Città Metropolitana di Roma Capitale, 2016, p.1167), the Fifth Municipality has a territory of 26,98 km<sup>2</sup>, and a population of about 250,000 inhabitants (15,8% of whom are migrants), with a concentration of 9.136 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, that is more than four times Rome's average (2.213 per km<sup>2</sup>, and an average of migrants of 12,7 percent) (ibid., p.1188). Also, the average income of the Municipality is consistently lower than Rome's average (about 18,000 euros next to 25,000). Lastly, one of the most striking figures is the extremely high percentage of built-on land: 65,3% against the average of 24,5%. These recent figures, and the history narrated in this section, show to what extent Tor Sapienza has been subjected to an uneven and speculative exploitation of its land for different purposes that yet furthered mostly the capitalist profit instead of the liveability of its inhabitants.

Besides, they display how the denial of 'right to the city' in its wider connotation has paired with both the canons of neoliberal urbanisation and the peculiarities of Rome's capitalism, piercingly defined by Carlo Cellamare (2016, p.2-3) as uncontrolled, underdeveloped and focused on maximising the extractions of profit especially by the building cycle and the reckless consumption of land. In this light, the housing squat Metropoliz epitomises the contradictory history of Tor Sapienza from its foundation, made of autonomous self-regeneration, informal settling, self-recuperation of extremely neglected urban ecologies, and hopes for creating a different model of inhabiting the city. The relationship with the history of popular *borgate* is at stake also in the second research site I chose, Tiburtina 770, which is likewise located in an area that shared a similar fate with Tor Sapienza, but was characterised by a somehow inverted

historical and political development.

### **Tiburtina 770 and the *borgate* Pietralata/Tiburtino III: a history of struggles for housing rights**

My second research site, before becoming the housing squat Tiburtina 770, used to be the former headquarters of the Rome's public transportation company, ATAC. It was squatted during the second *Tsunami Tour* on the 6<sup>th</sup> March 2013, following the first one which occurred on the 6<sup>th</sup> December 2012. This time, the simultaneous round of squatting in diverse areas of the city showed the joint action of the Housing Rights Movements *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa*, *Comitato Obiettivo Casa* (COC, Committee Objective Housing), *Action*, *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani*, and the grassroots trade union A.S.i.A.-USB (Armati, 2015). The Tiburtina 770 building is still included in the portfolio of urban interventions of the official owner, the Mambrini Costruzioni enterprise, who has contracted the renewal of the building to its affiliate company Fima SPA.

Differently from the previously described case of Metropolitiz and the legal activism of the owner Salini in trying to re-appropriate the building, in the words of activists and squatters, the property of Tiburtina 770 has never shown up, nor undertaken legal actions against the squat (at the time of writing). From what I have observed during my activist ethnography (and that I will report more in detail in the following chapters) most of the negotiations as for structural interventions (e.g. repairing a wall bordering with a street) and problems pertaining the building have been managed through the intermediation between the squatters, the BPM activists and the Fourth Municipality's administrators that have succeeded during the years (with the electoral change from the Democratic Party to the Movimento 5 Stelle occurred in June 2016 during the City Council and Municipalities' elections).



km<sup>2</sup>; however, it presents a lower rate of built land (40.6%). Overall, the population registered in the Municipality amounts to about 177,000 in December 2015, of which 8.5% are migrants, with an overall density population of 3,600 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> against an average distribution in the overall city of Rome of 2,231 people per km<sup>2</sup> (Città Metropolitana di Roma Capitale, 2016, p.1166). Yet, it is worth noticing that, due the effects of the article 5 of the Housing Plan that are recounted in the following sections, the vast majority of the inhabitants of the numerous squats and informal settlements (e.g. unauthorised Roma camps) dotting the landscape of the Tiburtina and the municipality that did not manage to register their address before March 2014 are not included in the overall count.

Nonetheless, these underestimated quantitative data cannot conceal the evidence that, once again, the patterns of housing segregation and urban marginalisation have historically crafted the city into a patchwork of diverse forms of settling and inhabitation, in which public housing and working class *borgate* played the role of 'fixing' the more unbearable situations of poverty and makeshift settlements. More specifically, the historical profile of the *borgate* Tiburtino III and Pietralata is particularly influential in terms of the thriving legacy of housing right struggles in Rome, for it epitomises the permanence of the housing problem in the development and expansion of the metropolis during the past decades as conceived through diverse 'waves' of urban planning and capitalist expansion/contraction. To start with the oldest one, Pietralata, according to the urban historian Luciano Villani (2012), was one of the most derelict *borgate* in terms of social composition and deprivation of public services since its foundation.

Whereas the area was appointed since 1919 as a suitable one for the location of industrial plants (the Fiorentini first) (see Pietrangeli, 2014, p.249), it only started to be configured as a housing district in the early 1930s. Originally, Pietralata was supposed to be a relocation area for the people forcibly displaced to the peripheries as part of the Fascist project of regeneration of the city centre in order to create the so-called "Great Rome". Yet, the evicted were not included into properly-built structures, but in actual shantytowns made of shacks, devoid of any public service or drainage system, to the point that the inhabitants were labelled in news reports as *baraccati* (the inhabitants of the shacks) (Camarda, 2007; Villani, 2012). To add to the already chaotic situation, the Pietralata area, at the time, presented inhospitable and noxious geological conditions, insofar as it used to be a rural district besides the still-active Aniene riverbed.

The *borgata* Tiburtino III was planned and founded in late 1930s on an area of

74,206 square metres after the governmental acquisition of land parcels owned by some local rural proprietors. The areas were promptly destined to become *borgate popolarissime* and *rapidissime* (very poor and quickly-built *borgate*), inhabited by public housing assignees with no income, and thus living in the most derelict conditions. It is likely that it is for this reason that the building of these public housing blocks planned by the Fascist government was characterised by the logic of maximised saving in terms of quality of the infrastructures and building materials (Villani, 2012; Santoro, 2015). Yet despite the fact that the new dwellings in many ways resembled actual shacks, they became a coveted goal for the *baraccati*, triggering a ferocious competition for getting into the uninhabited or un-allotted ones, even by means of squatting. In the meantime, the vestiges of the original shantytowns continued to exist alongside the ‘officially planned’ *borgata* until early Seventies, as they were crowded by internal migrants who were moving to the city of Rome from the poorest regions of Italy, such as Calabria and Abruzzo, in search of a job (Camarda, 2007, p.109; Villani, 2012, p.110-141).

Given the social composition of the *borgate* and the tensions with the Fascist authorities that created and controlled them, the struggle for decent housing and access to food became connected the broader antifascist cause. One of the most reported episodes in the written and oral accounts of the *borgate*'s history is the massive deportation and shooting of forty communist militants and partisans of Pietralata, Tiburtino III and San Basilio districts, accused of taking part in the looting of a Fascist granary inside the Forte Tiburtino (the future Ruffo barrack) on the 20<sup>th</sup> October 1943 (Villani, 2012, p.273). Few months later, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1944, a woman named Caterina Martinelli, a young *borgatara*<sup>8</sup> mother of seven living in Tiburtino III, was shot during the attack on a Fascist bakery, while she was holding one of her kids and had a loaf in her hands. The murder triggered a string of illegal strikes and uprisings against the unbearable living conditions suffered under the regime, while Tiburtino III and Pietralata became the hideout of many partisans (Capponi, 2000, p. 246-7).

Even in the post-war decades and after the deposition of Fascism, the struggle for decent housing in Pietralata and Tiburtino III did not stop, and inspired political initiatives, intellectual accounts and newspapers reports, compelled to describe the continuous revolts and the misery gnawing the margins of the sparkling city centre. The mixture of poverty and social turmoil affecting Pietralata, in the Fifties, became the

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<sup>8</sup> This word derives by the term *borgate* and betokens a female inhabitant of a *borgata*.

background for two of the most important books from Pierpaolo Pasolini, *Ragazzi di vita*» (*Hustlers*, 1955), a transgressive elegy of the urban *lumpenproletariat*, and *Una Vita Violenta* (*A violent life*, 1959, on which the later movie *Accattone* was based), narrating the lives of a group of Pietralata children living an hand-to-mouth life towards the end of WWII. Furthermore, the chronicles of national and local newspapers during the 1970s account for dozens of initiatives, strikes, protests in front of Ministerial palaces enacted by the inhabitants of Pietralata and Tiburtino III, demanding public housing for the *baraccati*, a formal cap of rent and bills, and infrastructural improvements. In the meantime, the protest vote for the Communist party peaked in Pietralata and Tiburtino III, where numerous extra-parliamentary formations also recruited militants among the *borgatari* (Camarda, 2007, p. 103-9).

The preceding historical summary illustrates how the housing issue, autonomous settling and differential forms of mobility have shaped this quadrant of the city and partly determined Tor Sapienza's becoming socially peripheral. In the meantime, its spatial location progressively moved to what could be qualified as 'semi-centre', due to the steady expansion of Rome's outskirts. Indeed, as Camarda (2007) contends, undeniably Pietralata can be "nowadays has a different aspect, but still problems persist, especially as for the uncomfortable link with the city centre, the lack of green areas and proper lighting systems" (p.110). Also, the problems connected to the cuts to welfare provisions and the dismissal of public housing operated within an austerity framework have aggravated once again the living conditions of the populations of Pietralata and Tiburtino III. As a story that keeps going and coming around, the effects of neoliberal urbanisation have created over the years a fertile socio-political humus for the proliferation of various grassroots groups struggling for right to the city in these areas, including those who have coagulated in the network *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina*, founded at Tiburtina 770 in 2014 (and whose activities will be described extensively in Chapter 6).

This implies that the squatters of Tiburtina 770 are currently called to gather the legacy of housing struggles of the place where they are located, and adapt them to the challenges they are facing nowadays with their unprecedentedly various social composition. First of all, they need to make their struggle intelligible to neighbourhoods that, boroughs that, because of the social chaos stemming from the effects of prolonged aftermath of the 2007-8 crisis, can become porous to likewise unexampled infiltrations by extreme right-wing and populist formations demanding to prioritise the allocations of



resources (including housing) to Italian native population (as Chapter 6 later discusses in relation to local-based activism). Secondly, they have to cope with sets of contradictory public policies that are attempting to either co-opt or repress the self-made city into the paradigms of neoliberal social reproduction. Following a chronological order, the following section describes the case of the first piece of legislation who has recognised the 'social legitimacy' of squatting for housing purposes: the coveted (yet unimplemented) 'Extraordinary Plan for Housing Emergency', approved by the Lazio Region in January 2014.

### **Institutionalising the squatted city: the Regional Deliberation over the housing emergency**

The previous part of the chapter accounts for the history of the modalities in which the struggles for housing rights have historically shaped the popular *borgate* where Metropoliz and Tiburtina 770 are situated vis-à-vis policies that have privileged capital-oriented interests instead of the social necessities of the poorest urban dwellers. Indeed, throughout different historical phases, the public and affordable housing shortage became sclerotic, and fostered the proliferation of informal economies and settlements (including housing squats) that mould Rome as a self-made city (Cellamare, 2014; 2016). Insofar as the self-made city is the product of both a political stance and a survival response to the inequalities produced by a neoliberal approach to the multi-scalar urban fabric, it becomes also the object of public policies that aim to at coping with the structural dimension of the phenomenon of squatting, while trying to co-opt institutionally subsume its modalities of regenerating neglected urban ecologies. The Regional Deliberation concerning Housing Emergency approved by the Lazio Regional government in January 2014 ought to be read in this light, as the effort of institutionalising the self-made city, on the grounds of a the pragmatic acknowledgement that the magnitude of the phenomenon of squatting stems from the lack of organic, socially-oriented public



policies about housing.



Figure 5: The Housing Rights Movements Manifesto celebrating the approval of the Deliberation's implementation plan in 2016 (Source: Blocchi Precari Metropolitani Facebook Page)

The 'Extraordinary Plan for Housing Emergency in the Lazio Region and implementation of the Program for housing emergency in Capital Rome' represented a landmark case for Housing Rights Movements for three main reasons. Firstly, it was the outcome of the declared collaboration between Housing Rights Movements and regional institutions, stemming from both conflictual and negotiating political tactics (Armati 2015; Caciagli 2016). Secondly, it recognises in its formulation '«the critical state of the housing situation, with emergency peaks of housing need especially in the city of Rome'» (pag. 1)<sup>9</sup>, and the consequent role of housing squats as one containments of the housing emergency in the light of the inadequate public management of the issue. As a last point, it qualifies the squatters as legitimate recipients of housing-related welfare provisions, despite the unlawfulness of their ongoing accommodation. Starting from these acknowledgements, the Deliberation earmarks 197million Euros millions of euros for the regeneration of public real estate heritage, and the renewal of about 1,200 public housing apartments, to be allocated through criteria modalities to be agreed during an inter-institutional round table involving the Region, the City Council, public housing

<sup>9</sup> The full text of the Deliberation (in Italian) is available here: [http://www.regione.lazio.it/rl\\_main/?vw=delibereDettaglio&id=230503](http://www.regione.lazio.it/rl_main/?vw=delibereDettaglio&id=230503)

agencies and also Housing Rights Movements.

In particular, its scope was to define how to conduct the census that should involve the squatters first and foremost, and later the institutional ‘road map’ for designing the allocation list. Although this deliberation represents a drop in the ocean as regards the housing crisis in Rome, it has been welcomed by Housing Rights Movements as an important victory for a number of reasons. Firstly, it subverts the usual speculative orthodoxy on which urban planning has been conceived, and *de facto* acknowledges the validity of the claims made by Housing Rights Movements about the social legitimacy of autonomous regeneration practices, despite the extensive repression deployed against them (Armati, 2015, p. 138). Indeed, the deliberation advocates the primacy of self-refurbishment and cooperative regeneration of the empty public patrimony as the privileged path for solving the housing issues almost at zero cost. Secondly, this kind of approach implies a reclaiming institutional activism in designing housing policies, and so disavowing the privatised, contingency-based and capitalist-driven approach that has historically shaped the modalities of designing the urban space, and intensified as neoliberal urbanisation unfolded in the Roman context (Berdini, 2014; Caciagli, 2016; Puccini, 2016).

Despite the institutional approval and the earmarking of public funds, the actual implementation of the Deliberation has been nothing but straightforward. Indeed, it took two years of negotiations, mobilisations and struggles driven by the Housing Rights Movements (especially BPM, Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa and COC.), for the Lazio Region to approve in March 2016 also the Deliberation's implementation plan. Its text ratified the future equal subdivision of 1,200 accommodations dwellings among between three subjects deemed in the most severe condition of housing emergency: assignees included in the public housing waiting lists; the guests of the so-called CAAT<sup>10</sup>; and the squatters living into the housing squats listed in the Extraordinary Deliberation 2014. With hindsight, the significance of both the initial and the implementation deliberations was not exclusively material as for terms of the recognition of housing squats, the allocation of public funding towards housing, and the bucking the trend in terms of as for the modalities of urban regeneration. It also involved also a relevant symbolic achievement, for it equally allocated equally the quotas for the new accommodations between diverse subjects without excluding the squatters as illegal

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<sup>10</sup> Temporary shelters for housing emergency managed by private entities on behalf of the City Council (see Puccini, 2016).

urban dwellers or distinguishing between ‘native’ and foreign citizens, and regardless of their ongoing formal status, but prioritising as the more important parameter their condition of economic fragility.

Considering the political implications of the logic underpinning the formulation of the Deliberation and its eventual application, it is quite unsurprising that it is currently unimplemented. Even more, it was later partially invalidated by another City Council's deliberation approved in March 2016 by Rome's extraordinary commissioner Francesco Paolo Tronca, who replaced the Democratic s' administration after the resignation of the mayor Ignazio Marino following a scandal about misappropriation of public funds (Caciagli, 2016, p.:8). Clearly, insofar as the building industry has been one of the stakeholders crafting the cityscape, the possible regularisation of the existing squats probably triggered an internal conflict within the different actors involved in Rome's governmentality with differing logics and agendas. Lastly, the approach of the new Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement) administration, at the moment of revising this chapter (September 2017) seems keen on acting in continuity with the hostility towards the regularisation of the housing squats. All in all, towards the implementation of the Deliberation is yet to be understood, what seems to prevail in terms of governmental action is a multi-layered effort of repressing the Housing Rights Movements in their activist and social composition, while pressurising the authorities to for recasting the primacy of private property by evicting squatted buildings, as the following sections describe.

### **The Article 5: excluding the squatters from the access to local welfare**

The Article 5 has become one of the most renowned (and controversial) pieces of the ‘Piano Casa’, or National Housing Plan, approved in March 2014 on the initiative of the then Minister of Infrastructures Maurizio Lupi within the coalition government led by the Democratic Party. The plan contains a set of provisions concerning the management of public real estate alongside measures meant to support social housing. Yet its most notorious (and operative) part is actually Article 5, intended to be an innovative tool for conducting the ‘struggle against the illegal squatting of buildings’ without resorting to the enforcement of penal law. Indeed, the article intervenes at the administrative level by

preventing the squatters officially registering their residence in unlawfully occupied buildings, therefore denying them the access to all the public services and welfare provisions which this registration. In this way, the bureaucratic passage of registering one's customary abode becomes an inherently political act in both its denial or allowance, another tool aimed at repressing squatting for housing purposes as a matter of public order instead of a structural problem, as attempted for instance by the aforementioned Lazio Regional Deliberation (Caciagli, 2016). Literally, the text establishes that:

Whoever squats a building illegally [...] cannot apply for the residency, nor the activation of services for the same building; every legal act and service activated in contravention of this law provision is to be considered invalid to all legal purposes [...].

The current legal framework allows those who have squatted illegally to register their residency there, even in the presence of penal felonies or convictions. This norm aims at restoring lawfulness where it is compromised by penally-relevant deeds. Through the ongoing regulation, the aim is also to decrease the phenomenon of squatting by 40 percent.<sup>11</sup>

The law's rationale is quite clear. On the one hand, it aims to sanction squatters by making them invisible in the eye of public authorities, and therefore excluding them from the arena of legitimate urban inhabitants, regardless of their individual circumstances and conditions (including age and health status). On the other hand, its effects aggravate progressively on the basis of one's status, whereas, in Italy, residency is necessary not only in order to access all public services distributed on a local level (healthcare and education included), but it is also a mandatory requirement for any kind of visa. This is to say that the lack of the residency may determine the loss of the visa, and therefore squatters could be subjected to what Nicolas de Genova (2010) defines as the threat of deportability. Hence, it can be said that the norm had been tailored in relation to the subjective profile of the existing squatters (described in detail in the following chapter), whilst discouraging potential new ones to take action, targeting in particular the migrant population that nowadays constitutes the vast majority of Housing Rights Movements (Grazioli, 2017b).

Seen in a historical perspective, the innovation introduced by the above-

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<sup>11</sup> The full text of the Housing Plan is available here: <http://www.unioneinquilini.it/index.php?id=6015>

mentioned Article 5 validates the controversial tendency that emerged at the national level especially since the early 2000s, in different local contexts, in order to discriminate between a ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’ urban population. As Gargiulo (2011) pointed out in a paper written prior to the introduction of Article 5, the registration of residence has already been used by different municipalities in recent years as a tool for selectively establishing a local citizenship by either allowing or denying registration to certain categories of people, or restricting the criteria for its access. This represents not only an extension of the original function and scope of residence as a bureaucratic act; it also maximises its potential in terms of exerting social control upon individuals through the distribution of public services. Indeed, it can be used both as a redistributive tool (as in the case of the so-called ‘fake residences’ for homeless people), or as an exclusionary one by subordinating the residence to a set of criteria which, for many socially marginal inhabitants, are often difficult to meet (e.g. a valid tenancy contract and/or a housing suitability certificate granted by a recognised authority).

The second option became more prominent since the early 2000s as a way of providing a response to the criticism of the granting of the access to already cut-off welfare systems by migrants and those supposedly benefitting illegitimately from the system. Wherever local administrations chose to use the denial of residence as a leverage to push undesirable inhabitants to leave the territory, the residence has become a (bio)political device which performs a series of interconnected functions: enforcing the border regime on a local level; setting differential lines of exclusion and inclusion (see Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) between legitimate and illegitimate urban populations by making the latter formally ‘invisible citizens’; contributing to the public discourse depicting certain subjects as dangerous and undesirable (e.g. homeless people, Roma people, squatters, itinerant travellers and so on) (see Gargiulo, 2011). Residence as a political tool is thus located in the centre of the tension between inclusion and exclusion that questions the intersection between citizens and *citadins*, as discussed in Chapter 1.

The extension of these exclusionary and differentiating functions of administrative tools on a national level determined by Article 5, and its immediate consequences, have compelled the population of urban squatters to cope on a daily basis with its effects, and to devise tricks for bypassing it (e.g. registering their address in other places or trying to mediated directly with local institutions to access services, especially for children). Besides this, the Housing Rights Movements’ activists are forced to cope with the consequences of this norm on different levels: organising national campaigns

and counter-information demanding the repeal of Article 5; negotiating with local institutions in order to lessen its effects, at least provisionally; involving other actors in the political battle for access to social rights; helping the squatters to devise on a daily basis strategies and tricks for bypassing the administrative thresholds set by the lack of residence (as Chapter 7 discusses in relation to the forms of activism they generate). This is to say that the activists/squatters are currently confronted by the biopolitical negation of their social and legal personhood through a legal device operating on the ‘softer’ level of administrative acts, instead of on the more visible terrain of penal repression.

The relevant biopolitical impact of the Article 5 on the daily life of the squatters is thus due to the fact that, ultimately, its very purpose is to impair the reproducibility of squatting for housing purposes. More specifically, its target is the social reproduction of the squatter as a socially dangerous subject for a number of reasons associated with the act of re-appropriating empty urban ecologies for furthering autonomous geographies, forms of communing and contentious politics in the city. Also, it aims to delegitimise the Movements, thus adding to public pressure not to condone or regularise the act of squatting, as the Regional Deliberation seemed to attempt to do. In this light, we can also read the specific type of repressive measures deployed against the activists, and targeting especially those recognised as the more charismatic and influential figures in articulating the Housing Rights Movements’ political discourse and public profile. Once again, extra-legal devices are privileged in order to curtail their freedom of movement and mobilisation by emphasising their alleged social dangerousness. The following section describes one of the mostly unknown, yet more impactful legislative tools tested out on Housing Rights Movements’ activists, once again more extensively in the particular context of Rome: the so-called ‘oral warnings’ and special surveillance orders.

### **Socially dangerous, orally warned, particularly under surveillance**

The previous section described the peculiar repressive modality deployed against the extensive social composition of housing squats by deflecting the logic of the administrative tool of ‘residence’ from mainly redistributive to biopolitically selective. As mentioned, a similar process of repression through administrative instead of penal law occurred in the case of measures that are targeting the activists of Housing Rights

Movements in the city of Rome through the use of measures of preventive monitoring and detention. More specifically, since 2015 an increasing number of activists have been reached by the so-called *avvisi orali* (oral warnings), in the first place, and by requests for *sorveglianze speciali* (special surveillances) when they refused to comply with the prescriptions contained in the first approach. Indeed, the ‘oral warnings’ usually relate to supposedly socially-dangerous behaviour by the recipient, based on ongoing investigations or even mere reports made by the Digos (the political branch of the Italian police), and demand that the individual cease the behaviour described. In case of non-compliance, the next step is a request for social surveillance made to the local Surveillance Court.

These measures' history can be traced back to the Savoy Law Code, and aimed at establishing strict social control of marginalised, ‘undesirable’, ‘idle’ subjects such as beggars, sex workers, homeless people and so on. The subsequent Pica law (1863) against banditry and the incipient phenomenon of organised criminality then designed a set tools of control to be applied to these *socially dangerous* subjects, whose movements needed to be tracked down and curtailed in order to prevent associative activities (Gianni, 2017). By extension, this preventative measure began to be also applied to subjects criminalised for their political activism, including trade unionists and militants of leftist parties. This tendency, in particular, was largely deployed by the Fascist regime, who incorporated the oral warning, special surveillance and the ‘forcible abode’ into the Rocco penal code (Santoro, 2015). These instruments were later preserved in the post-war Republican law code in order to control certain categories of ‘socially dangerous’ individuals including mob organisation members, sex offenders and alleged terrorists. This is to say that the contemporary use of these measures against political activists represents a relatively repressive innovation in the Italian post-war law custom (Giuristi Democratici, 2016).

Yet, given the previous analysis relating to ‘dangerousness’ in terms of the dominant social reproduction of grassroots urban movements and squatting, it also becomes understandable why public authorities would resort to this extensive range of repressive tools in order to curtail the freedom of movement and dissent of political activists. In addition, and differently from court-based cases, these tools present a relevant advantage, namely the wide margin they offer for discretionary application (Manconi, 2016). Indeed, they do not have to be validated on the basis of specific evidences and deeds: a police report concerning the alleged ‘dangerousness’ of the individual on the basis of their subjectivity, personality and possible tendency toward



committing felonies is enough to require their subjection to the oral warning, and the special surveillance in case of alleged recidivism in ignoring or violating the principles of law and order (Gargiulo, 2016b; Nalbone, 2016). This implies that, in principle, any political antagonist can be considered a dangerous subject (Antetomaso, 2017). Thus, once again, as in the case of the 'residence' issue described in the previous section, an extra-judicial tool, in this case understood during recent decades as one for repressing organised criminality, has been twisted in order to control individual activists, while establishing a deterrent for other militants.

Indeed, the wide range of monitoring modalities established through oral warnings and special surveillance have significant impacts on individuals' liberty. These effects can include: a ban from the participation in any public gathering or demonstration; the mandatory residence inside or outside one's metropolitan area where they are alleged to 'commit' the socially dangerous behaviour; the obligation to stay indoors at night (curfew); the withdrawal of their driving licence due to the 'lack of moral prerequisites' for holding a vehicle. Furthermore, the timespan of application of these measures has been extended in order to possibly include the person's whole lifetime (Antigone, 2016; Manconi, 2016). Although the vast majority of the special surveillance's requests presented against political activists since 2015 have been repealed by the Surveillance Court of Rome, at the beginning of October 2016 they were imposed on two of the more prominent activists and speakers of Housing Rights Movements: Paolo di Vetta (the founder of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani) and Luca Fagiano (current frontman of the Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa). These provisions have triggered the launch of the national campaign 'Freedom of thought, freedom of dissent'.



*Figure 6:* The logo of the campaign "Freedom of thought, freedom of dissent" (Source: Abitare nella Crisi website)



The call for action underlines the relationship between devices such as oral warnings and ‘special surveillance’ and tools like Article 5 in twisting the customary use of extra-judicial and administrative instruments in order to target antagonist political subjectivities, exploiting the high degree of arbitrariness they permit. Also, as activists denounce, these tools address squatting as a response to the rampant housing crisis in a criminalising, public order perspective that elides the social and political motivations from which it stems. This underpins the framing of grassroots urban movements’ supposed ‘social dangerousness’ ‘with the twofold purpose of isolating political opponents and intimidate [sic] social movements in order to minimise demonstrations and quell dissent’<sup>12</sup>. The debate that this campaign sparked has also involved non-political subjectivities as the independent lawyers’ associations *Giuristi Democratici* (Democratic Lawyers) and *Antigone*, who have underlined the doubtful constitutionality of these measures, particularly in the case of their use against political activists. Furthermore, they have demanded the intervention of Parliament and the Supreme Court in order to narrow down their target and scope (*Giuristi Democratici*, 2016; *Antigone*, 2016). Yet, despite these calls for action, at the time of writing these measures are still in place, and are also being proposed towards other activists connected to other grassroots urban movements, even those beyond Rome (see *Antigone*, 2016; Nalbone, 2016).

### **The conflict about the reproduction of the metropolitan block**

As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, Rome is a self-made, squatted city (Cellamare, 2014; Vasudevan, 2017) in which informal modalities of settlement and habitation have played a constitutive role in shaping the map of the city as we know it today, whereas they have preceded institutional urban planning in creating neighbourhoods in areas where public housing schemes would be later installed. Besides, squatting and informal settlement have historically represented an autonomous response to the lacking or insufficient access to affordable public housing, thus fostering its construction and redistribution in the post-war period. Last but not least, the struggle for housing rights played the role of a catalyser for further grassroots mobilisations concerned with the

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<sup>12</sup> Here is the full text of the call in English:  
<https://www.facebook.com/dissensolibero/posts/721170604705902:0>

access to a decent livelihood even for the urban poor and dispossessed (Mudu, 2014; di Felicianantonio, 2016). Nonetheless, since the 2008 crisis unfolded, the power relations and the meaning of squatting in relation to governance of the urban space have mutated both on the institutional and the Movements' sides in terms of political elaboration and action.

From the Movements' standpoint, the political birth of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani is rooted in a political elaboration that has acknowledged the role played by mainstream forms of housing in the production of the urban space and in the ruling of the urban inhabitants' everyday life. Hence, BPM as a precarious metropolitan block epitomises the positions of those dispossessed urban dwellers that, starting from acts of re-appropriation, exert three functions: questioning the speculative mechanisms ruling the market of housing and the design of housing-related policies; resisting against the patterns of segregation and displacement stemming from its enforcement; demanding public authorities to prioritise the primacy of collective social necessities over privatised ownership and profit. In this respect, this way of conceptualising squatting constitutes both a political innovation allowing BPM to experiment diverse forms of coalition with diverse social and political subjects, as well as a mode of retaining the thriving legacy of the Housing Rights Movements. This background is discussed in the sections concerning the *borgate* where Metropoliz and Tiburtina 770 are located, that combined the historical profile with an analysis of the current socio-political indicators that show a quite critical situation in terms of their 'right to the city'.

Moving to the institutional side, the chapter discussed the uneven governmental modalities of responding to the renewed significance that housing squatting has acquired in a framework of neoliberal organisation and restructuring unfolding in response to, and in close relation with, the effects of the unfolding economic crisis. On the one hand, as the case of the Regional Deliberation has described, local authorities have been forced to reckon with the legitimacy of the Movements' claims pertaining the historical institutional inaction in providing adequate housing, and its aggravation in the light of the systemic dismantlement of welfare support systems. Consequently, it tried to pave the path for regularising housing squats as 'emergency containers' that ought to be progressively emptied through a two-steps process: a full census of the squatters inhabiting inside the housing squats listed in the 2014 Deliberation and registered through their residence; the elaboration of a priority list on the basis of everyone's economic parameters; the allocation into previously empty buildings that could be self-renovated with the cooperation of the City Council and the Lazio Region. Nonetheless, this

progressive (and innovative approach) has been hindered by the clash between different actors involved in the urban management with divergent entitlements and agendas.

In particular, the national government has delivered the hardest blow against its implementation with the approval of the Article 5, which overtly criminalises the squatters and prevent them from accessing any form of local citizenship. Besides, the ban of the residences' registration has forcibly made invisible all the squatters who did not register their residence address inside the squat prior to March 2014, thus making them formally not entitled to be included into the census, according to a verbatim application of the Deliberation. Whereas the Lazio Region and the City Council could choose to apply a more 'resilient' approach by ordering the census of all the people living into the squats regardless of the registration of their residence, the tendency that seems to prevail at the moment of writing is to leave the Deliberation unimplemented, and to address squatting as a socially dangerous phenomenon, instead of as a socially legitimate and sustainable alternative to exploitative models of urban regeneration.

This criminalising approach towards the phenomenon of squatting and the social composition of the squatters altogether is also reinforced by the repressive backlash against the squatters. Whereas its repercussions towards the Movements' forms of activism and mobilisation is discussed within Chapter 7, what emerges from the previous analysis is that the stakes involved in the conflict revolving around housing and squatting are extremely high. In fact, they pertain the legitimate modalities of producing the urban space, inhabiting it, and demanding the 'right to the city' as the access to a decent livelihood for everyone. Nonetheless, the multi-scalar attempts of impeding the social reproduction of squatting for housing purposes seem currently destined to fail. Regardless the threats it poses, a growing composition of dispossessed urban dwellers is trying to practice squatting collectively, with or without the political and organisational tutelage of Housing Rights Movements. The following chapter describes the subjective composition of the squatters of Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz in relation to the factors that led them to approach Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, and the process of community-building that stems from the act of 'cracking' into a place and squatting it.

## CHAPTER 4. Building the squatters' community. Before and after the exceptional moment of 'cracking'

### Foreword: First impressions



Figure 7: Metropoliz from via Prenestina/Tor Tre Teste (March 2015)

The first time I visited Metropoliz in via Prenestina 913 it was November 2014. As we arrived by car from via Tor Sapienza, I could see a large number of riot police vans and armed policemen guarding the street around the Giorgio Morandi public housing block. A few days before (as Chapter 6 more extensively recounts), there was rioting against the refugee centre established in the area, and the pattern of boiling racism of underprivileged and abandoned neighbourhoods was a hot topic. Against the gloomy atmosphere that surrounded Tor Sapienza as a whole, and the usual greyness characterising the polluted and congested via Prenestina, the *Metropoliz* squat pops out unexpectedly, 'shocking' the watcher's gaze, for it looks completely out of place, proportion and even colour in relation to the surrounding cityscape. And actually to some extent it is. Coming from both directions, you can see the so-called 'moon' tower standing out against a post-industrial landscape: traffic jams, shopping malls (like Decathlon and the low-cost supermarket chain Lidl), and a bunch of bars and video slot saloons scattered along the street.



Figure 8: The facade of Metropoliz with the Malala graffiti (February 2015)

Once you approach the facade, the dissonant effect persists in terms of the tone of the graffiti covering it. Just beside the entrance, the gigantic reproduction of the face of the Pakistani rights human activists Malala stares at you with seriousness and intensity; yet, if you raise your eyes, you can see the desecrating word “F.A.R.T.” over the roof as a monumental smirk to the self-righteousness and egotism of mainstream artists and museums. Hence, at a first sight, *Metropoliz* appears to be a street art museum in a quite peripheral area, yet it has similar characteristics to those associated with the imaginary of cities like Berlin or even Detroit. However, as you approach the gate, you realise it is covered with mailboxes with the names of the inhabitants. Only when you trespass within the iron blue entrance separating Metropoliz from the rest of the world on an ordinary afternoon do you realise not only that it is not a regular museum, nor a post-industrial relic painted by a street artist. It is a space that is actually inhabited and lived in on a daily basis, and whose internal structure recalls that of a village inside Rome and indeed Tor Sapienza.

There are children running in circles with their bikes, dogs trotting around the cement clearing, teens chatting and bickering in front of the museum and wearing their school backpacks, waiting for their parents or the activists to open the play room to do their homework together, discussing their own issues and gossiping and bickering. As you look toward a sort of long open corridor in the square, you may be surprised by the sight of a rocket that is surprisingly well-integrated in the landscape of Metropoliz, enclosed between Plaza Peru (a gathering of houses where South-American people live), the renovated football field and the garbage recycling area. As you enter the main building, you get lost in a maze of rooms, halls and gardens packed with art pieces by artists with different levels of fame, yet grouped by their relationship to the political and

artistic experience of Metropoliz and the Metropolitan Museum of the Other and the Elsewhere (MAAM).



Figure 9: The Venus of the Rugs by Pistoletto (May 2015)

As part of this, in the same corridor leading to the assembly room you will find an art installation made by the independent collective ‘Askavusa’; a memorial of the migrants who have died in the Mediterranean Sea. Here you can also see the world-famous *Venere degli Stracci* (*Venus of the Rugs*) by Michelangelo Pistoletto, lent to the MAAM for more than six months during 2015. In addition, many art pieces have been made by re-using abandoned machinery from the former slaughterhouse, or pieces allude to the original function of the room within the cycle of industrial production. The intersection between the museum, the inhabited spaces and the industrial remains is probably what keeps ‘shocking’ the eye of the visitor as they look into each corner. For instance, when you see carpets, garbage and even electrical appliances on the balconies or hanging in the main hall, you cannot help asking yourself whether it is a piece of art, a leftover of the factory or an object belonging to the inhabitants. Indeed, it may be all three of these things, because what becomes apparent once you walk inside Metropoliz is that every corner, public and private, is part of an effort toward autonomous regeneration that has completely ‘detoured’ the inner space of the former Fiorucci slaughterhouse, and hence its relationship with the cityscape outside the perimeter of the *mestizo* city.

On the other hand, Tiburtina 770 (usually just called ‘770’) looks perfectly embedded in the landscape of via Tiburtina, to the extent that even noticing it as a squat



is difficult at first glance. This was my experience the first time I arrived there, getting out a cab in January 2015. Despite the fact that it was winter, the occupation was almost hidden by a thick covering of trees. ‘The Municipality refuses to cut them as this is an illegal occupation, thus we can't request this service. We asked if we could pay, but they said no way!’, an occupier explained early on. Again, this was another consequence of the Article 5 of the Piano Casa; the squatters cannot legally access public services of any sort, including the gardening maintenance usually provided by the city council on demand to the inhabitants of ‘regular’ private or public buildings. Some more details revealed to an attentive eye that 770 is a squat and not an ‘ordinary’ building though. First of all, in red letters; *Stop sfratti, sgomberi e pignoramenti* (*Stop evictions and foreclosures*) written on a flag that indicates the entrance of every squatted building affiliated to Housing Rights Movements in Rome and Italy. Secondly, political posters and a metal placard about the local anti-eviction info-point run weekly from 770 (and whose activities are described in Chapter 6). Lastly, the presence of a person monitoring (or, as it is usually defined, picketing) the entrance to the squat revealed the squatted nature of the building.



Figure 10: The Atac placard in the entrance hall of Tiburtina 770 (January 2015)

Once you enter inside the building, the feeling that it is inhabited on a daily basis is obvious. The place conveys a domestic and ‘comfortable’ feeling. The vestiges of the past are barely visible. The only sign left indicating the previous purpose of the building as the headquarters of the public transport organisation ATAC is a metal placard depicting the layout of Rome's subway. Yet if it was not for that detail, and the iron gate soldered at the entrance door, this would resemble an ordinary building for public housing. The squat, distributed on three floors, is made of corridors leading to each different room and topped by a balcony roof. On every door you can see a tag with the family name of the inhabitants. Drying racks are distributed at every landing, along with ashtrays, ornamental

plants, abandoned furniture, as well as bikes and toys left by the kids living and playing there. The basement floor, where my allocated space was, looked less inhabited than the other spaces; yet, this was the case due to the prolonged lack of inhabitancy and closure of the assembly hall and nearby rooms caused by the humidity impregnating the walls. All in all, if it wasn't for the size of the rooms, the shared bathrooms and few other details, you would have a hard time distinguishing it from a place meant to be used for residential purposes.



*Figure 11: The "Not here" yellow cross inside the garden of Tiburtina 770 (January 2015)*

From these first impressions, it is quite apparent that Metropolz and Tiburtina 770 are quite different places in terms of their fitting into the surrounding cityscape, and especially in terms of the daily experience that the squatters have in their spaces. Yet their commonalities are not limited to the fact of being affiliated with the same Housing Rights Movement (Blocchi Precari Metropolitani), nor to the fact that both the spaces displace the yellow cross indicating 'Not Here' at their entrance<sup>1</sup>. They shared the initial experience of starting to create a community after the first moment of 'cracking' with the cooperation of the activists that got them in, albeit in quite diverse ways. Secondly, they had to devise from the outset strategies of self-defence that could secure the squat against the threat of immediate eviction. Thirdly, they had to start negotiate the ground-rules that might communise what type of maintenance and restoration the building required in order to become inhabitable. The last aspect served a double function: solidifying the foundations of community-building; creating the consensus-based, horizontal, non-discriminatory, solidarity-based rules that would set up the premises for the commoning

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<sup>1</sup> The yellow crosses "Not here" have been drawn by the street artist Mario Cuppone that cooperated with the Housing Rights Movements' activists in flagging empty spaces that could be squatted. More information here: [http://roma.corriere.it/notizie/arte\\_e\\_cultura/14\\_giugno\\_30/not-here-x-gialle-il-luoghi-citta-okkupata-1b7ec6d8-0063-11e4-9185-2e4a12f9e1bf.shtml](http://roma.corriere.it/notizie/arte_e_cultura/14_giugno_30/not-here-x-gialle-il-luoghi-citta-okkupata-1b7ec6d8-0063-11e4-9185-2e4a12f9e1bf.shtml)



of housing inside the squat and, more broadly, for the commoning of everyday life and social reproduction. This is the more sensitive aspects, whereas the ethical coordinates (Gibson-Graham, 2006) underpinning them are clearly at odds with the mainstream experience of the city everyone brought with them up until living together in the squat.



Figure 12: The frontdoor ate of Tiburtina 770 (January 2015)

On these grounds, the purpose of the current chapter is to account for who exactly the squatters of Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz are in the city of Rome in terms of their intersectional positioning as dispossessed urban inhabitants inside the ladder of neoliberal social reproduction. Indeed, far from being an indistinct or homogeneous mass of people, the squatters present heterogeneous subjectivities that underlie their resolution to squat with the support of Housing Rights Movements such as Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, and the peculiar forms of life and urban commons they later develop in the places they have happened to inhabit. This chapter describes the process of creating the community of the squatters stemming from the exceptional quality of the moment of ‘cracking’, also setting out a parallel with my experience as a brand-new squatter inside an already-established, yet always-in-progress setting. In so doing, I try to point out how the squatters' mobile commons (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013) within the city take the shape of urban commons as described in Chapter 1.

In particular, I start by giving an insight into the experience undergone by the new squatters in relation to their positioning within Rome's neoliberal social reproduction. After that, I discuss how the punitive stances of post-welfare, post-crisis neoliberalism (see Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Davies, 2016; DeVertueil, 2016) have been engendered in the housing arrangement of the ‘self-made’ city of Rome. The first aim of this is to account for the circumstances that led extremely diverse urban dwellers to share a common condition of severe housing deprivation, the decision to turn to Housing Rights Movements, and the final gamble to squat despite all the risks this entails. I then move

on to describing what happens after the exceptional moment of ‘cracking’ unfolds. In particular, I account for three linchpins of the process of community-building occurring after the act of squatting is performed, and through which the process of converting mobile commons (see Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013) into autonomous infrastructures and urban commons takes place: the organisation of resistance; the introduction of ground rules and non-negotiable principles; and the establishment of consensus-based decision-making as the principle for living collectively inside the squat.

### **Who are you? Why did you come here?**

The first time you walk into a housing squat for the purpose of carrying out a research project like mine, you cannot help but have a double concern around giving a good impression during your first encounter with the squatters. First of all, you want to have at least an overview of its social composition and the attitude of the people around you in order to know to behave. Secondly, you have to rapidly acknowledge your own positionality in order to respond to the fundamental question everyone will ask you: “Who are you? What are you doing here? And why did you come here?” These are likely to be the very first queries you encounter the first time you show up at the gate of a housing squat and ask to the person monitoring (or, as the squatters' jargon describes, picketing) the entrance if you can enter. Predictably, they were the first words I heard as soon as I arrived with my bunch of suitcases and huge backpack at the gate of Tiburtina 770. In my immediate and later perception of this kind of questions, the first layer is a security matter. In order to guarantee the squats' safety and avoid undesired guests (or even worse, police) wandering unattended into the squat, unknown people need to be introduced and taken inside by at least one inhabitant. If they are due to stay longer than just the daytime, their presence needs also to be reported and written down at the entrance in order to make the pickers aware of the presence of the guests.

In addition, as an activist-researcher I felt that this kind of question had a further layer to it, one which interrogated my identity and positioning in terms of social reproduction, and therefore the reasons that led me - as my bulky baggage clearly suggested- to move into the squat for some time. I could feel the curious gaze of Tiburtina 770's inhabitants on me while I introduced myself to the activists living in there, moved my belongings to the basement floor where I was going to settle, and started to think about how to arrange it. This was a different kind of looking than the one received from the inhabitants of Metropoliz, who are more accustomed to the presence of researchers and observers around because of the MAAM. Yet in the case of the 770, the presence of a new squatter who did not arrive because of housing deprivation was a novelty. I therefore had a double task as a new squatter. On the one hand, I had to become familiar with people and to make them comfortable with my presence. On the other hand, I was also compelled to sort my material necessities, like understanding who could help me get things I needed, where I could sleep, the basic residential information (bathroom, lights, kitchen), and whom I add to for obtaining the basic recycled furniture and electrical appliances.



*Figure 13:* The "living room" side of my room in the basement floor of Tiburtina 770 (February 2015)

As a matter of fact, like every new squatter I had to figure out both by myself and with the cooperation of the other fellow-squatters how to arrange the space I had been allocated in order to make it inhabitable. This demanded figuring out what kind of refurbishments needed to be made, and then who could be the people inside the squat who could do the job for me. Indeed, the skills of bricklayers, plumbers and electricians are very much in demand in a squat. Whereas the refurbishment of common areas, structures and plants is made for free through the commoning of each individuals' skills, the works

inside each “private abode” falls within the realm of those internal, informal economies aimed at generating a little income, especially for precarious and unemployed people living hand-to-mouth (see Federici *et al.*, 2012). Comprehensibly, the ‘peak’ of these sorts of informal economies occurs particularly during the period immediately after the act of ‘cracking’, and in particular after the spaces have been allotted to families and individuals according to the criteria that I recount in the following sections.

As a newcomer to the occupation of via Tiburtina 770, I experienced first-hand how to make inhabitable a space that had been originally conceived for a different purpose. In my case, the space I was allocated was the former ATAC archive, located in the basement floor, on the corridor leading to the assembly hall. Following the advice of my fellow squatters, I started to plan how to manage the refurbishment, during which time I was hosted in a spare but furnished room on the first floor left vacant by a guy removed by the squat for harassing behaviour towards women that clearly contradicted the ground rules of the squat later recounted in this and the following chapter. First of all, I had to buy a lot of cleaning products and a good electric radiator in order to solve two of the main issues of the room: the thick layer of dust and cobwebs covering almost every surface, and the extreme humidity impregnating the walls that, in the other squatters' words, was the reason why nobody else wanted to inhabit that room. Secondly, I had to negotiate with the fellow-squatters who would actually help with the work of levelling the walls, repainting, and providing me with the basic furniture I needed such as a bed, fridge, desk, sofa, TV, and so on.

As for the furniture, inside the squat most of these objects come second-hand from one of the many precarious sources of income of the squatters, which often includes roaming around looking for abandoned furniture in the streets, bargains with other informal ‘vendors’ in the local flea markets, as well as from occasional activity such as being house movers and ‘rag-and-bone men’ undertaken by those lucky enough to own a van or a vehicle of this sort. For the work on the walls, the squatters pinpointed for me the right person who was previously experienced in this kind of job. After being introduced, I had to buy with him the materials such as the paint roller, the coloured paint and the anti-mould coating, and then he would do the rest of the work in exchange for a small sum of money for the actual labour. In the meantime, another woman started to move into the room next to mine in the basement floor. Together, we agreed to arrange the necessary work on the bathroom we were to share in the corridor, scheduled the cleaning shifts on the floor. We bought together the products for scouring the tiles and

sanitising the bathroom fixtures. We also helped each other in progressively cleaning and arranging our belongings inside the respective rooms, polishing the last details (e.g. cleaning doors, windows and wall cavities), and finally moved in.

All in all, it took approximately three weeks of work in the bathroom and the rooms before I was able to move from the temporary room to the new one next to my neighbour. This period of time before I settled down in the basement room showed me two fundamental aspects central to the process of creating a dwelling space inside a squat, and which recalled what the squatters experienced in the first weeks after the ‘cracking’. First of all, this was not an individual activity, but an inherently social and community-based one. In fact, during the process of planning the work and implementing it, I made the acquaintance of my future neighbour and of the people with whom I bargained over the job. During the time we spent together, they asked me plenty of questions about myself, and I had the chance to become familiar with their histories, habits and even families. Also, while the guy, and my neighbour and I were working, the other squatters and friends would come down to the basement floor to observe and comment how everything was proceeding and to give tips about further improvements to be made, having a break with coffee, sweets and cigarettes, and chatting about the latest events inside the squat.



*Figure 14:* The bedroom side of my space in Tiburtina 770 after the moving in (February, 2015)

The second aspect I noticed is that such a process requires a combination of DIY skills, daily work and communising of resources that was unprecedented for me. Indeed, although I was used to on a regular basis being in squatted and self-managed spaces such as social centres, at the end of the day, I would go back to my own house, either my parents', or rented accommodations during my Bachelor and Master degree years. If I

ever had to do some refurbishing activities in there, it was nothing compared to the actual production of space I performed during my first weeks inside Tiburtina 770. In the meantime, I could not help but think how laborious this operation should have been for my fellow-squatters when they originally squatted. Apart from my poor DIY skills, it was a time consuming and engaging process even though I had the advantage of relying upon an already set-up infrastructure and a cumulated experience in terms of organisational skills, work strategies and customary relations. Indeed, making a decent dwelling space out of a former office or an abandoned industrial plants means deploying a complex set of individual and collective skills for radically regenerating and repurposing those spaces that not everyone can support materially or even emotionally. The reason for engaging with such a challenging task relies, once again, in the patterns of housing segregation, displacement and deprivation experienced by the would-be squatters inside the city of Rome as a consequence of their positioning within the hierarchies set up by mainstream social reproduction.

The following sections recount the conditions underpinning the squatters' resolution to address Housing Rights Movements and engage with the act of squatting. Indeed, it is necessary to investigate the premises leading a heterogeneous composition of dispossessed urban dwellers to squat, in order to understand the exceptional quality of the process of community-building and organising stemming from the moment of 'cracking'. Without this background, it is indeed quite hard to understand why they decided to engage with the unexperienced complications entrenched in the act of autonomously creating decent dwelling spaces in buildings designed for completely different purposes, while catering to the extremely complex process of building the squatters' community according to a core set of ethical coordinates and groundrules (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Hodkinson, 2012; Kokkinidis 2015a, b; Mudu and Aureli, 2016). Hence, the following sections recount the recurring explanatory patterns which emerged during the interviews and interactions with the squatters of Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz when asked one of the multiple variations of the long-lasting, yet fundamental first question: 'Who are you? And how did you come here?'

## **Before squatting: the (future) community of the dispossessed**

As framed within the previous chapters, the housing crisis affecting the city of Rome, and the consequent diffusion of the phenomenon of squatting for housing purposes as an autonomous response, ought to be read through a double analytical lens. First of all, they have to be read as the product of the combination between neoliberal urbanisation and the (post?)crisis of social reproduction determined by the current phase of punitive capitalist restructuring begun since the outset of the economic crisis in 2008. Furthermore, as contextualised in Chapter 3, they are the structural consequence of the history of Rome as a self-made, squatted city (Cellamare, 2014; Vasudevan, 2017) in which autonomous forms of settling, squatting and uneven housing policies have co-existed and related since the post-WWII planning of the working class *borgate*, destined to housing the urban poor and the internal migrants progressively displaced or marginalised by the city centre as undesirable and exceeding, yet exploitable population (see also Santoro, 2015).

The combination of these factors does not only act spatially on the urban space, which is constantly produced and modified within this field of tensions. It biopolitically maps a subjective experience of the city on the very bodies of urban dwellers (see de Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 2008), operating upon their intersectional lines of differential inclusion/exclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) (e.g. nationality; ethnicity; race; migration status; economic and educational background; gender; labour conditions). Their combination creates a set of markers that differentiate their degree of access to either the mainstream housing market or residual forms of social or variously state-led housing, and the degree of dispossession they endure in their everyday life. When it becomes clearly impossible to support one's income and livelihood under the conditions set by neoliberal urban reproduction and mainstream forms of housing, this determines the point of rupture where autonomy and material coercion intersect in the future squatters' resolution to turn to the Housing Rights Movements, and then to carry out the project of squatting together with a previously unknown community.

The subjective experiences and personal biographies of each squatter are irreducible to universal understandings of the world (Stephenson and Papadopoulos, 2006), since they enclose diverse individual trajectories and self-interpretations of life stories, as well as inherently psychological factors affecting one's notion of authenticity and recollection of the events leading to the act of squatting. Yet during my interviews and informal interactions with the squatters of Tiburtina 770 and Metropolit, I

acknowledged that some patterns recurred in their narration. For instance, the word-of-mouth within ethnic communities, family networks, and the same socio-spatial contexts determine a snowball effect that encourages people to affiliate themselves with Housing Rights Movements in groups, and then later to squat together. Interestingly, these appear to be, the same factors that, along with others (e.g. the local labour market, attitude of residents, institutional support) affect the access, concentration and eventual segregation of migrant communities within the mainstream housing market (Mudu, 2006, p.426). Besides, the first approach may occur via the Movements' campaigns, materials and public initiatives. Lastly, referral from social practitioners in the public and charity sectors appeared to be increasingly frequent.

As for the weight of communitarian influence in the choice of squatting, it can be observed in the case of the Roma families living in Metropoliz and Tiburtina 770. Indeed, the Roma squatters who joined Metropoliz in 2010 introduced their relatives and fellow-inhabitants in other settlements to the Movements. This is especially visible in Tiburtina 770, occupied three years later, where the majority of the Roma families are relatives of those living in Metropoliz, or use to be live in the same informal settlements or camps. On the other hand, squatters may be influenced by their previous experience into independent squats that are mostly organised on ethnic grounds, and whose relationship with Housing Rights Movements comes down to the mutual solidarity in case of evictions and demands for public housing accommodations. This is the case of many asylum seekers and refugees, who became aware of the modalities of squatting used by Movements as BPM thanks to their involvement in historic squats like Piazza Indipendenza<sup>2</sup> and the former Salaam Palace, two housing squats located respectively in the city centre and the south-eastern periphery of Rome, and inhabited exclusively by asylum-seekers and refugees, mainly from Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia and Niger.

Lastly, there is the frequent case of other dispossessed urban dwellers (often Italian natives) who have admitted the possibility of squatting with Housing Rights Movements only once they have explored all the other options besides homelessness, ranging from the reliance upon family/social networking, to charity and the public sector. These considerations are the result of the findings obtained during my day-to-day experience as a squatter in Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz, and, more importantly, from the in-depth interviews collected with their inhabitants. Insofar as these factors tend to

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<sup>2</sup> The squat of Piazza Indipendenza has been brutally evicted on the 19<sup>th</sup> August 2017. The impact of this eviction is discussed in the conclusive chapter. At the moment of writing, the inhabitants are still homeless.



intersect in the squatters' complex biographies, for analytical purposes I have chosen to highlight those ones that were often emphasised during the stage of interviewing, and that therefore I assumed to be more determinant as for the squatters' resolution to opt for collective squatting under the political tutelage of the movements, in this case Blocchi Precari Metropolitani. In the following section I elaborate upon the migrants' diverse mobile commons (see Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013) and the role played by housing in their migratory trajectory. This is due to the fact that the vast majority of the current squatters are migrants with diverse statuses, from being downright undocumented to holders of humanitarian protection visas. This demonstrates in turn how they have been those primarily affected by patterns of housing segregation, displacement and deprivation that have been in turn reinforced by the racist and criminalising assumptions underlying the current border management and securitarian policies enforced in Italian cities, Rome included (Gargiulo, 2011; Santoro, 2015; Ricotta, 2016).

### **Migrants' mobile commons**

Migrant lives, in particular, highlight the mix of autonomy and coercion underpinning the choice to squat in respect to three main aspects: the connection between housing policies and border management in the Italian context; the patterns of residential segregation undergone by migrants housed in Rome; the role played by squatting as a cultural satisfier/intermediate necessity allowing migrants to reconcile diverse projects they have developed during their migratory trajectories (Mudu, 2006; Martínez and Cattaneo, 2014; di Felicianantonio, 2016; Staid, 2016). Indeed, as previously mentioned, Rome as a self-made, inherently migratory city, is historically characterised by the proliferation of informal settlements and unlawful housing solutions in response to the multifaceted processes of segregation occurring in its territory. In the case of migrants, these factors may include: formalised statuses; relationship with their ethnic communities of origin and their customary housing patterns; pre-existing family ties; labour market structures; levels of control deployed in a certain territory; specificity of border management (Mudu, 2006; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Cellamare 2014, 2016). Consequently, these patterns influence the size and ethnic composition of the migrant communities living in Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz. This is to say that, from my

interviews and my daily experience in the squats, what emerged is that, in the case of the prevailing migrant population, the decision to squat in Rome was the combined effect of border management, labour precarisation and patterns of housing segregation. Hence, squatting for housing purposes intersects with mobility in the frame of the intersectional lines of inclusion and exclusion characterising neoliberal social reproduction within the ongoing phase of restructuring. Furthermore, migrants re-appropriate housing as a form of retrieving direct and indirect income to allocate towards many things: remittances towards their home countries for their families and also building their own house where they plan to return in the future; affording higher education both in Italy and abroad for their children.

In this light, squatting becomes an emancipatory strategy of settlement that allows migrants to counter the housing segregation to which they are subjected amidst broader patterns of social exclusion, othering and exploitation (Chattopadhyay, 2015), while fulfilling other social needs and ambitions that require the exertion of a collective social power of re-appropriation and demand (see Martínez and Cattaneo, 2014, p.29). In this way, the migrant squatters also gain the opportunity to reconcile with the expectations and projects they have made at the beginning of their migratory projects, and which they could not fulfil within mainstream urban social reproduction (see Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013). This is coherent with Blocchi Precari Metropolitani's framing of squatting for housing purposes not only as an emergency solution for retrieving housing, but also as a way of re-appropriating comprehensively the right to inhabiting and changing the city. Last but not least, it is also a modality of realising that expectations of settlement and life-changing opportunities that many inherited from the narration of the previous generations of migrants, and that affected their decision to move to Rome in the first place, as the following extensive quotation from an interview shows.

Those who come back [from Morocco] that came before us get back home and convey that there is the dream of the new world here [in Rome]... You go there and you sort it out: car, job, money and so on... And how can you resist at that point? Once indeed, if you recall I told you... Really, I remember, during my last years in Morocco before going away, the kid that has studied, got to the university, who has a degree and an educational path, more knowledge than others, didn't count anything in respect to the other that, for instance [...] has a lower educational level, no knowledge at all, yet was lucky...He went to Italy and came back with a Mercedes

car, a bunch of cash...You see what I mean? So it opens a debate inside us... 'You see, there is life there, not studying is pointless' and so on... [...] Obviously there is a difference between how you live in Morocco and Italy in any case. Yet there are plenty of similarities: corruption, the *impicci* [savviness, survival tricks] and, I say this begrudgingly as I feel Italian in effect, ignorance...You see? We feel we are inside a society that more or less is similar to ours... Then, especially when we come here... We find out how things are really going on and working...Women, habits, attitudes and so on... And you find out that at the end of the day there is not such a big difference...And so it is not great but we fit here anyway. It's kind of a psychological thing, I don't know if you get me...I don't want to say it badly...But in Italy you have less order measures than elsewhere in Europe... In Switzerland you can't throw a cigarette on the floor, in Italy you can throw a beer on the floor and no one would tell you anything... Not that I'd like to do it, but unfortunately it's like this, it's the tolerance that brings many other people to say 'I am staying in Italy, you can do whatever you want, I am doing well, who cares' ...And unfortunately it's like this, but it's bound to a system that started in the Sixties and didn't work...Or worked just for slapping a band-aid on the problem<sup>3</sup>, and that's it.

(A, male, Moroccan, August 2015)

From A's interview, what emerges is the prominent role played by the narration made inside the communities of origins in regard to the prospects for a 'successful' future in Italy, and Rome especially. Insofar as the ongoing crisis has certainly played a role in shrinking labour and settlement opportunities for migrants, it is likewise undeniable that what shines through this narration is a certain disillusionment towards the idyllic accounts of other migrants regarding the easiness with which they have made their way up the ladder. Put this way, squatting could be perceived at the same time as an individual failure, a collective strategy within people of the same national community for coping with the widespread difficulty in supporting themselves in the housing market, and an opportunity of emancipation by a reiterated condition of poverty and precariousness after migrating. Actually, the relevance of the combination among word of mouth about Housing Rights Movements within kinship networks, community habits and the necessity of accommodating precarious labour and social conditions was stressed repeatedly during the interviews and interactions I collected. This is reflected in the following excerpt from

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<sup>3</sup> He refers to the sequence of amnesties that have characterised Italian migration management especially during the past two decades. The same interviewee has been undocumented for almost 5 years, before being legalised through one of the many 'pardons' for housekeepers and care-workers issued during 2000s.

an interview with F, an Ecuadorean single mother of two that, during her first weeks of squatting, also discovered she would be a single grandmother, since her teenage daughter immediately became pregnant by her (also very young) boyfriend:

I've chosen to come in Italy thirteen years ago first of all because I had my sister here, and because all people from my country were going to Spain, half of Ecuador was in Spain and our easiest point of entry was in Italy instead of Spain. Spain at the time was already deporting people and my sister said 'come here in Italy' because when we came immediately my sister found a job and so we decided to come. [...] Now it's difficult. Before we just entered with the passport as tourists and overstayed, now you need a proper long-term visa. It's not easy to enter, nor to leave my country nowadays. [...] My sister used to say it was more remunerative to stay here in Italy so I had the idea to stay one, two years, work, save money and then go back to Ecuador. But it hasn't been the case. [...] My daughter came recently, 5/6 years ago. [...] I left her 8 years alone and make her come to Italy when she was close to her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. [...] The decision to come to live inside the squat was a choice I made alone, because beforehand I used to work and I was ok money-wise. Thank God I had money to pay for a rent, I was OK but then the job was done because the man I was a caregiver for passed away and then it was done. And then as I got to know friends that said 'Go to the infopoint for the squat', I was saying 'We'll see, what I going to say to my children?' Because here in Italy I had another kid from a man from whom I separated soon. But then I convinced myself and I started going to assemblies, demonstrations and my children were preguntando [asking] me 'Where are you going?' 'Got things to do, I'll be late', I would reply, because sometimes the assembly, the rally lasted until late, and I would come home at midnight.

(F, female, Ecuadorean, August 2015)



*Figure 15:* Preparation of the Ecuadorean bread 'guaguas de pan' during Easter at F.' house (April 2015)

The way in which F narrates how she made up her mind about squatting, and the fact that she concealed for a long time her intention towards the children (and especially the teenage daughter she left back in Ecuador for many years) displays to what extent housing patterns implicate the same complex entanglement of autonomy and coercion underpinning the other aspects of their migratory project and trajectories (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2011; Martignoni and Papadopoulos, 2014; Grazioli, 2017a). Indeed, F's recollection of the period prior to squatting encompasses the idea of being incapable of supporting herself in the privatised housing market as a failure. Also, she felt she was betraying the dream of climbing the ladder for which she moved and sacrificed her experience of motherhood in her own country. Here, squatting is clearly perceived as a failure, a misstep in the migratory project, alongside the sense of guilt and inadequateness characterising neoliberal individuals' crisis of positioning within mainstream social reproduction. The choice, as F perceived it, was either to become a homeless person, or a squatter. In addition, in her decision, the positive 'feedback' of other Ecuadorians who were already involved in the Movement was particularly influential.

This confirms the idea that the circulation of information and the support provided within family and community networks is one of the factors that explain the particular concentration of certain ethnic or national communities in housing squats. Also, the intersection that squatting for housing purposes determines among mobility, life trajectories and alternative strategies of settlement can be framed through the notion of mobile commons. They are as a complex set of affective bonds, organisational practices, tricks of survival, informal (if not overtly illegal) economies, networks and bonds of solidarity aimed at fostering settlement and mobility that are continuously updated and expanded through the experience of the people on the move (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013, p.190). While making these mobile commons, migrant squatters craft complex and even contradictory narratives that can encompass emancipation and empowerment as well as failure and shame, in line with the complex interplay of autonomy and coercion that determine the diverse steps of their migratory project (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

### **Squatting as withdrawing from the business of forcible/temporary housing**

*'Let's hope 2013 will be a year full of garbage emergencies, refugees and*

*migrants' crises, unaccompanied minors, Roma-camps, that it will be rainy so that the grass to be cut grows, and possibly with some snow storm. Long live the social cooperation!*". This chilling text message sparked outrage in late 2014 after its publication in every Italian newspaper. It was exchanged on New Year's Eve 2013 by two of the main people accused in the Mafia Capitale trial, Salvatore Buzzi and Massimo Carminati, who have been detained ever since in the framework of a probe that uncovered the corrupt cooperation between politicians, entrepreneurs, mob organisations and public administrators in managing the businesses of emergency in the city of Rome. This wiretapped conversation manifestly shows that one of the most lucrative areas for them was the management of forced temporary housing addressed towards three seemingly disparate categories of urban dwellers: refugees, asylum seekers and the Roma population. Indeed, although their migratory trajectories and subjective profiles are quite different, inside the city of Rome they are equated by the fact of being directed towards types of housing that are outside both of the market and the welfare circuit, and that are run through subcontracting to private enterprises for all maintenance services.

I really don't get this thing in immigration centres...You are not allowed to cook your own food, to do your own laundry, let alone let someone come to visit you...We are not 'guests' as they say in there, we are basically prisoners! But we do not need them [the cooperative managing the refugee centre] to look after us...We are not babies! You know, we had very bad discussions with the janitor in the refugee centre...We wanted to cook at least our own food... We are different people, we eat different stuff...For instance, those who are Muslims, how can they know whether the meals they bring everyday are *halal*?? Or what if we want to cook for a religious feast? This was insane... We are human beings, we are grown-ups, can look after ourselves. We are refugees, not pets or babies!

(J., Somali, male, April 2015)



*Figure 16: A detail of the kitchen of the house of a Roma family inside Metropoliz (July 2015)*

As we can see, squatting in this case represents a strategy for withdrawing from a system that strips individuals and communities of their agency, freedom of movement and daily life routines. Indeed, inside both immigration centres and official Roma camps there are cast-iron mechanisms of control that allow the managers involved to extract profit out of basically every aspect of everydayness, from cooking to the monitoring of access, whilst the daily life conditions are often well below the standards of a decent livelihood. In particular, the Italian state has been repeatedly reprimanded and invited by the European Union to go beyond the policy of Roma camps as a form of discriminatory housing, whilst the system for refugees is the object of three distinct procedures of infraction begun since 2012, besides the already mentioned judiciary enquiries that have touched all Italian regions, Lazio included, about the mismanagement of deportation and immigration centres (see Staid, 2017; Tizian, 2017).

I am a refugee. I still remember the day when the soldiers withdrew us from the boat... We lived the war, we went through Libya... We were terrified. We thought we made it arriving in Italy, that it would be easier as controls are usually less severe and it is easier to achieve refugee status. True. Yet. I would get assistance just for a limited amount of time. At some point we were kicked out of the refugee shelter and they didn't pay my cheque for asylum. Occupying was the only option I would say, and not a novelty. There are some occupations (like the Piazza Indipendenza one) lived in only by refugees in Rome. Or like the old Hotel Africa<sup>4</sup>. No news at all. (M,

<sup>4</sup> In Rome a number of squats not affiliated to either Housing Rights Movements or other political

male, Eritrean, November 2015)

I have been living basically in the streets for years before squatting! I had to leave my wife and my older son in Romania with her parents as I couldn't provide good accommodation...I lived also in a camp, I was evicted from the Casilino 900 camp...Then I knew the Popica association, working in Metropolitiz with Roma families...We have known each other for years so far [*speaking of an activist*] and that's how I got to know about housing squats. Then I brought my wife to Italy when she was pregnant and we occupied together... Then I had to go on holidays [in jail] for a quite long period two days after we squatted... But I guess that's another part of the story...

(M, Roma, male, November 2015)

Whilst the issue of the management of asylum seekers and refugees is relatively new, the case pertaining the Roma community is rooted in a history of brutal cultural, social and political repression that for centuries, has hit this community. History books date the first bans against the camping of Roma back to the fifteenth century; their postulate was to forbid their parking with caravans and mobile homes within the walls of the city (Staid, 2017, p.42-3). Hence the discrimination and housing segregation against the Romani community bear out an old tradition in the city of Rome, and has determined peculiar patterns of forced mobility through the sequence of continuous eviction, and forced forms of settlement into the so-called Roma camps. Indeed, on the one hand, the Roma population is basically forced to live in semi-institutional camps and other informal ones that are often evicted. On the other hand, the ending of the 'camp' policy would necessitate their repositioning into alternative arrangements as public or social housing that is in fact often declined by the Roma themselves as a form of enclosure. Then, squatting becomes a way of withdrawing from the vicious cycle of camping and eviction, while retaining the communitarian habits entrenched in the Roma traditions, as the following excerpt from a collective conversation explains:

We kept being evicted from place to place. One month in one place, one month in another. That's how it used to be. Living in a camp has become really difficult. Not

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organisations can be traced. Among them, there are the evicted Piazza Indipendenza, Romanina and Collatina, whose majority of inhabitants are refugees and asylum seekers. It is worth noticing that these squats usually do not participate to the Movements' campaigns and mobilisations, even though they use alike forms of internal organisation and resistance in case of evictions.



that they are nice places. And by the way in our country, in Romania, we don't live as nomads. We have houses, also very nice and big ones, you wouldn't believe that. Now in the squat it is way better... We can still stay all together, have community life and maintain our traditions, while the kids are growing up in a safe environment, and some of them go to school... Of course it is more difficult for the elderly who are used to a certain lifestyle but we managed to convince them that this was good for everyone, that inside the squat we could still be together as a family and a group but without living in a gross camp where you treated like an animal just because they think you are a zingaro<sup>5</sup> and so they don't want you to live in an house but they want to evict you from the camp because you are dirty and messy... How am I supposed to live? How am I supposed to feed my children? I wouldn't go back to a place where I live with Roma and nomads only, we are ok here.

(Group conversation with Roma women from Tiburtina 770 and Metropolitiz during a general assembly, June 2015)

In the light of the double difficulty of finding a 'regular' housing arrangement within either the market and the welfare circuit, and the willingness to retain their community culture, squatting becomes an empowering option for combining a decent (and settled) dwelling arrangement and the commoning of daily life that characterises Roma traditions. Furthermore, the heterogeneous composition of the squat becomes a shelter and, at the same time, an opportunity for deconstructing the mutual suspicion and discrimination between the Roma and all the so-called *gaggiò*<sup>6</sup> with whom they experience completely segregated daily lives within the space of the city. Last but not least, as implied in the interview excerpt, the Roma families who live in Tiburtina 770 and Metropolitiz are also allowed to maintain the main source of income that is common to many Romani families, which constitutes one of the favourite objects of derogatory racist propaganda. It is the self-managed recycling process of the garbage abandoned into the trash bins, which they collect, separate and recycle for selling and building. Inside the squats, the Roma dwellers are allotted external spaces where they can collect their belongings, and that in exchange have to be kept clean and decent in order not to attract negative publicity from outside the squat. It is worth noticing that this experimentation inside the Blocchi Precari Metropolitani housing squats Tiburtina 770 and Metropolitiz has paved the path for the introduction of Roma to the social composition of Housing Rights

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<sup>5</sup> This word is the equivalent of *gipsy*, and bears a strongly derogatory connotation in Italian slang.

<sup>6</sup> The sedentary non-Romani.

Movements in Rome. Yet, they remain the only ones where the Roma community is numerous, visible and stable in time, whereas other experiments of mono-ethnic squatting with Housing Rights Movements (as the Lancio and Avis squats promoted by the Movement RAM in the Tiburtina area) ended up with other procedures of evictions (Maestri, 2016). Besides, in Rome the Roma communities tend to opt for independent and mono-ethnic squats which are often quite precarious and subject to continuous procedures of eviction (Maestri, 2014). For instance, during my sojourn in Tiburtina 770, I became aware that some of the relatives of the Roma people living there had occupied an empty industrial pavilion on via Tiburtina, in the direction of Tivoli, in June 2016. Since then, they have undergone many evictions, yet despite this have continuously occupied buildings following the route of the Tiburtina towards the outskirts of Rome. Once again, this occurs with modalities similar to those undergone by asylum seekers and refugees that, as mentioned in the previous excerpts of interviews, have a long tradition of autonomous squatting in the city.

Hence, the case of asylum seekers, refugees and Roma population shows how squatting for housing purposes can become an emancipatory, empowering act aimed at withdrawing from systems that implement what I define as forcible/temporary housing, and whose features are temporariness and the subjection to political and entrepreneurial logics that strip the so-called ‘guests’ of their genuine right to accessing a permanent and stable place to dwell. Therefore, the political tutelage offered by Housing Rights Movements, and their inherently anti-racist and anti-discriminatory stance, offer migrants an opportunity to regain the agency and independence they were stripped of, and to experiment with new forms of life while retaining their culture, habits and community spirit. Yet while this type of migrant squatting (see Chattopadhyay and Mudu, 2017) is now consolidated in the context of Rome, the exacerbated context of crisis is witnessing the return of native Italian citizens to squatting, alongside subjects with whom they are experiencing unprecedented proximities in social marginality and housing deprivation.

### **The Italian way of (going back to) squatting in Rome**

As discussed in the previous chapter, squatting for housing purposes is not a novelty in the context of Rome. Entire neighbourhoods like Tor Sapienza and Pietralata and other

dozens of *borgate* were founded, or later shaped, on the impulse to the fierce struggles for housing rights conducted by Italian internal migrants and urban poor that responded to the forced displacement from the city centre and the relocation into peripheral area by demanding ‘right to the city’ in the guise of the access to public housing and decent dwelling conditions (Santoro, 2015). Besides, the Italian inhabitants of Rome have broadly resorted to the squatting of public housing apartments as a strategy for responding individually to their condition of homelessness, reaching an approximate number of 10,000 in 2015 (Puccini, 2016). Yet, as extensively framed in Chapter 1, the inherently self-made character of Rome, the prolonged aftermath of the 2008 crisis, and the cuts to an already residualised welfare system, have brought back and rescaled organised squatting for housing purposes within the cityscape with renewed prominence, unprecedented approaches and unforeseen subjective assemblages.

Indeed, the city has witnessed the emergence of new housing demands that have involved precarious workers and students, internal migrants, evicted families and individuals, all of whom have undergone procedures of seizure and foreclosure, alongside people who have lost access to welfare provisions and therefore are both unable to support their existence in the privatised housing market, or achieving a public solution to their condition of housing deprivation (Di Felicianantonio, 2017). Last but not least, despite the (contested) numbers of people experiencing the housing emergency, social housing is still tailored around the profile of a middleclass with a minimum income, whilst public institutions pursue the aim of privatising and alienating the existing public housing stock with the double intent of complying to the ambitions expressed in the 2014 Piano Casa (the same law that introduced Article 5), and ameliorating the exorbitant debt weighing on the treasury of the city council (Mudu, 2014). Yet, this former middle class is not only experiencing the lack of social mobility, but often undergoing a sudden pitfall into the traumatic experience of urban poverty that encompasses manifold forms of material deprivation, housing included (Puccini, 2016).

I used to live in the borgata of Centocelle. [...] I decided to squat, for I found myself in dark waters. Still, after my mother passed away all of a sudden, I used to work, at least I was working as a bartender, at least I had an income, 600 euros per month...*Poteva stacce* [could be translated more or less as ‘it could be enough’] and more or less I could go on and pay my mortgage for the house she bought with a lot of sacrifices, with the sweat of her very forehead... For sure, at the point we had

already lost the pizza restaurant she had opened when she was alive, but at least her house was still there and I had the hope to keep it and pay the instalments to the bank... Then I found myself unemployed out of the blue... And then... Through a friend of my husband we got to know about Movements and squatting, and we subscribed to the 'waiting list' for occupying [...] We did rallies, static demonstrations, anti-eviction pickets, we helped other people who found themselves in hard times for they couldn't afford or a rent or who ended up on the streets from one day to another. By the way we also help those who need help, on top of the fact that we need it too.

(T, female, Italian, March 2015)

T's discourse contains all the benchmarks of the middle-class narrative shaped according to this kind of logic: small entrepreneurship; becoming indebted due to buying a house as a respectable gesture that had to be even *post-mortem* as a twofold material and moral legacy; the ethics of sacrifice through steady work to achieve a certain lifestyle and maintain it. The role played by the biopolitical pervasiveness of the neoliberal mentality in shaping social reproduction also clarifies why the Italian component of squatters are apparently more reluctant to consider squatting as a viable option until all the others (and especially the reliance upon family and friendship networks) are discarded, and the necessity for them to be accommodated into a squat is fairly immediate. Indeed, the narratives of Italian squatters convey the feeling of an abrupt impoverishment to which they were unprepared to react.

On the one hand, as occurred in T's interview, there seems to be no hiatus between the moment of being forced to abandon her house and the moment of squatting. Another element that emerges from her discourse is the absence of welfare among the options she could have pursued. This could be explained in two ways. First of all, the lengthiness of the procedure for accessing a public housing accommodation is incompatible with the urgency lived by those who found themselves suddenly stripped of their housing assets. Furthermore, it reveals the sense of bewilderment and shame in turning to welfare systems felt by people that, in accord with the ethics of the entrepreneurial, neoliberal individual, were struggling for maintaining the social capital of home-ownership as a social engineering technology inside the city (Martin, 2002; Foucault, 2008; Hodkinson, 2012; Lazzarato 2012, 2014). This also supported by the number of Italian evictees who came to the 770's anti-eviction info-point accompanied

by members of charities, autonomous trade-unions and even local social welfare's practitioners who acknowledged their inability to provide adequate support solution, and asked the Housing Rights Movements to take on their cases, as this interview recounts:

I got sick... Artery problems, then a clot in my brain... Even though I still smoke two packages of cigarettes per day! Whatever... Then I got hospitalized for a long time. In the meantime, I had problems with my kids... Especially one of them... Drug issues, please don't make me be more specific... I had an invalidity pension. I am exempted from paying for most of my treatments, but it still wasn't enough to afford renting a house with all these problems I had to tackle. Then I was unionised with A.s.I.a-USB<sup>7</sup> and they suggested to me this path of squatting as the only viable thing to do in a short time-span. As sceptical as I was, I had run out of other options. Now, at least, I have a roof on top of my head, local welfare practitioners are following my case even though I live into a squat... Indeed, as you can see, they bring me pre-cooked meals everyday through a charity, I can rely on the legal support of both the Movements and the associations that are helping me... I am still anything but rich, but at least I can make it. And I can afford a day off at the shore with my sons or offer them a pizza if they feel like it and I am healthy enough to go out!

(M, male, Italian, February 2015)

The interview with M conveys a simultaneous feeling of inadequacy, as well as the effort to provide a 'socially acceptable' explanation of the fact that squatting was not an autonomous and voluntary choice, but the unwilling product of circumstances that were unsolvable otherwise. Also, in my experience with the Italian squatters especially, I came to understand that the uncomfortable feeling underpinning these narratives is also due to the two main prejudices purported by derogatory political and media campaigns targeting housing squats: their illegality, and the fact that they are mostly inhabited by migrants. Hence, these new urban poor have to negotiate their biographies and craft their own narratives of the act where they have to frame a type of dwelling that, in their imaginary and self-perception, was unforeseen and unpredictable. Yet in this existential task, they are not alone. Indeed, they are supported not only by the solidarity networks around them, but also by other Italian squatters who have experienced housing and social marginality throughout their lifetime.

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<sup>7</sup> A.s.I.a-USB is a grassroots organisation that unionises public housing' tenants and even squatters.

These people, especially if they have grown up in the *borgate*, have a more fatalistic and, at the same time, rather more pragmatic approach to the act of squatting, whereas they perceived it as a return to a struggle on which their families had capitalised in the past by obtaining public housing, and that is again necessary due to the existential precariousness they are experiencing. One example of this approach towards contemporary squatting is epitomised into the biography of S, a single mother who grew up in a public housing block in Pietralata in a family of working class, leftist heritage. In her words, she was accustomed to the history of squatting and Housing Rights Movements on the one hand, and to the reality of squatted social centres on the other. Hence, to S, squatting is not a failure, but a way of claiming the access to affordable and public housing that her mother obtained otherwise in previous decades through welfare. Her discourse encompasses at the same time the spatialised depth of the ongoing crisis of social reproduction, and the temporal ‘golden thread’ connecting the legacy of the past decades of conflict to the current struggle for the ‘right to the city’:

I had a daughter at 16 years old, it was unintended but I decided to keep her. I broke up with the father almost immediately, he was a junky lazybones... After I gave birth he pretended he was working, whilst he was hiding to sleep in the car parked a few steps from home. Ridiculous. At some time I told him: *abbello*<sup>8</sup> ok, I have to raise and support my daughter but not you as well, ok? So I stayed at my mum's house, I was living with her, in a public housing apartment that is close to the squat. I had to give up high school and opted for the hairdressing professional school to get a job as quickly as possible. Then I started to go out, hang out in social centres and I realised how it worked to get into housing squats... I knew a lot of people that squatted single apartments in the public housing blocks but that was different, nowadays this option is safer... So I saw a chance for being finally independent. Ok, they say we are illegal, but what if even with a job I can't afford to rent a place for me and my daughter as a single mum? Let alone public housing. If they gave us another solution, we would take it for sure. But they never did and I couldn't stand living with my mum any longer, and my kid was a difficult one. So here I am.

(S, female, Italian, October 2015)

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<sup>8</sup> Italian slang translatable with “Hey dude”.

## **Becom(mon)ing community in the moment of cracking**

The very first day you never think you are going to stay. You can only think of that moment when you are going to overstep the threshold separating you from your potential new home. You can really only think of that moment, what it takes to do it and keep the pressure high in order to make it and not be overwhelmed by fear, the fatigue of climbing something with all your things packed on your shoulders and so on. *Real* life starts afterwards, if we can consider it real in the sense of being 'normal'... Ordinary. Living inside an occupation is like living in the Big Brother. The problems you have to face here, you wouldn't find them elsewhere or in an ordinary context.

(A, male, Moroccan, March 2015)

As the previous sections described, the social composition engaging with the act of squatting is a quite heterogeneous one, whose diverse components though share the circumstance of finding themselves in a condition of severe housing deprivation. After a period of 'training' and assemblies with Housing Rights Movements during which they were introduced to the struggle and explained its potential risks, the squatters finally arrive to the moment of 'cracking' into the place that will hopefully become 'their home', although not in a property-wise sense. This crucial moment is recounted by the squatters as an almost epic one, lived by each individual and family with a mixed sensation of fear, excitement and also uncertainty about what will come after. Yet, once the squatting is performed, the more challenging task begins: constituting the squatters as a community capable of self-organising and defending themselves from the immediate and future threats looming onto their heads.



*Figure 17:* Tiburtina 770 kids playing with a tent stored since after squatting (May 2015)

This requires the activists to set up a series of non-negotiable ground-rules and tasks based on the principles of collectivity, mutuality and shared responsibility. Indeed, everyone's commitment is required in order to implement the basic organisational bedrocks for the very first days and weeks of a squat: arranging the defence of the space against the looming risk of immediate eviction; establishing shared criteria for the refurbishment of common spaces and the allocation of at least provisional dwelling slots; distributing responsibilities among the squatters. All these aspects are crucial in order to support the individuals in tackling with the first impact amidst the infrastructural deficiencies affecting previously abandoned buildings as the administrative headquarters Tiburtina 770 and the former slaughterhouse Fiorucci in terms of liveability. And indeed, when asked about the first period into the squats, the squatters in both places stress the harsh materialities that they faced, and the tricks they invented in order to tackle the initial lack of basic facilities, especially electricity and bathroom fixtures:

At the very beginning, we had no shower. I and my partner were one of the few with no friends to go to for a shower, nor we had the chance to go to our previous place to shower, as it was in Rome's outskirts and it would take hours to go and come back. Then I found the only working water boiler in the basement. With a pipe, it could be turned in a hand-crafted shower. The only problem was it wasn't supposed to be a shower.... There was no hole on the floor, let alone a shower tray. [...] How did I make it? Well, I started to fill a bucket with the hot water and wash myself like this... In order not to flood everything and be spotted by other people, my partner stood behind the door mopping up and rinsing everything immediately... She was helping me, I was helping her... Needless to say, the secret didn't last very long, and everyone started taking showers there. [...] Same for the clothes rack problem. How to dry the laundry? I spotted a sunny corner on the roof and stretched a string. As soon as I got back with my clean laundry, it was full of someone else's clothes. You definitely cannot keep a secret inside a squat!

(A, Moroccan, male, December 2015)

When we arrived in Metropolis there was...Nothing!!!The only functioning bathrooms were in the guardian's house close to the entrance... The only other inhabitable place was the yellow house... Then nothing else! We were 150 families, but many went away when they saw the place... Only three Italian families decided



to stay! The others fled and went to occupy vacant apartments in Tor Vergata, Ponte di Nona<sup>9</sup>...Then after the shock we started arranging the place... And it's still a work in progress. Everyone is making their own place. A Roma house is different from an Eritrean and a Moroccan one. Yes, building is still ongoing...

(M, Moroccan, male, June 2015)

As these excerpts clarify, the first impression of squatting entails acknowledging the often appalling, or at least inhospitable, initial conditions of a building that has been abandoned to degradation for years. And indeed, it is not surprising that for many families and individuals the prospect of the effort it will take to be refurbished and converted into a liveable dwelling space is overwhelming, and that they decide to quit the squat in that initial period. Of course, the prior absence of other options, the time spent homeless, as well as the availability of further solidarity networks affect the determination of the new squatters to engage with the challenges encompassed in the act of squatting. Nonetheless, I have to admit that, even though I had previous experience of frequenting squatted spaces, I was taken aback in figuring out how to obtain a decent 'studio-flat' in one of the rooms that had hitherto been empty, or destined for completely different purposes. On the other hand, I reckoned I was in a quite a privileged position if I reflect on what other squatters experienced during the very first days and weeks as squatters.

Indeed, as recounted in the previous sections, since my arrival, I could rely upon an already operating infrastructure that had been consolidated by the squatters through the support provided by the BPM's broad solidarity network. Activated after each new squat, it involves subjects with likewise diverse origins and motivations: word-of-mouth of kinship and communities; trans-local informal economic circuits; activists from the Housing Rights Movements and other grassroots political entities; already-established squats located in the area; and even local political formations and charitable associations. Regardless of their constitution, the intervention of each of these subjects does not only contribute to sorting out material needs such as helping to get second-hand furniture, mattresses and camping tents, water and food. They are essential inasmuch as they increase the circulation of organisational knowledge and expertise upon which the squatters can dwell in order to figure out how to make the space work on the basis of the core set of non-negotiable ground rules and principles that constitute the orientation of

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<sup>9</sup> Once again, this confirms the widespread custom in Rome for Italian families to squat apartments on their own instead of living in housing squats run by Housing Rights Movements, as discussed in the previous sections.

the new experience of commoning housing from the very first moments.

This activation in sorting out the more urgent materialities allowed the squatters to focus not only on the short-term task of assessing the buildings' structural conditions in the beginning, but on the long-term process of setting out, together with the more experienced activists, a set of consensus-based, horizontal and non-discriminatory organisational modalities (see Kokkinidis 2015a, b; Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014) that could fulfil the three bedrocks of every incipient experience of squatting. First of all, the organisation of anti-eviction resistance. Secondly, the distribution of responsibilities among the squatters according to everyone's capabilities, inclinations and willingness to cooperate. Last but not least, an equitable allocation of the available spaces which could conform as much as possible to everyone's needs. These aspects are listed in temporal order, for the organisation of the self-defence is the first step the squatters engage with, from the shifts for picketing the roof and the entrance to the creation of barricades through the 'recycling' of waste materials found inside the squat like tubing, iron slabs and scattered metal components that could be assembled in the guise of doors, gates and 'hand-made' soldering.

Once the immediate threat of eviction is passed, the squatters can begin to proceed to the progressive allocation of the spaces for each individual and family group. Before this, they dine and live in common halls where camping tents and improvised mattresses are placed, if they do not sleep directly on the bare floor. From the moment of getting access to a mono-family accommodation onwards, social reproduction becomes progressively less visible and gets subsumed into the private sphere of one's 'home'. Hence, whereas commoning and community-building are the almost inevitable outcomes of the exceptional quality of the moment of 'cracking', the biggest challenge housing squats have to face is to secure the routinisation of what I define in the following chapter as the *organisational rites* that guarantee the endurance of the housing squats as a place for the commoning of housing, experimenting with alternative forms of social reproduction, and proliferating manifold urban commons within the urban space. Then, before moving on to analysing their daily constitutions and limitations, I will undertake some final considerations concerning the intersectional, spatialized dynamics underpinning the process of community-building that involves the squatters in Rome from the decision to occupy to the moment of cracking.



Figure 18: The game room located in the front building of Metropolitiz (January 2015)

### **From exceptionality to routinisation**

The previous chapters have addressed in both theoretical and historical terms the existing nexus between the ongoing housing crisis, the crisis of social reproduction unfolding since 2007-8, and the role played by squatting for housing purposes in a renewed context of urban governance, prone to the logics of what I chose to frame as *neoliberal urbanisation*, in order to stress its processual nature and functioning. Indeed, this modality of governance has been characterised by the maximisation of accumulation through dispossession within each and every aspect of social reproduction, housing included. At the same time, it has rescaled the way in which the individuals conceive of their presence inside the city after enduring of indebtedness, spatialised inequalities and stigmatisation of the access to a diminished welfare system as an undesirable form of dependence on the collective. Hence, as the ethnographic account provided in the current chapter has clarified, the choice of squatting under the political tutelage of Housing Rights Movements is not one taken light-heartedly. It is, rather, the outcome of the intersection between the rationale of neoliberal urbanisation as a global process and its locally-spatialised articulation into multi-scalar layers of inequalities and segregation that become ingrained into the peculiar constitution of Rome as a self-made city constituted within the constant field of tension among autonomy, repression and resistance in respect to housing practices (Cellamare, 2014, 2016; Caciagli, 2016; Di Felicianantonio, 2016).

Otherwise said, what emerges from the squatters' narration is that the neoliberal management of housing in its different articulations (from the privatised market of housing to the business of temporary shelters) is what has created the conditions for its own destabilisation through the social and political dynamics triggered by squatting.

Whereas the latter has been a strategy historically used by Rome's poor and dispossessed in order to claim their legitimate right to housing, it gets replicated by new compositions of urban dwellers (refugees, migrants with different statuses, segregated ethnic minorities) who join impoverished native inhabitants in a renewed struggle against the patterns of exclusion and deprivation they are enduring. This heterogeneity then becomes the condition under which Movements like *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani* conceive inhabiting the urban space as an inherently political act, insofar as it is not understood as the unfolding of everyday life into enclosed spaces (La Cecla, 2017). It prefigures the claiming of a new model of urban citizenship based on the as the right to use (and not to consume) the city for experimenting new, and more equal, models of societal reproduction (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Sevilla Buitrago, 2015). The squatters engaging in this effort are then supported by the activists and diverse solidarity networks in becoming conscious of the challenges deriving from the act of squatting, and then in organising a community based on the principles of commoning, plurality and non-discrimination (Grazioli 2017a, b).

Indeed, the local articulations of neoliberal urbanisation are characterised by manifold points of rupture, disjunctions and multi-scalar re-adjustments that occur on the basis of contingencies, spatial situatedness and evolving geographies of state regulation vis-à-vis autonomous ones (see Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Sassen, 2015). The management of housing and squatting in Rome represent therefore a point of rupture through which observing how the intensity of the crisis of social reproduction unleashed into a contradictory process of neoliberal restructuring, alongside autonomous forms of mobilisation and organising (see Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015). This is consistent with the elaboration upon the fact that post-welfare neoliberalisation does not operate as a monolithic entity, but rather as 'an assemblage of disparate, hybridised and inherently precarious arrangements that exist side by side with residual arrangements from previous settlements' (DeVerteuil, 2016, p.6).

Hence, the previous analysed aimed, on the one hand, at describing with hindsight the current social composition of the squats Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz. On the other hand, it contributes to exemplifying the broader conditions under which

manifold dispossessed urban dwellers have made (and are currently making) the resolution of squatting collectively, although aware of the risks it implicates (from being immediately evicted to being excluded by localised welfare systems on the grounds of the Article 5). Indeed, given the disarticulation of the spaces of institutional representativeness (see Zavos et al. 2017, p.379), the unevenness of neoliberal policies (DeVerteuil, 2016, p.6) and the dominance of the punitive aspect of neoliberalism towards welfare (Davies, 2016), tackling the consequences of squatting collectively within grassroots, yet structured urban movements like BPM becomes a safer option than during the past decades which have witnessed a rise of individual and/or independent squatting (Armati, 2015; Puccini, 2016).

Once the contextual conditions leading quite diverse subjects to squatting with the Housing Rights Movements are established, it is then necessary to clarify how these communities, in their routinized everyday life, can not only resist the external pressures, but first and foremost to the internal frictions and tensions that tend to dilute the commoning of social reproduction into the sphere of privatised interests. To this purpose, the following chapter describes the process of making the housing squats into autonomous infrastructures (Larkin, 2013; Papadopoulos, 2018) through organisational practices that allow the creation of manifold urban commons, while preserving them from the looming threat of degradation, dissolution and even self-enclosure. In particular, it addresses how the organisation of resistance, the decision-making method of the assembly and the arrangement of internal spaces introduced in the current chapter are articulated in the routinisation of everydayness through continuous adjustments and negotiations, yet according to established ethical coordinates (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Hodkinson, 2012). This process is analysed through the junction of the original definitions of *eurythmisation* (see Lefebvre, 2004) and organisational rites into the rich debate about the theoretical and material constitution of autonomous infrastructures.

## **CHAPTER 5. For a radical theory of eurythmisation and autonomous infrastructures**

### **From the spatialised temporality of exceptionality to everydayness**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the process of building the community of squatters begins with the act of ‘cracking’ into the empty building with the cooperation of the Housing Rights Movements’ activists. In particular, three actions are implemented in order to constitute the squat as a space for the commoning of housing. First of all, consensus-based collective decision-making, non-discrimination and mutuality are established as the non-negotiable scaffolding of ethical coordinates (Gibson-Graham, 2006) which structure the ground-rules and social reproduction in the squat. Secondly, the necessity of assessing the conditions of the building and catering for basic necessities (e.g. food, water, mattresses, blankets, and so on) triggers the internal distribution of responsibilities according to everyone’s skills and inclinations in order to fulfil two primary tasks: the first is necessary refurbishment (e.g. installing bathroom facilities, connecting electricity and water); the second is mapping of the internal space in order to set up the following allocation of spaces on the basis of everyone’s necessities. Lastly, the squatters and the activists arrange anti-eviction precautions such as shifts of pickets on the entrance and the roofs, and the construction of barricades aimed at resisting the eventual police interventions.

Once the first weeks and the risk of impromptu eviction immediately after squatting have decreased, the activists progressively spend less daytime inside the squats and retain a role of political referees, thus leaving to the inhabitants the primary responsibility of self-managing their daily living by operating the ground-rules and internal arrangements established during the first weeks. This occurred both in Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz which, as stated in the previous chapter, present quite similar forms of internal organising and social reproduction, mainly due to their spatial location and social composition. In this chapter, based on my ethnographic and squatting experience in these two places, I describe this process of transition from the spatialised temporality of exceptionality to the routinisation of everydayness through the concepts of *eurythmisation* and organisational rites. They both dwell and expand upon Lefebvre’s work (2014) concerning the rhythm of everyday life in the city, *eurythmia* (Lefebvre,

2004), and the categorisation of the rites punctuating it: profane, religious and political. Indeed, Lefebvre's definition of rites implies a spatio-temporal understanding of the relationship between the city and its dwellers, whose diverse existential rhythms have to be attuned in their both driven and compelling unfolding.

According to this interpretation, the organisational rites deployed in the housing squats embed in their operation resilience, provisionality and contingency, whereas they encompass a certain capability for flexibility and abstraction. Hence, when they act upon the everyday social reproduction they can though be negotiated, adapted and reworked according to the given situation in which they have to operate in spatial and subjective terms. Yet, their peculiarity is the fact of being conceived and elaborated according to the non-negotiable principles encroached in the Movements' political blueprint. Ultimately, organisational rites configure regimes of living (Collier and Lakoff, 2005, p.31) that enable the squatters to conduct their experience of commoning housing, while providing them with the tools necessary for acting within a conflicted, and potentially hostile environment like the urban fabric of Rome in the ongoing context of crisis of social reproduction and neoliberal restructuring.

Indeed, as the exceptional quality of the moment of 'cracking' dissipates into ordinariness and shared social reproduction progressively folds back into the private sphere of daily routines, aspects such as plurality in decision-making, self-defence and commoned self-management of the squat have to be incorporated into the imperceptible politics of everyday life and their workings. At the same time, they need to emerge and become firmly visible in case of a rupture (see Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2008; Linebaugh, 2008; Fournier, 2013) in order to preserve the squats from two main threats jeopardising their existence. First of all, the internal imbalance between the necessary organisational resilience, and the ineluctable friction and disorder stemming from the co-existence of such a heterogeneous community in daily routines. Secondly, the temptation to retreat from the cityscape and abandon openness and networking as a form of defensive self-enclosure from the potentially hostile environment surrounding the squats delineated in the previous chapters. The spatial, relational and material crystallisation of the organisational rites' effective operation in the space of housing squats like Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz is here framed through the definition of infrastructures, and more in particular through the conceptual framework of autonomous infrastructures.

## **Housing squats as autonomous infrastructures**

As Brown et al. (2017, p.10-1) summarise, by common definition infrastructures are those organisational forms, operational structures and facilities that are implemented in order to support the functioning and maintenance of a community for daily living. Hence, the squat as an infrastructure is composed of interrelated sets of sub-infrastructures (e.g. those of communication, organisational and political action) that interact dynamically, are scaled up and enabled in either effective or dysfunctional ways according to the specific contingencies in which they emerge and are gradually situated into everyday life (Feigenbaum et al., 2013; Brown et al., 2017). In this perspective, organisational rites represent enable the implementation of these assemblages of sub-infrastructures during the transition from the exceptional quality of the spatialised temporality of ‘cracking’ to the unfolding of everydayness. Furthermore, they represent the resilient process of mediation and management of frictions through which the squats progressively develop into autonomous infrastructures where nurturing alternative regimes of living in common, alongside manifold urban commons made available to the city (see Linebaugh, 2008; Federici, 2010; Fournier, 2013; Mitropoulos, 2013; Huron, 2015; Vasudevan, 2015a).

In this chapter, the ‘conceptually unruly’ (Larkin, 2013, p.329) elaborations of autonomous infrastructures made by diverse authors in respect to their ontological, political and theoretical constitution are used in relation to three main aspects that are quite descriptive of the ways in which the squatters manage the everyday workings of housing squats and tackle the tensions that may jeopardise their maintenance and development. First of all, autonomous infrastructures are understood as radical, political and relational entities whose function is to facilitate exchange over distance and make durable the material and ontological articulations of autonomy. Whilst they are not to be mistaken for structures that determine a priori actions and behaviours, they enable a resilient focus on contingency, situated encounters, and the mobility of other matter in order to maintain, develop and possibly change the political and social conditions of their existence vis-à-vis deterioration and dissolution (Cooper and Law, 1995; Larkin, 2013; Lefebvre, 2014 [1991]; Papadopoulos, 2018).

Secondly, they boil down to an understanding of autonomy that refers to the idea that grassroots urban movements exert a transformative power on the cityscape through progressive accruals of scale that pertain to both the invention of new social systems and modalities of social reproduction, and the spatial production of autonomous geographies



combining everyday praxis, political principles and theory (Fournier, 2002; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Jackson et al., 2007; Kokkinidis, 2015b; Vasudevan 2015b; Papadopoulos, 2018). This is to say that the housing squats as autonomous infrastructures are moulded by the relational, affective and imperceptible politics of matter encroached in the unfolding of everydayness. Furthermore, they are crafted by the continuous process of making (Larkin, 2013; Papadopoulos, 2014; Vasudevan, 2015a) enacted by the squatters that radically repurpose neglected urban ecologies such as empty administrative headquarters and former industrial plants autonomously regenerate the urban fabric, and produce new ontologies that are compatible with their material necessities and desires (de Certeau, 1984; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011; Holm and Kuhn, 2013; Galdini, 2015; Mudu and Aureli, 2016; Grazioli 2017a, b).

Thirdly, the housing squats can be considered as generous infrastructures that spatially epitomise the conditions under which the squatters can generate new ontological and spatial forms, protect their communities and claim their 'right to the city' through their peculiar existential and organisational modalities. On the other hand, they cannot crystallise into a static shape, for they as they are constantly subjected to internal and external pressures that may deteriorate (if not dissipate) not only the material structure of the building, but also the ontological conditions of their forms of life (see Kokkinidis 2015a, b; Papadopoulos, 2018). This resonates with the interstitial, situated and resilient nature of autonomy as understood in relation to the notions of autonomous geographies and infrastructure, insofar as they operate in a field of tension characterised by a constant interplay with coercion, reflexivity and situatedness within contextual contingencies (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). This description fits with the challenges that the squatters need to tackle in order to prevent the deterioration and dissolution of their autonomous infrastructure, which may occur when organisational rites are set aside, or lose their connotation of collectivity, mutuality, non-discrimination and resilience in favour of individualised and privatised interests.

In the light of the previous framing of housing squats as autonomous infrastructures, the chapter discusses how anti-eviction resistance, plural deliberation and collective management of space become organisational rites which operate both in the everyday life management, then in the occasion of ruptures and frictions that unsettle the consolidated routines. On the other hand, in the following sections, I address how the spatial and subjective relationship with the city can be negatively experienced from the the squatters, to the point of fostering self-enclosure and insulation. I frame this tendency

through a definition that I have elaborated during my fieldwork, which is the ‘squat effect’. Lastly, given the constant relevance of the relationship between the squatters’ practices of producing space and the, in the conclusions I contend the necessity of opening up the squats’ organisational rites to the production of urban commons within the Housing Rights Movements’ autonomous geographies (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Vasudevan, 2015a, b).

### **‘*Tutti sul tetto*’: the barricade as a space of encounter**



*Figure 19: The view from the rooftop of Tiburtina 770, 4.45am (29th August 2015)*

29<sup>th</sup> August 2015, 4.30am, Tiburtina 770. It was a breezy morning, still summery but forecasting the imminent transition toward Autumn. After the sound of multiple alarm clocks resonated inside the building, the vast majority of the squatters began their ascent toward the roof, while others moved down to collect multiple tyres and other objects apt for creating a barricade in front of the external entrance. After these arrangements were completed, the heavy iron barricade situated at the internal entrance was locked and everyone moved to the rooftop, bringing blankets, pillows, flasks of hot drinks, bottles of water, power banks and other items that could guarantee utility and comfort for a number of hours, not yet exactly defined. In fact, everything depended upon the eventual sighting of riot vans on the via Tiburtina and, in the worst case scenario, an attempted eviction by police forces. In the same minutes, the inhabitants of Metropolitiz assembled on the roof of the main building in order to monitor the circulation on the via Prenestina. The same procedure took place in every other squat affiliated to Housing Rights Movements beyond Blocchi Precari Metropolitani. Information was shared from squat to squat, and the

simultaneous anti-eviction mobilisations taking place in different spots of Rome were made public by activists on social networks like Twitter and Facebook.

There were two reasons why the squats decided to make the ‘Tutti sul tetto’ [everyone on the roof] that day. Firstly, according to the Movements’ empirical observations, summer and the beginning of September are usually the more dangerous periods of the year as for the risk of eviction for a series of reasons: the cities are still deserted by last-minute holidaymakers; some of the squatters may be on vacation as well; the hot climate makes an eviction less ‘traumatic’ on the level of public opinion than one made in deepest winter during a cold spell. In support of this empirically-based belief, a few days before, and precisely on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August, a student accommodation squatted by the collective *Degage* and located in the heart of the diplomatic district, in via Antonio Musa, had been evicted, and 50 people had been left homeless. For the squatters, this event was quite alarming, for they perceived it as a direct attack towards them. As a matter of fact, *Degage* had been closely cooperating since their foundation with the Housing Rights Movements, to the extent that the space in via Musa was squatted during the second *Tsunami Tour* on the 6<sup>th</sup> April 2013, simultaneously to Tiburtina 770 (Armati, 2015).

This connection was consolidated to the extent that many squats spontaneously offered solidarity from the very first hours of the expected eviction, and not only by demonstrating together with the evicted students. They also made available empty basements and spaces for storing the students' furniture and personal belongings. Besides that, many squats offered long-term hospitality to the evictees, providing accommodation in rooms that had been left empty on purpose for “emergency occasion”. This actually happened in Tiburtina 770, where three of *Degage*'s former inhabitants were offered hospitality; one of them lived there for more than one year, until September 2016. In the aftermath of these events, in the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup> August, everyone stood on the roof chatting, resting but most of all relentlessly watching via Tiburtina below to spot any sign of police movement while checking the smartphones for news from the other squats. Around noon, the squatters agreed that the major risk had passed, as in their experience evictions usually take place in the early hours of the morning. Yet even though the ‘exceptional’ circumstance of ‘Tutti sul tetto’ was ended, there remained a whole set of organisational rites. The main ones are the regular maintenance of the barricades; the regular monitoring of the area; and, most of all, the pickets of the entrances.

The scaffolding of organisational practices pertaining anti-eviction resistance

dwells upon the consolidated experience of self-defence enacted by both Housing Rights Movements and other type of squatted places in Rome such as social centres. All of these squatted places indeed share a set of behaviours and tactics aimed at guaranteeing the security of activists and residents, alongside the safety of the space itself. For instance, during public initiatives inside social centres, self-managed street festivals and/or protest camps, the entrances to the area and the 'sensitive' spots are monitored in order to prevent uncontrolled behaviours (e.g. sexual harassment and drug dealing) and remove undesirable people (like robbers, undercover cops and even fascists trying to irrupt to disrupt the initiative) (see Feigenbaum et al., 2013; Piazza, 2013; Mudu, 2014; Brown et al., 2017). This element also exists in housing squats like Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz, where unknown people cannot enter without first being introduced to the person at the entrance by another squatter, or without explaining the reason for their presence there. Even kids are taught from the moment they are capable of speaking not to open the gate of the squat to strangers and to ask to those they do not know personally who they are and what they are looking for.

Yet the ritualisation of a set of organisational rites connected to self-defence, anti-eviction and resistance is especially relevant since it serves a double function in both symbolic and material terms, once again facing both inward (the community of the squatters) and outward threats. Starting from the latter, it has the function of making visible the day-to-day ability of the squatters to resist attempts of evictions and to set a rhythm of resistance (Milburn, 2012, p.403) that could attune to both day-to-day practices and 'extraordinary' events. Actually, to me the presence of the pickets and the visibility of the metal barricades conveyed the feeling of a cared-for space, since the monitoring of the space constitutes an act of care, emotional engagement and self-defence that reinforces the ties of the community by replicating the habits they had since the very first days after squatting (see Armati, 2015; Caciagli, 2015). Besides, and, most of all, the eventual presence of hundreds of people on top of the roof points to a human barricade that can resist a police intervention, and eventually force them to retreat.

For all these reasons, sleeping on one's picket shift or, even worse, attending it intoxicated by alcohol and/or drugs are very socially disparaged behaviours in the squat.

Indeed, these attitudes are perceived as an utter lack of responsibility and respect towards the squatters that, in those few hours, are 'delegating' the safety of their home to the person on the picket. I experienced this perception first-hand during my first few times doing the picket at night. Used as I was to being in social centres and attending also to

the monitoring of the place during concerts, street festivals and/or protest camps, I was used to the idea that you can both have a look around together with other people and, in the meantime, drink up to a couple of beers to pass the time with your fellow-pickers. During my first night picket with another woman in January 2015, she actually offered me a glass of cold beer. Without thinking there was something wrong about it, I accepted and toasted with her.

Yet, a squatter that was passing by the corridor approached the both of us and explained quite friendly, yet firmly, that drinking alcohol during the picket was deemed untrustworthy behaviour, and that generally people are not allowed to drink on pickets. After that remark, I did not make the same mistake twice, and actually observed that this internalised demeanour produces quite visible distinct behaviours in the same portion of space between the squatter and the person doing their shift. For instance, in the garden of Tiburtina 770, it is quite common that people gather with bottles of beer and other drinks in order to be sociable. Yet the person doing the picket in front of the door is usually the only one that would not drink and is restricted to just smoking cigarettes (if they are smokers) or having soft drinks. Undeniably, the collective importance bestowed to picketing practices is due to the squatters' awareness of the precariousness of their situation, and the necessity of defending their living space against the threats that may jeopardise its existence and the community that inhabits it.

In this light, and in the same way as the pickets, the material barricades exert a function that is simultaneously material and symbolical, for they epitomise the space of encounter where the protection of the community's spatial premises coagulate alongside the non-verbal, yet explicit intent to resist towards an eventual attempt of forcible eviction. Hence, it could be said that the organisational rites through which self-defence is internalised, and the physical spaces where it is materially articulated (the roof, the barricades, the picket) serve as sites of encounter where every squatter is periodically called upon to donate their time as a form of free care and surveillance towards their inhabiting space (see Yaka and Karayali, 2017). Politically speaking, this implies protecting the symbolic boundaries of the squat as an autonomous infrastructure where prefigurative politics and utopian visions, entrenched in hope and alternative regimes of living, can be experimented with, commoned and nurtured into a safe space (see Fournier, 2002; Collier and Lakoff, 2005; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Parker et al., 2014a). But how are these organisational, political and existential modalities ritualised and preserved? Mainly, through the organisational rite of the assembly, where consensus-based, plural

and equal deliberation are enacted.

### **The assembly as the site of consensus, community-based decision-making**



Figure 20: A painting laboratory for kids inside the assembly room of Tiburtina 770 (April 2015)

The paramount space of encounter inside a squat is, undeniably, the one of the assembly. Indeed, the assembly in housing squats like Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz bears, once again, a double concretely spatial and symbolical matter. First of all, in every squat there is the so-called '*sala assemblee*' (assembly room) where the squatters and the activists can host their periodic meetings. Besides, the *sala assemblee* can be used for many activities: preparing the materials for demonstrations, such as banners and signposts; hosting public and cultural initiatives with writers, academics, musicians and so on; squatters' parties and religious meetings; workshops; political meetings with other grassroots urban movements and/or political entities active on the territories and so on. Yet, the maybe more important function embedded into the *sala assemblee* is the inherently symbolical one.

This is to say that, being a space of encounter where the process of decision-making is implemented, the room where the assemblies take place is considered one of the most important spaces in the squat. For this reason, it is considered everyone's duty to keep it clean and tidy. Also, it is probably the only space inside the squat that will remain untouched by reworking which is aimed at gaining more spaces of habitation or enlarging the existing ones. Indeed, as the following sections recount extensively, the modification of pretty much every inch of space within the squat is collectively negotiable, with the exception of those that undercut the basic principles of equity,

collective interest and infrastructural safety. Nonetheless, the *sala assemble* is considered a 'sacred' space that cannot undergo any reduction or reworking, if not to the purpose of renovating it through decoration, new furniture and even structural additions aiming at improving its liveability. For instance, in the case of Metropoliz, many of artists donated pieces of art and painted graffiti on the walls; in Tiburtina 770, the only change made to the assembly room was the construction of a small space to store tables, chairs and other items often used during parties and public events.

Borrowing terminology from the field of rites (including the ones that Lefebvre categorised), it can be said that the *sala assemblee* is considered a 'sacred' site, as it epitomises the spatialised temporality of the assembly as the organisational rite that enables consensus-based, plural and equal decision-making. Hence, the care that squatters devote to tidying up the assembly room is directly proportional to the importance they bestow to the assembly and its purpose. In my experience in housing squats, when an assembly room is shabby, dirty and dusty, it means it has not been used for a while; this, in turns, implies that the process of collective decision-making is not working as it should, and that the squatters are not meeting on a regular basis. This has direct consequences for what in the following interview excerpt is defined as the upkeep of the 'quiet life' of the squat. Indeed, the interviewee associates an effective process of decision-making and even the social sanctioning of unacceptable behaviours in the squat with daily liveability, also noticeably borrowing a lexicon that spontaneously embraces the fields of rites, religious ones included:

Quiet life is the key word here... That's the thing... In order to have a quiet life you have to get over behaviours, people, situations that you do not like... You say 'Whatever, just let it go, at the end of the day we need this place' and... You don't want to get it wrong. And then, because of someone else's fault, you find your troubles *outside yourself*, because this is how it works at the end of the day.. Because there are rules, those who make *serious mistakes* should be shielded with their own sins, if we want to call them this way... [...] The least we can do is to talk it through during the assembly, then we make a decision! Don't get me wrong, I am not saying that those who make mistakes should be kicked out straight away... There is forgiveness after all, there should be, everyone messes up at times right? But in other *serious cases* hell no, certain things cannot be condoned, and you cannot avoid discussing it during the assembly by the way, even it feels awkward or ungenerous. Otherwise it is unclear what the assembly is for....



Figure 21: The assembly room of Metropolis (February 2015)

It is quite evident that, in the squatters' perception, the dysfunctionality of the process of collective decision-making as an organisational rite can seriously jeopardise the social reproduction of the squat and the process of *eurythmisation* attuning the different rhythms of daily living of the community. Also, the wording about alterity and outside that T. uses when referring to the people who make 'serious' mistakes convey the feeling that, once the in-common modalities of living inside the squat are internalised, certain behaviours are perceived as radically other and dissonant with the rhythm of the community's daily living, and so as a threat for the very maintenance of the squat as an autonomous infrastructure. In this particular case, the 'seriousness' of the ground-rules' infringement was related to an alleged case of domestic violence within a family in which the parents got drunk on an almost daily basis, had continuous fights, and therefore raised concerned about the physical and emotional well-being of their young children. An assembly was then called to discuss this case with the family, 'chaired' by the other squatters and also the activists that, on the basis of their experience, could give advice about how to proceed for the sake of everyone.

This anecdote reveals three relevant aspects related to the importance of the assembly and its role in the daily social reproduction of the squat. Firstly, its ritualisation in prioritising the collective management of conflicts and problems. Secondly, the resilience required for assessing the circumstances under which decision-making is done, and a finally making a shared call about how to take action through debate and



negotiation. Lastly the fact that, like the vast majority of rites, the assembly encompasses both an 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' function whereas it requires a settled frequency for routinised management, whilst it could be called anytime for sudden demands. Again, this is consistent with Lefebvre's idea (2004) that the rhythms' that rites attempt to attune can be considered both driven and compelling. In the same way, the process of collective and progressive decision-making partly depends on the exertion of autonomy of the squatters aiming at doing their best to secure a 'quiet life', as T. states. In this case, the role of the squatters is to facilitate the discussion within the assembly, and to encourage the squatters to pursue fairness and objectiveness in deciding how to 'sanction' the violation of ground-rules and principles attuning the daily life of the squat without falling into the dangerous trap of physical violence or moral blackmail.

Indeed, it is not stressed enough that despite the derogatory campaigns of endorsed right-wing newspapers like *Il Tempo* against the movements and squatters<sup>1</sup>, violence is nothing but a permitted problem-solving modality inside the squat; nor it is allowed any physical or psychological coercion in order to 'oblige' the squatters to comply to the ground-rules and be part of political mobilisations. Indeed, in my experience in Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz, as previously outlined, the only cases in which a squatter can be kicked out of a squat involve physical abuse against children, partners other squatters; drug dealing; forbidden trades over spaces, robberies and other criminal activities. Otherwise, what the activists do from day one is to encourage the squatters to develop and nurture a sense of mutual commitment and consciousness about the reason why they are there, and the necessity to find respectful modalities for living with each other. Hence, what is at stake in consensus-based, plural and collective decision-making are the openness, transparency and clarity of the logic underpinning processes of deliberation. Secondly, the way in which the decisions are actually executed in a way that is respectful of the debate made during the assembly and in order not to encourage the people to ignore what is collectively established.

Going back to the previously-addressed matter of the correct way of running pickets at the entrance, the assembly is the only site where it is possible to discuss what to do with individuals who have attended their own picket under the influence of alcohol or, worst, on drugs. Or where to deal with a controversy that involves more people before

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, *Il Tempo* presents a series of alleged violences occurred inside squats, deliberately confusing them also with the mob racket of public housing apartments: <http://www.iltempo.it/roma-capitale/2017/03/31/news/bulli-e-okkupazioni-ecco-le-60-inchieste-1026826/>

it escalates. For instance, during one assembly, I witnessed a really long quarrel between two people (a Sudanese man and a Roma woman) who had been in dispute for weeks since they could not find an agreement about the night hours of usage for the washing machine located in their common bathroom, and that could be heard quite noisily in the man's room. As a result, they slapped and swore each other. It immediately occurred to me that the escalation of this 'residential' argument implied a number of layered frictions that pertained to the specific social composition of the squatters and not only, such as gendered violence and latent inter-ethnic tensions. In the end, considering they both slapped each other (by their own admission), they apologised to each other in front of the assembly; in addition, it was decided that, on all floors, washing machines located into shared spaces could not be used after 10pm.

This kind of negotiation outlines the main features of the organisational rites entailing consensus-based decision-making within a context like a housing squat, inhabited by an extremely heterogeneous community of people, inside which frictions are constant and can escalate if not managed properly. On the one hand, there is a set of non-negotiable ethical coordinates and ground rules that constitute the compass for participating and contributing to a discussion that enmeshes a plurality of elements concerning the squatters' subjectivity and the self-management of daily living alongside broader political principles (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Hodkinson, 2012; Kokkinidis, 2015a). This is to say that the process of addressing controversies and making decisions inside the assembly cannot by constitution imply unanimity if not in rare cases. Nonetheless it is designed for fostering what Kokkinidis (2015b, p.852) defines as 'the institutionalization of conflict in constructive ways' and under conditions of plurality. This means that, during the assembly, each squatter is allowed to voice their standpoint on a subject matter; the different ideas then have to reach a middle ground that can be acceptable for everyone, no matter how time-consuming this process is.

Ultimately, this modality of plural and consensus-based deliberation reinforces the community, as the negotiation occurring during the assembly strengthens the bonds of affection and mutual commitment on which basis the squatters experiment alternative regimes of day-to-day living in common and exert their autonomy in constant connection with others (Collier and Lakoff, 2005; Linebaugh, 2008; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Federici, 2010; Kokkinidis 2015a, b). Throughout this process, the activists and the '*comitato*' (the committee, or group of inhabitants taking responsibility for coordinating the implementation of the decision taken collectively) fulfil the role of the 'moderators'

of the internal debate and, after the call is made, of facilitators of its implementation. This modality of deliberation also constitutes the bedrock for organising the spatial production of the squat as a space of inhabitation and commoning; indeed, the principles of equity and consensus it implicates are crucial also for an as orderly (and, more importantly, equal) distribution of the internal spaces of the squats destined to the single family units, while retaining the common spaces where collective sociability and common social reproduction can unfold.

### **From deciding to making: taking responsibility (and care)**

As extensively addressed in the previous and current chapters, the arrangement of the existing spaces of a squatted place for accommodating the dwelling necessities of everyone is one of the more important processes since the moment of ‘cracking’, for it involves the primary reason why people decided to squat in the first place, which is solving their housing need. Besides this, it is probably the most time-consuming organisational rite, whereas adjustments to the original structure of the building, refurbishments and reshaping can go on for years, and have to be subjected each time to the approval of the community of the squatters as a whole. Yet once the assembly has deliberated under a condition of plurality, what is at stake is taking the matter into hand in order to implement the decisions made. Even though in theory this is everyone's responsibility, in actual deeds it gets delegated to the *comitato*, a group of people appointed for supervising that the deliberated activities inside the squat (e.g. coordinating electricity and plumbing works; measuring and allocating spaces) take place according to the assembly's collective mandate.

This form of internal activism and distributed assumption of responsibilities usually involves more people than what I later define in Chapter 7 as *social activism*, which has to do with the political activities of the squat as local entities and part of a broader urban movement. Indeed, many squatters may not be interested or prepared for politics at all, but they may be keen on making their skills available in order to take care of the material, infrastructural aspect of the squat, starting with the arrangement of the inhabiting spaces. These people thus becomes the facilitators of communication, implementation, coordination and supervision of the overall process of adjusting the the

squat. It is worth specifying that, differently from the informal economic circuits I described in Chapter 4, the members of the *comitato* are acting on a purely voluntary and free basis, just as the movement activists. And, in the same way, they become important referees for the other squatters who have to trust them and bestow upon them an extra amount of responsibility in ensuring that everything inside the squat is managed in a commoning, plural way that does not further the interests of specific individuals, kinship groups or ethnic communities.

Everyday there is something new that you find out in the building, something new that you have to do... Without being aware of it, while you do these things you become a referee... There is a proverb in Arabic that I do believe to be true which says 'the servant of people is their governor'. I believe it in the good meaning, not in the form of power... But still you become a point of reference. People do not go searching for those who are after politics [*the activists*] about certain things pertaining to the 'condominium', they come seeking for you. [...] You are a point of trust, and this is crucial in order to gain experience... And it doesn't come easily, you have to put your willingness and be serious, and then people will keep trusting you. And with your own experience and head you start projecting with others how to improve this place. It's nice, it's clean, you can sleep, but then you need more things in order to live well. [...] For instance as a group we have put about 15 showers in the building... When you build 15 showers then, for sympathy and respect people trust you and want you to do their things because they trust you, they confide in you so that they can get a good, decent life... The more are the facilities you manage to create, the least problems you will have, and besides you would have found a way of talking more, sharing more... Going back to the actual materiality of the building, that's where most of the problems come from. And so you address directly the problem, with the good spirits of people that get motivated to do stuff, but then you need to take the first step and they will follow you. You make the job for them, you show them how it works, they get an idea, you fix something for everything... For instance what happened after the famous allocation of the rooms, after the first month, when we got to understand that we could actually take the place, and then on the basis of one's family size you get one space and they have to change the locker of their room... I remember that I've changed it for all the families in the building... Everyone has a kitchen, because in the first days they only used to have a camp stove, but then they got a kitchen from their former house that needed to be converted from methane to functioning with the gas cylinder. So I remember that I converted

everyone's cookers. This can sound lame, but when you do these things you establish a relationship with people, because in those five minutes when you enter someone's place, you mount this, dismount that, they offer you a coffee, they say something, you say something else and you create a bond that lasts potentially forever... Even when you are on your knees to change someone's locker, it takes two minutes, but that's when you are the people's servant. You don't gain people's trust by chatting, you have to do things...

(A., Moroccan, male, August 2015)

### **The squatters as makers of community and space**



*Figure 22: General cleaning in Tiburtina 770 (November 2015)*

The previous long interview excerpt displays how the making of community and the production of the space in squats are interwoven to the point of being almost impossible to disentangle discursively and materially. Indeed, through the progressive process of allocating spaces, adjusting the squat to the inhabitants' necessities and distributing organisational roles, the squatters configure themselves as makers both of their living space, and of their own community.

In this light, and based on my own experience, the more engaging and fluid aspect of the making of the building pertains to the dwelling profile that is constantly subjected to multiple reconsiderations, improvements and changes over time. These rearrangements are yet conditional on the assessment of the infrastructural adaptability of the squat enacted during the first weeks after 'cracking' in order to make way for an equal and just

distribution of single family units. In the case of Tiburtina 770, the squatters have proceeded together with the activists to map the floors, rooms and bathrooms which were subsequently divided and distributed within a relatively short time-span according to agreed criteria. For instance, families with more than two children would either get the bigger rooms or two small ones; furthermore, the bathrooms have been arranged in order to be shared by a maximum of four to five families.

On the other hand, the case of Metropoliz was different, since very few areas of the former slaughterhouse were fit for being promptly inhabited and presented very few toilet facilities. Hence, for its squatters, the process of building a house has been far more complex and, in some cases, is still ongoing. Nonetheless, it has left to the inhabitants a wider margin of possibility in creating their own inhabitable units according to their necessities and desires. Indeed, after mapping the whole industrial plant, the squatters have agreed upon the parts where they preferred to settle; then, they have started to accumulate the materials and recycle the industrial facilities in order to start building. Hence, especially in the case of Metropoliz, the squatters have become makers and inventors at the same time, for they have not been limited to repurposing existing structures as in the case of Tiburtina 770. They have radically re-invented new ones by recombining, recycling and tweaking the existing materialities they have found inside the abandoned Fiorucci industrial plant (see Papadopoulos, 2014), as the following interview with one of the first squatters describes alongside the pictures:



*Figure 23: The original fuses of the industrial plant on S. house's wall (June 2015)*

Here in Metropoliz you didn't get allocated a room or a space, no, it was up to you to decide the place you like, and then fix it. But as you said, it was labour, some said 'No, it is too expensive here to refurbish', and they would go looking for another

place to squat that was cheaper. But here's the thing in Metropolitiz that is different from all the other squats... In other places, spaces were kind of ready before and people were given them, they can have a bath and a shower after some time... Here no, we have built with our own hands the house of our dreams. That's the nice thing, besides the things that you had to do, the feeling, the heart you would put in it. For instance, if my husband had to do a job, I would notice because he would ask me: 'S., do you like this?', and then I would say 'Yes, no, do it this way', I would try to help while I was cooking and looking after our kids that were toddlers at the time, and in the meanwhile he would do a wall, then another little wall as I said... My children, my little ones would offer to help their daddy as well, that's the difference from all the other squats. Here in Metropolitiz we have this heart, we do not only evaluate the economic value of each house, we value is the meaning you give to it, the love you have used in order to build your own house. [...] Of course we have found some pieces here that we have used, especially for the external part of the house. For instance inside my house there is the case of electric implants, the general one for all the industrial plant. For instance here we have plenty of things, and we have left that one, that fuses...We have left them as a reminder for us of what our house used to be before we got here, and our beginning of our house.

(S. Peruvian, female, May 2016, second interview)

As S explains, in the case of Metropolitiz, each squatter had the onus to build their own house or unit. Yet, as an outcome, the housing squat presents a certain stability as for the housing dynamics, whereas each one had chosen where to settle, and even newcomers had options to choose given the wide availability of space. This was for instance the case of the Roma families that joined the squat later, after the double eviction of the Casilino 900 camp and via Prenestina 911, and who chose to re-arrange an unused two-floored section of the industrial plant for living all together in separate apartments they have built autonomously, yet in the same building. On the other hand, in a squat structured like Tiburtina 770, the materiality of the existing structure prevents the radical alteration of the division of the rooms in infrastructural terms. Hence, when re-arrangements occur, they come down to the agreement between diverse families that have to move from space to space in order to respond to new needs. These changes coincide with the enlargement of one's family, and in particular with the birth of more children or the reconciliation with partners and other relatives. Yet, these are also the instances in which the modalities of producing the space of the squat as organisational rites become

visible, emerging from the imperceptible management of everydayness.



Figure 24: The packing of my belonging before moving to my second room in Tiburtina 770 (September 2015)

Indeed, these changes are not automatic; rather, they are subordinated not only to the prior agreement between the people that have to move from space to space, but to the collective consensus that has to be reached during the common assemblies. Also, they have to fit into the list of priorities that has been proposed by the families, examined by the *comitato* and finally approved during the squat's assembly. Once all these steps have been made, it is possible to go ahead with the move. During my period of inhabitation in Tiburtina 770, I have twice experienced first-hand this case. After nine months inside the room in the basement floor, I was asked to move into a smaller room on the first floor in order to accommodate the wife and children that a squatter had finally managed to repatriate. Six months after, I moved in another room on the second floor so to allow two *Habesha*<sup>2</sup> families to build a common kitchen inside that space. Throughout this procedure, I constantly kept the *comitato* posted about the timing of the moving, coordinated with the other families involved, and I was finally helped by a group of squatter to clean the new rooms and move my belongings.

Once again, the procedure followed may seem laborious and time-consuming. Indeed, by common sense, one can assume that the prior agreement between the families involved is enough to arrange a move that, on paper, would not create any disruption to anyone else. And of course, these organisational rites can be negotiated and reworked in case of particular emergencies. Yet, as I understood on the basis of my own experience, it is extremely important to retain the underpinning principle of collective deliberation

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<sup>2</sup> Ethiopian ethnic group.



when addressing spatial matters. First of all, collectively sifting through every change concerning space decreases the chances of conflicts arising among people. Indeed, if someone just took possession of a space without letting anyone know, this would be perceived as the exertion of a privilege. This is even worse if this gesture is associated with ethnic, family or kinship favouritisms made by the members of the *comitato* that are supposed to be the collectors of these requests. This way of tempering from the outset eventual frictions associated with the distribution of space also pertains to a deeper level that, once again, has to do with the realm of the non-negotiable principles underpinning the organisational rites enacted inside a squat.

This flexible way of managing spaces collectively enhances one of the main aspects of commoning housing in the squats, which is the internalisation of the functioning of the dichotomy between ‘private’ and a ‘common’ spaces inside a squat. Where, by definition, the private space is the one where one's individual or the families' social reproduction unfolds, this fluid way of conceiving space implicates the idea that no one can boast ownership rights over anyone's rooms, and that every inch of the squat is a put-in-common space in which the community's needs have the priority over the individual's sense of entitlement to owning something. Obviously, this does not imply that someone can be asked (or worst, forced) to move to another space without prior agreements or explanations, as this would configure an act of prevarication. In this respect, the organisational rites involved in making space have to balance the commoning of space and social reproduction with plural deliberation and the individualistic drives that may still persist in the squatters' mind-set. Ultimately, the opening up of social reproduction and space to collective care and management is the ultimate outcome of organisational rites operating correctly, and can be observed especially in the handling of two of the most intimate events involved in one's life, which are, in fact, life and death.

### **Commoning the experience of life and death inside the squats**

Within the commoning of everyday social reproduction in housing squats (from shared childcare to the conceptualisation of individual and collective responsibility in the management of common rather than private spaces), ruptures in the mundanity of daily temporality as events related to life and death become community matters. Then, they

become paradigmatic of the way in which the commoning of everyday life, if practised with openness, care and resilience ends up transcending the realm of strategic necessity and forced sharing, and progressively becomes part of the community's identity, from the private household to the demeanour towards common spaces (Serra and Federici, 2015; Mudu and Aureli, 2016). Indeed, in neoliberal and highly individualised societies, the experiences of life and death have been stripped of their community-based aspects, and have become 'private' events to be shared mainly with the inner circle of family, friends and sometime acquaintances. In housing squats like Metropolit and Tiburtina 770, the religious and profane rituals connected to the diverse cultural, ethnic and national traditions that each family and community bears are hybridised with the organisational rites and modalities assimilated during the experience of squatting. In this respect, two episodes which occurred during my stays caught my attention.

The first one happened in mid April 2015 in Tiburtina 770. During those days, a newborn baby was brought from hospital to home; the family and parents (of Orthodox Christian religion) had started two weeks before to make the arrangements for the christening party in the garden of the squat. In so doing, with the cooperation of the *comitato*, they started to collect foldable chairs, tables, extension cords and a sound system for the party from the other squats, in case the equipment inside 770 was not sufficient. Yet, on the 18<sup>th</sup> April 2015, a boat carrying hundreds of migrants fled from Libya's coasts flipped in the Sicily Channel of the Mediterranean, not far from Lampedusa, when the already-fragile keel collapsed under the weight of the people jumping to attract the attention of a Turkish merchant vessel navigating alongside them. Based on the testimonies of the survivors, it is esteemed that the presumed dead people on that occasion numbered between 700 and 900 (Fortress Europe, 2016). Among was the younger sibling of an Eritrean man who was expected to join the community of the squatters after disembarking and applying for refugee status. As soon as the family lost every hope that he was among the few rescued from the drowning, the organisation of a body-less funeral was activated with the cooperation of all the squatters.



Figure 25: *Habesha* coffee served in the corridor of Tiburtina 770 during the mourning vigil (April 2015)

First of all, the relatives of the newborn child promptly cancelled the scheduled party as a sign of respect and empathy with the grieving family. In addition, all the items borrowed for the celebration were rearranged and used for setting up a week-long funeral vigil for the dead. A provisionally empty room on the first floor of the squat was refurbished in order to host a sofa, chairs and pillows for the grieving relatives and the guests who came to express their condolences. Since it is customary for *Habesha* vigils to provide food and beverages 24/7 during these kind of occasions, tables were put outside the room. Also, the basement floor (where I was living at the time) was made available for the preparation and cooking of big quantities of *zighini* (their traditional dish, consisting of sour, spongy bread and stewed vegetables and meat). All the people doing their daily pickets were informed that, for one week, many people would come for the funeral (which unfortunately lacked an actual body) and that therefore the attitude towards them at the entrance should be as flexible and as kind as possible. Eventually, all the squatters of Tiburtina 770 during the week took part in the organising of the vigil and the grief in some way, from sitting with the people to contributing to the food shopping.

This is to say, that the day-to-day rhythm of the squat was altered and routines were reorganised in order to meet the necessities of those who were grieving. Everyone (myself included) changed their habits in order to attune to the ongoing mourning. Besides this, the organisational capacities of the squatters in terms of arranging events, and the solidarity networks crossing Housing Rights Movements according to multifarious lines of intersection (e.g. family bonds, ethnic and religious communities),

were activated. In doing so, the squatters purposefully combined the organisational rites of the squats, communitarian customary praxes, religious and non-religious traditional rites in order to cope as a community with these traumatic event. Lastly, this approach also implicated the idea that, within a community, it is a responsibility of all the squatters to cater not only for the emotional support, but also for those concrete aspects that are not affordable for low-income families. Whereas this is usually visible in the occasion of the birth of new kids, when the families offer help and donate items such as second-hand clothes and even prams to the new parents, it occurs also in the case of events related to death. This was evidenced in a crowdfunding event arranged inside Metropolitiz in order to pay the impromptu travel of a mourning squatter to her country of origin in July 2015.

At the end of June, Michel Angelo, the 20-year-old only child of a young single mother and a former prominent member of Metropolitiz and the *4 Stelle* South-American community, became a fatal casualty during a gun fight among gang members back in Peru, where he had decided provisionally to return in order to seek for a more linear economic path than in Italy. The bad news circulated rapidly inside the two squats and spread everywhere since the moment in which the last, feeble hope that the guy was still alive was contradicted by his desperate mother, G. From that moment onwards, her primary concern was to find a way to travel as soon as possible to Peru to attend her son's funeral. Quite predictably, she could not afford the amount of money needed for an intercontinental and very sudden trip. The South Americans living in Metropolitiz decided to organise for the following weekend the so-called *gran pollada* that, as I came to know, is basically a crowdfunding party.

After the activists involved the designers they usually contact for the demonstrations' promotional materials, leaflets and posters were created, printed and put up in spots more popular among the South American communities living in Rome (like the Colosseo and Stazione Termini, where they gather during the weekend). Also, a Facebook event was created and sent to all the contacts of the Movements' profiles; besides, the appointment was circulated inside each and every squat affiliated with Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa. In addition, singers and dancers popular with South American people in Rome were recruited for free and invited to perform on the stage that in Metropoliz is usually designated for artistic performances and concerts during the events organised by the MAAM internal museum. This mobilisation fully succeeded; the *gran pollada* managed to fundraise enough money to allow G to fly to Peru two days later, attend the funeral, and also to financially contribute to the arrangement of the ceremony.



Figure 26: The poster of the Pollada organised at Metropoliz in support for G. (July 2015. Source: Metropoliz Facebook page)

During my one year-long fieldwork, I had multiple chances to witness similar incidents. Indeed, within numerous communities such as the squatters', events related to life and death are a frequent matter. Yet, borrowing from Lefebvre's categorisations of rhythm (2004, p.27-8), it is possible to say that these two episodes showed me for the first time how organisational rites, and the regimes of living they configure, are progressively internalised and become what Lefebvre defines as 'secret rhythms', both physiological

and psychological, and therefore both driven and compelling. Here I witnessed the embeddedness of the set of community, solidarity-based principles underpinning the rationale of organisational rites into the ways in which the squatters deal with their daily demeanour, as well as with the extraordinariness determined by life and death-related events. Yet, as repeatedly stated here and in the previous chapter, the process of *eurythmisation* is anything but automatic, as the squatters' negative self-awareness of their spatialised location inside the cityscape can intervene and hijack it. The following section addresses the inward and outward perception of *eurythmisation* in relation to the housing squats' gates, which I summarised under the label 'the squat effect'.

### **The squat effect and the spatiality of the gaze**

As described in the previous section, the folding of social reproduction into the private sphere is immanent to the routinisation of the life in housing squats, for the extraordinariness of the moment of cracking and arranging the space from scratch dilutes into a process of incremental adjustments pursued through the enacting of resilient organisational rites devised according to the political legacy of Housing Rights Movements, their composition, and a set of non-negotiable principles. On the one hand, as they operate correctly, they become encroached into the imperceptible politics of everydayness. If, on the other hand, a rupture in the routine of daily living occurs, they become part of the way in which the community reacts as a whole in the face of events that, within the mainstream neoliberal regimes of social reproduction, are addressed mainly by individuals together with their inner circle of family and friends. Hence, in this respect, this community support in the majority of the spheres of day-to-day living, from childcare to the sharing of spaces through the commoning of the experience of grief, represents an opportunity to supporting one's settlement inside the city that would be otherwise hampered by the material constraints of individuals' means.

Nevertheless, the peculiarity of these regimes of common living developed inside the housing squats, and the opportunities they offer in terms of emancipating from the mainstream linchpins of social reproduction (first and foremost, exploited and precarious forms of labour aimed at coping with housing-related indebtedness) can foster the squatters' tendency to spend the vast majority of their lifetime inside the squat. This can either happen if, especially if they are part of the *comitato* and given responsibilities, they are basically absorbed full time by the internal dynamics of the squat and the implementation of the aforementioned organisational rites. Given the often non-politicised subjectivity of the squatters, this folding inwards can lead to creating cliques and little groups of interest, whose eventual sectarianism can be extremely detrimental for the coexistence of the community as a whole.



Figure 27: Little girl playing with a teddy bear in the assembly room of Metropoliz (September 2015)

Furthermore, the possibility of having one's means of survival guaranteed by through solidarity mechanism offered by the squat, and the sociability developed on the inside, may discourage the squatters to go outside and confront the daily life of the neighbourhood where they are located in the first place, and subsequently the city as a whole. Lastly, the pressure exerted by the negative perception of their presence inside the city and with respect to the neighbourhoods where they are located can cause the squatters to somehow 'hide' from the outside gaze by progressively decreasing the squats' openness in order to create a sort of enclave with its own rules, existential modalities and organisational forms, yet disconnected from the outside. The combination of these two aspects resulting in self-enclosure is what I call 'the squat effect'. This definition is the outcome of diverse informal interactions with my fellow-squatters and activists, and has been refined by discussing with them what I thought about the life in the squat and the

effect it exerted on me from the perspective of a ‘newcomer’ who had not experienced the exceptional first phases after the initial squatting. Insofar as the prominence of the squat effect becomes more perceptible over time, the following two excerpts taken from different interviews discuss respectively its inward and outward dimensions.

I will explain to you... The squat goes through phases, time phases that affect your way of thinking and living, for better or for worse. You have the first stage, when people get to know each other, and then what happens after the group of people is defined, selected to live in the place. And believe me, it is really difficult to put many different cultures together... It is way too difficult. This is a societal model, I think it is a model in any case. I've always told you: if you brought the same people, the same inhabitants and you gave them a different building, that would be a different life from what happens here. Because it is open, everything is in common... In a regular building the context is different... So after the selection you have the problem of difference. As I told you last time, those who have accepted difference, who have embraced it... And maybe they have never experienced it... [...] This doesn't come from reasoning but from habits, cultures etc. ... It is something you learn here, and about which you have to take responsibility in the first person. And those who live well here are those who have understood the other [...] and you find a way of walking together. If one doesn't accept it they feel very bad, and there are plenty of these people... Most of the problems arise because people won't accept the other, statistically speaking when it comes down to problems in here, people do not fight with someone from the same ethnic group, it happens rarely, but again as a matter of diversity... Cultural clash... Keeping everything together without major drama is already a big success, but the only ones who can accept the other and be honest and spontaneous are going to be truly ok [...] Than there are those who pretend they accept it and they go on fairly well. And then those who would not accept it... They feel and live like shit... Every day they fight with someone, they are always argumentative [...]. What is for sure is that you could spend basically all your time dealing with what happens in here. Trying to resolve conflicts, fixing things for people. It is compelling, chaotic, sometimes you feel suffocated and you just want to escape. But, in a weird way, it becomes the centre of your life, the only thing you manage to think about. It absorbs you. And indeed, as you know, many end up not working, they spend all their time here. You know that, I am one of them...

*(A, Moroccan, male, August 2015)*



So far nothing bad has happened with the neighbourhood. We never got ourselves recognised as criminal people, for we are quiet people, we have kids, we go to work, to the hospital, we live like anyone else. It is easier if you relate to people who did their own struggle, because here you have public housing blocks that in their times, years ago, they did demonstrations and struggles as we are doing nowadays... And as an outcome, they have achieved public housing accommodations. Yes, those are far [away] times, when things were far different, probably better, people were more determined... [...] I know the history of these neighbourhoods [*Pietralata and Tiburtino III*] and I know people who have been regularised after squatting public housing apartments. Because I know these zones and I know that there are people who achieved them through struggles like ours, but nowadays with this government everything is a *magna magna*<sup>3</sup>. Besides that, the majority of us squatters are immigrants and this doesn't help. People look at us with suspicion and even resentment sometimes, as if we were taking advantage of something, because they struggle to pay bills and rent and mortgages and we don't. They look at us as if we were living on someone else's shoulders, theirs.

(*T and M, Italian, female and male, March 2015*)

From these ethnographic accounts, two main elements characterising the 'squat effect' can be drawn out. Firstly, the fact that the sense of self-sufficiency stemming from the commons developed inside the squat can further the tendency to self-enclosure. The second pertains the evidence that this impulse can also be reinforced by the squatters' feeling of being negatively judged by the other urban dwellers with whom they share the daily routines and 'right to the city' issues of the neighbourhoods where they have happened to be located after cracking. Indeed, regardless of their knowledge of the legacy of these *borgates* in relation to housing rights struggles, the squatters acknowledge the novelties that their communities present in respect to the thriving heritage of Housing Rights Movements in the past decades as presented in the previous chapters: the mainly migrant composition; the resentment felt by those who are still socialised into the mainstream ways of dwelling the city; once again, the unlawfulness and supposed social dangerousness of squatting spread by the media and political propaganda, regardless of the reasons that led them to do it.

In my experience of being a fellow-squatter in Tiburtina 770 and as a recognised

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3 Eating everything, a vernacular Italian expression for indicating corruption and embezzlement in the public and political arenas.

activist-researcher in Metropoliz, I had the chance to witness that this awareness bears a set of implications that, most of time, remain delimited to the realm of the single squatters' narration of their subjective situation, but that can also affect daily routines inside the squats. The first case makes itself known, for instance, when parents deliberately hide their housing arrangement from the educational institutions where their children are enrolled, and also from the schoolmates and colleagues. As a result, their social acquaintance is limited to the inner circle of those few people who are aware of their real housing arrangement. Otherwise, the negative self-perception of the squatters (see Mattiucci, 2017) is visible in those debates about the convenience of making visible to the outer world those items that reveal that people have improved their class position during the period of squatting. For example, I witnessed in both Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz heated discussions during the assemblies about letting the squatters park their cars in front or inside the squat, since many feared that the external sight of 'nice' vehicles could feed the propaganda describing the squatters as 'false poor' and 'social scroungers' (for the record, none of the squats came to a definitive rule on this subject matter).



*Figure 28: View from inside the gate of Tiburtina 770 after the squatters' parked cars were temporarily removed (October 2015)*

Based on these considerations, my first-hand experience and discussion with the other squatters, I feel that the 'squat effect' feels in the short-term as a solution for shielding the community from confrontation with the hostile outer gaze, especially inasmuch as the squatters' regimes of living allow them to support their day-to-day existence even without being exploited in the labour market. However in the long run it can become a problem for a number of reasons. First of all, the self-insulation from the city outside the squat furthers the reciprocal feeling of estrangement and isolation between the squatters and other dispossessed urban dwellers that are nevertheless still

socialised into neoliberal social reproduction. Furthermore, isolation also implies renouncing the creation of a solidarity network that could intervene in support of the squat in case resistance was needed. Besides, it is particularly insidious whereas it implies a form of denial of one's legitimate presence to be inside the city and, therefore, a more fragile endurance of the community as an autonomous social and political entity vis-à-vis the threats jeopardising their existence, from the consequences of the Article 5 to the permanent social stigmatisation they endure.

In conclusion, the eurythmisation of the making of the squat into a durable autonomous infrastructure requires to preserve a delicate balance. On the one hand, organisational rites need to be incorporated in the imperceptible politics of everydayness in order to preserve the squatters' regimes of living, which are at odds with mainstream expectations and modalities of social reproduction. For this same reason, they can yet lead the squatters to getting trapped in the squat effect as a form of self-enclosure and insulation from the outside, which implicates relinquishing from claiming their legitimate presence into the city as *citadins*. So, organisational rites can become a double-edged sword for the housing squats if they are conceived in a negative and segregated relation towards the broader cityscape, to the point of jeopardising their maintenance and existence. The following section summarises a set of reflections about this aspect, contending the necessity to open up organisational rites to the creation of urban commons directed at recasting 'right to the city' in order to strengthen the position of housing squats inside the urban fabric from a both political and social standpoint.

### **Opening up the organisational rites to urban commons and autonomous geographies**

The current chapter has focused on the crafting of the housing squats as autonomous infrastructures where peculiar regimes of living and organisation unfold within the workings of everyday social reproduction through organisational rites based on a set of non-negotiable ethical and political coordinates (Collier and Lakoff, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011; Hodkinson, 2012; Kokkinidis, 2015a). This follows the ethnographic account of the previous chapter, which described the subjective profile of the squatters as dispossessed urban dwellers prior to cracking, and then moved on to the steps enacted in the exceptional phase after squatting in order to trigger the

process of community building and space making. In particular, the previous sections have described how the ritualisation of anti-eviction self-defence, consensus-based deliberation and space making practices operates both within the imperceptible politics of day-to-day living, than in case of frictions and ruptures that break the usual routines. The process through which this occurs has been described through the original definition of *eurythmisation*, drawn by the Lefebvrian conceptualisation of eurythmia in relation to the rhythm of urban life (Lefebvre 2004, 2014).

From the previous ethnographic accounts, organisational rites emerge primarily as existential and organisational modalities that re-establish the relation between the production of inhabiting spatialities and the sense of belonging as a community that has been stripped by the mainstream, individualised conceptualisation of dwelling prevailing in the neoliberal urban fabric (see Papadopoulos, 2014, p.639-40; Staid, 2017; p.20-21). Hence, they can be framed as an inherently ethopoietical practices that foster the simultaneous production of situated ethics and ontologies in the process of doing/undoing subjectivities, materialities and relational spatialities on a daily basis through complex scales of organisational, affective, political and social relations (see Cooper, 1986; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2010; Papadopoulos, 2018). This happens in contrast with a neoliberal urban environment that, as Serra and Federici (2015) point out, is characterised by a dramatic erosion of intimacy and by the marketization of care. And, as a matter of fact, the squatters' way of taking care of each other is not the outcome of supposedly natural solidarities among dispossessed urban dwellers, but rather of the constant interplay between commoning, autonomy and coercion (Linebaugh, 2008; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013).

On the other hand, the subsequent analysis has also remarked the role played by the constant subjective and spatial entanglement between the self-contained space of the squats and the surrounding city through the kaleidoscope of the squatters' self-perception of their presence in the city (Gaita, 2017; Mattiucci, 2017; Rahola, 2017). In particular, it discussed how the unrolling of organisational rites into the squats may lead the squatters to opt for self-enclosure as a way of fully experiencing the squats' inner life, alongside shielding them from the hostile surrounding urban fabric. If not collectively discussed and addressed through daily engagement and reflexivity, the squat effect can therefore lead the squatters to weaken those relations with the city 'outside' that are yet crucial in order to avoid the squats' deterioration or dissolution as an autonomous infrastructure. This can occur both in the case of the fragmentation of the community, as well as in the

case of an eviction that might not witness any opposition in the absence of broader social and political networks of solidarity. Hence, in order to prevent the jettisoning of all the efforts made, organisational rites need to be opened up to the Movements' autonomous geographies of the city where these alliances and the proliferation of urban commons can be nurtured and expanded, starting from the level of local proximity.

To this purpose, the last two ethnographic chapters aim to explore how Tiburtina 770 and Metropolitiz have developed local urban commons (Chapter 6), and finally how their forms of activism can contribute to the 'socially dangerous' struggle of the Movements for the 'right to the city' (Chapter 7). More in detail, the following chapter describes the substantially different urban commons that Tiburtina 770 and Metropolitiz have created in the *borgate* where they are situated according to the contingent materialities and situatedness of their autonomous infrastructures (Larkin, 2013; Papadopoulos 2014, 2018). In their differences, they contribute to rescaling, re-signifying and repurposing the urban space through feasible, local, yet exciting and transformative actions that extend themselves across multi-scalar spatial dimensions (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Harvey, 2012; Rahola, 2014; Galdini, 2015; Vasudevan 2017). Ultimately, this 'local' engagement paves the path of social legitimacy and political alliances that are pivotal not only for contrasting the 'squat effect' but, ultimately, for contributing to the contentious politics for the 'right to the city' developed by the Housing Rights Movements inside the post-welfare, self-made urban fabric of Rome.

## CHAPTER 6. Housing squats and the redefinition of the urban inside the *borgate*

### *The squats as urban commons de borgata*<sup>1</sup>



Figure 29: Metropoli on a Saturday afternoon during which the MAAM is open for visiting (April 2015)

The previous chapter has described the process of making the housing squats into autonomous infrastructures where the commoning of daily social reproduction and the process of spatial production can unfold according to community-based, plural and equal ethical coordinates. In particular, it has focused on the workings of the organisational rites pertaining anti-eviction resistance, the assembly as the site of decision-making, and the collectivisation of the squats' spatial arrangement. As pointed out, these rites foster the *eurythmisation* of daily life routines. Also, they affect the way in which the communities deal with internal frictions pertaining to the difficulties of experiencing housing in common, as well as the management of matters of life and death. Yet, they have to be operated through a constant effort of resilience and situated adaptiveness whereas the Movements are currently faced with unprecedented challenges in terms of social composition, political context, and issues of scale in their action vis-à-vis an increasingly aggressive process of neoliberal restructuring and urbanisation (Harvey, 2012; Cattaneo and Martínez, 2014; Mudu and Aureli, 2016; Stavrides, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> A vernacular expression of Rome's popular neighborhoods meaning 'of the *borgate*'.

In the light of the volatility of social ties and relationship inside an urban fabric crossed by growing tensions and impoverishment, the forms of self-relegation and enclosure inside the housing squats that were labelled in the previous chapter as 'the squat effect' can jeopardise the existence of the squat in three main respects. First of all, they may undermine the bedrocks of the squats' internal reproduction by fostering the folding into the sphere of privatised interests and lifestyles. Secondly, they weaken the ties of solidarity and cooperation with the city that constitute a social and political barricade whenever the squats are threatened with eviction, commodification or even reappropriation by the original owner. Thirdly, and consequently to the previous point, they undermine the social and political legitimacy of the squatters by feeding their negative self-perception inside neighbourhoods that are already crossed by increasing social tensions as a consequence of the depletion of the 'right to the city' that has been exacerbated in the prolonged aftermath of the 2008 crisis. Hence, the squatters need to open up their organisational rites to the city and make them available for the proliferation of urban commons directed towards the other dispossessed urban dwellers struggling for their 'right to the city', starting from the local scale of proximity.

In the case of Metropolitiz and Tiburtina 770, this pertains devising urban commons open to the *borgate* of Tor Sapienza and Pietralata/Tiburtino III, where the transition from a Fordist (and eminently industrial) urban arrangement to the unfolding of neoliberal urbanisation has determined the progressive erosion of the inhabitants' 'right to the city', and the invalidation of the social welfare they have achieved through decades of thriving struggles from a series of standpoints introduced in Chapter 3. Firstly, the access to local social welfare, including public housing, has been significantly curtailed, regardless of the dissolution of the neighbourhood's industrial profile, alongside the precarisation of the labour market. Secondly, the process of de-industrialisation, coupled with the austerity-based abandonment of developmental urban planning, has determined the erosion of the social and political identity of the *borgate*, as well as the environmental degradation of their landscape. Last but not least, this condition of tension and social disempowerment has made these areas unprecedentedly vulnerable to the infiltrations of neo-fascist formations attempting to trigger a class war against the urban poor along the lines of ethnicity and race by accusing migrants of stealing already scarce resources from Italian native dwellers.

Dwelling upon their local rootedness, Blocchi Precari Metropolitani have been among the more active grassroots urban movements in Rome in contrasting this tendency,

that they define '*guerra tra poveri*' (war among the poor). The modality they have chosen is to open up the squats to the city together with the squatters, thus moving the battlefield from the hostility between dispossessed urban dwellers for using enclosed resources to the contention for the redistribution of those commons which have been stripped from collective, solidarity-based use (Blomley, 2008; Stavrides, 2016). To this purpose, they foster the creation of local networks of solidarity in order to re-appropriate many neglected ecologies of the urban space (e.g. abandoned gardens and areas) and contend a different 'right to the city'. Through this kind of politics on the local scale they oppose not only the neo-fascist infiltration inside historically leftist *borgate*, but above all a model of capitalist accumulation which gains surplus value both by the competitiveness among the poor, and the appropriation of the wealth, knowledge and excess produced in the circuits of day-to-day social reproduction in the city (Harvey 1989; Jeffrey et al., 2012).



Figure 30: The squatters of Tiburtina 770 and the inhabitants of Tiburtino III in front of the local church during an anti-racist initiative (November 2015)

In this light, Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz have contributed to this effort by creating different type of urban commons, that yet share the fact of being envisaged and materialised within spaces that are saturated with divergent interests, heterogeneous people, alongside pervasive forms of neoliberal governmentality and investment (Harvey, 2012; Bresnyhan and Byrne, 2014; Huron, 2015). In order to elucidate the modalities and rationalities underpinning the diverse ways in which Metropoliz and Tiburtina 770 have articulated their social and political presence inside the *borgate*, this chapter is divided into three main parts. In the first one, the experience of the MAAM (Museum of the Other



and the Elsewhere) created within Metropoliz through the cooperation of activists, a group of artists and squatters is recounted in light of the exceptionality it marks for the *borgata* Tor Sapienza. Following this account, its visibility is assessed firstly in the light of the lawsuit settled in court by the owner of the former Fiorucci slaughterhouse, Salini (also the head of the bigger Italian general contractor for the engineering and construction sector). It is then evaluated through another milestone of Metropoliz's activism and *mestizo* publicity on a local and national scale – the hosting of the national antiracist tournament *Mediterraneo Antirazzista*.

The following sections, on the other hand, address the strategy of mimesis with the struggling heritage of the *borgate* Tiburtino III and Pietralata that Tiburtina 770 has chosen to adopt, while cooperating with other subjects endeavouring to retain its legacy vis-à-vis attempts of neo-fascist and racist infiltration. Firstly, it recounts the modality of foundation and then participation in the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina*, a network of local grassroots groups, radical left-wing parties, associations and individuals engaged in activism for the 'right to the city' in the Tiburtina quadrant. This type of effort is then discussed in the light of the set of political and spatial repercussions that the *Nodo* and Tiburtina 770 had been confronted with in the instance of the eviction of the refugees' shanty-town of Ponte Mammolo in Summer 2015. In the conclusive part of the chapter, a series of reflections are suggested concerning how these strategies, referred to as 'local', end up uncovering the contrast between the Movements' autonomous geographies (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Vasudevan 2015a, b) and the diverse scales of the urban fabric. These issues are analysed in the light of the problem of the squatters' grassroots activism for the 'right to the city' within a conflicted city like Rome that is finally discussed in the last ethnographic chapter.

## Degrado<sup>2</sup> and class war in Tor Sapienza: “Who is to blame?”



Figure 31: The poster calling the assembly organised in the main square of Tor Sapienza by BPM during the campaign "Who is to blame?" (From the Blocchi Precari Metropolitani Facebook page)

In November 2014, a few days before my first preliminary fieldwork visit in Rome, Tor Sapienza witnessed violent protests against a refugee centre located in a building close to the *Giorgio Morandi* public housing complex. The centre was managed jointly by an NGO and the Red Cross. The triggering episode was an alleged attempt of sexual harassment perpetrated by one of the guests of the centre towards an Italian woman. Following the predictable outburst of outrage, neo-fascist formations gained the momentum by infiltrating the angry residents of the public housing block and inscribing the whole ordeal within an overtly racist frame by accusing the migrants of being the culprits for the increasing *degrado* and feeling of insecurity affecting Tor Sapienza. The tension grew to the breaking point, when Tor Sapienza's inhabitants and far right-wing affiliates engaged in a riot, threw molotov cocktails, and physically threatened both the practitioners workers and the guests of the refugees centre, with the demand that they had to be removed as soon as possible. This goal was actually accomplished, for the structure was closed less than a week after and the refugees were displaced to another location in the Infernetto neighbourhood<sup>3</sup>. Throughout the convoluted unravelling of the events, the squatters of Metropoliz and the activists of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani tried to be

<sup>2</sup> Italian word meaning 'degradation,' which is used mainly within the urban context.

<sup>3</sup> The chronicles of how the riot unfolded during the days can be retrieved here: 1) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/13/riot-police-violence-refugees-rome> 2) [http://www.ansa.it/english/news/general\\_news/2014/11/13/more-violence-around-rome-refugee-centre\\_bf7ac489-4e42-437e-a901-0142a43b559f.html](http://www.ansa.it/english/news/general_news/2014/11/13/more-violence-around-rome-refugee-centre_bf7ac489-4e42-437e-a901-0142a43b559f.html)

present and interact with the enraged residents of Tor Sapienza, with whom they had tightened relations of acquaintance, if not cooperation, over the years. In particular, they sought to uncover how specious the neofascists' presence was in those instances by underlining the political role they played in the previous administrations that had furthered the interest of corrupted politicians and speculative builders (the so-called 'palazzinari' in Rome's jargon), instead of taking care of neighbourhood's depletion in terms of 'right to the city' and downward spiral towards mob-related economies<sup>4</sup>. In this light, BPM framed the racist rhetoric as an artifice for concealing a new phase of class war and marginalisation against the urban poor that is functional to the current neoliberal governance of the city, besides being ingrained in the political DNA of far right-wing formations, as the massive displacement and purges operated by the Fascist regime show (Villani, 2012; Pietrangeli, 2014; Santoro, 2015; La Cecla, 2017). Furthermore, they organised poster campaigns and assemblies entitled 'Who is to blame? The real *degrado* is constituted by thieves, corrupted politicians and speculative builders!'

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the events, diverse local and national politicians and MPs from almost every institutional party showed up in Tor Sapienza, profiting from the 24/7 presence of mainstream media that crowded the area. In a sort of anticipation of what would have been the campaign for Rome's local election in 2016, they all attempted to qualify themselves as 'people among the people' with semi-improvised speeches inside housing blocks, cafés and local spots where the residents usually meet. Yet right-wing politicians were those who mostly were present in the area during those days, and especially affiliates to the neofascist groups CasaPound and Forza Nuova<sup>5</sup>. Besides this, TV shows, interviews and news breaks were broadcasted incessantly for one week, framing the events coarsely under the heading of 'the rage of the peripheries' and the racial hostility against migrants that was growing all over Europe in socially-marginalised contexts and public housing districts in a condition of institutional abandonment<sup>6</sup>. Given this spotlight, Housing Rights Movements, and Blocchi Precari Metropolitani in particular, felt an urge to present a narrative alternative to this toxic and misleading

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4 Tor Sapienza is one of the biggest drug dealing squares in Rome: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-rome-idUSKCN0IZ0MN20141115>

5 Here can be found a timeline of right-wing formations intervention in Tor Sapienza during the days of the revolt: <https://strugglesinitaly.wordpress.com/2014/11/25/en-racist-attack-on-political-asylum-seekers-centre-in-rome-and-new-project-for-italian-right/>

6 This video was shot by the private broadcast La7 few days after the revolt in November 2015, and shows the squatting of public venues and apartments in Tor Sapienza and the Giorgio Morandi block: <http://www.la7.it/laria-che-tira/video/gli-abusivi-dellater-nel-cuore-di-tor-sapienza-11-11-2015-167318>

rhetoric.

### **Metropoliz and BPM vis-à-vis the rage of the peripheries**

As the activists and the squatters of Metropoliz later told me during my first preliminary visit at the end of November 2014, they deliberately decided to put their social and political weight into play in that spurious and uncomfortable scenario, despite the possibly dangerous presence of fascists, and the derogatory attention it could have attracted toward the housing squat as simply another illegitimate space to be cleared. Indeed, they sensed that what happened in Tor Sapienza could start to legitimise a string of attacks against migrants and urban poor as the ideal scapegoats for the crisis' consequences in terms of the *degrado* of the everyday life inside the *borgate* (as the following sections about Pietralata/Tiburtino III display). Hence, Blocchi Precari Metropolitani shared their reflections on the online portal of the Housing Rights' Movements National network *Abitare nella Crisi* [Inhabiting within the crisis] through a pamphlet entitled *La collera delle periferie. Una riflessione da Roma Est* (The rage of peripheries: A reflection from East Rome, 2014). Its purpose was to share the autonomous, radical standpoint of the squatters, and to point out how this outburst of rage boiled down to the long-term repercussions of post-Fordist disinvestment, crisis-driven austerity, and overall neoliberal urbanisation:

Rome's peripheral areas have endured changes connected to new forms of extraction of profit by land annuity. The processes of valorisation actually design a new model of urbanisation, a new management of economic fluxes, and a new organisation of housing and labour. Large retailers and the rush to real estate development that remains mostly unsold define the new scenario close to GRA<sup>7</sup> and within the more consolidated city. This has caused a gradual loss of income and social security for larger social sectors, including those thought to be safe from economic turmoil, as small retailers and local artisans. The generalised precarisation mixes with environmental degradation, the denial of social services, and a vastly complicated urban mobility. If we consider also the remarkable percentages of school drop-outs as a direct consequence of the lack of services and dismantlement of welfare, we

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<sup>7</sup> Abbreviation for the *Grande Raccordo Anulare*, the ring-shaped highway that conceptually separates the inside and the outside of Rome.

have to reckon to what extent deprivation is dramatic also from a cultural viewpoint<sup>8</sup>. In parallel, the value of solidarity tends to disappear in favour of individualistic selfishness, that is the harbinger of racist and securitising drives, which in turn shape the contours of the so-called 'non-political' protests. Governmental provisions and the attitude of local governments also stimulate these connections by politically addressing only the population who can still afford to pay and live inside the city, the so-called solvent population. They deliberately counterpose it to migrants and those sectors of society that are more vulnerable to economic disadvantage nowadays. This behaviour then fosters xenophobic and antagonistic attitudes towards anyone deemed illegal or not assimilated to the mainstream culture. Even legitimate struggles in this context can be downgraded to socially dangerous experiences, and irretrievably branded as such. Manipulations are therefore to be contextualised within this slippery, and complex, social magma.

Through these reflections, the activists of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani managed to pierce the wall of mainstream narratives and outline the racist framework of neo-fascist formations, while the inhabitants of Metropolitiz gained further political legitimacy inside Tor Sapienza. This is remarkable not only in light of their lonely attempt to buck the trend of a simplistic and dishonest, yet tantamount easy attempt to target a scapegoat for all the vicious consequences of the lack of a 'right to the city'. It was even more notable inasmuch as it involved in the midst of the boiling squares activists and squatters that, regardless of their position as 'illegal dwellers', defiantly represented and reclaimed their *mestizo* ethnic profile. This occurred also despite the fact that unlawful settlements, and Roma ones in particular, had been targeted for a long time by residents and far right-wing agitators as factors that contributed to transforming Tor Sapienza into a 'social dump' (Grazioli, 2017a, p.398-9). Besides, throughout the turmoil, Metropolitiz was never targeted by fascist retaliations or derogatory media campaigns and demands for extensive evictions, displacements and 'recovery of lawfulness' that were taking the toll in those days.

The following sections contend that this type of legitimisation and mobilisation was made possible by the thick and diversified network of solidarity and grassroots

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<sup>8</sup> According to the last report about socio-economic indicators provided by the former VII Municipality, inside Tor Sapienza the average rate of school attendance is the lowest one in Rome, whilst the drop-out rate one is the highest (15% compared to a city average of 9%). According to the same report, this is also due to the very low number of school facilities (just four in one of the then biggest municipalities), forcing students to undertake fatiguing daily commutes that discourage the families. The high presence of Roma and nomadic families are also included within the cited as factors discouraging attendance. Report available here: [https://www.comune.roma.it/pcr/it/mun\\_viii\\_terr\\_edaterr\\_rif.page](https://www.comune.roma.it/pcr/it/mun_viii_terr_edaterr_rif.page)

political recognition that Metropoliz, its squatters and BPM activists had managed to consolidate by opening the squat to many art interventions and manifold initiatives through the *Museum of the Other and the Elsewhere*. Indeed, the richness of the social, political and cultural milieu they have developed marks a sharp exceptionalism towards the degradation characterising Tor Sapienza. Besides, it furthers a radical prefiguration of the possibilities encompassed in autonomous forms of regeneration that could renovate the *borgata's* foundational identity through the re-appropriation of the abandoned vestiges of its thriving industrial past. Hence, this proliferation of cultural urban commons can be considered a 'barricade' of art protecting Metropoliz against the threats posed by a potentially hostile surrounding environment, as well as against the former slaughterhouse's proprietor Salini's attempt to re-appropriate the building and commodify the forms of art that had been produced in it. Besides, the experience of the antiracist football tournament *Mediterraneo Antirazzista* is discussed as another validation of the plural and consolidated role exerted by Metropoliz in Tor Sapienza.

### **From *Space Metropoliz* to the MAAM: the barricade of art to the Mestizo city**



*Figure 32: The space Metropoliz rocket located close to Plaza Peru (January 2015)*

The sense of bewilderment, surprise and astonishment that Metropoliz instils in the

visitors arriving for the very first time can be processed only by understanding its specificity even in relation to the burgeoning trend of counter-cultural production amid squatted places such as social centres, and whose outcomes are largely traceable throughout Rome (see Fucolti, 2015; Piazza, 2015; Teatro Valle, 2015). Indeed Metropoliz is not just a housing squat, nor a squatted museum. It is an inhabited squat who hosts a lived museum inside single dwelling units and common spaces, and that has been moulded by a complex web of consolidated relations, deliberate political planning and fortuitous encounters among activists, squatters and artists (Careri and Goñi Mazzitelli, 2012; Grazioli, 2017b). The first step was the encounter with the collective of urban trekkers and ethnographers Stalkercollective, which discovered Metropoliz by chance while walking on the via Prenestina. As they entered into the suggestive reality of the squat, in 2011 they developed with the Blocchi Precari Metropolitani activists and the engagement of the squatters the peculiar artistic project that would have been finalised into the web-documentary series *Space Metropoliz*, which is fully available on YouTube since 2014<sup>9</sup>. During its elaboration, diverse philosophers, astrophysicists, collectives, performers and artists populated Metropoliz for one year with diverse intellectual and material contributions for the purpose of constructing a rocket to be sent to the moon by using and recycling the material, debris and industrial leftovers they found inside the unexplored areas of the former Fiorucci industrial plant. Ostensibly, the making of the rocket through the recombining and repurposing of existing materials recalled the squatters' autonomous effort of regenerating a slaughterhouse into an autonomous infrastructure that could suit their dwelling necessities, as well as their ideals and desires (see Larkin, 2013; Papadoulous, 2014; Galdini, 2015). Furthermore, the rocket travelling to the moon epitomised the collective creation of the means of emancipation and commons that allowed Metropoliz's inhabitants to produce a radically alternative spatio-temporality, an *heterotopia* where experimenting with new forms of social cooperation and *mestizo* urban citizenship aside from the surrounding hostile urban fabric (Careri and Goñi Mazzitelli, 2012; Avallone and Torre, 2016).

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9 The full documentary is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/user/SpaceMetropoliz> (subtitled in English)



Figure 33: The birthday cake for the anniversary of the MAAM museum (23rd April 2015)

The entanglement between art, culture, squatting and autonomous regeneration did not stop with the completion of the documentary. Indeed, during and after the *Space Metropolis* project, the squat has become attractive for a large number scholars, artists, journalist and documentarists who proposed manifold types of activities inside Metropolis. Indeed, besides a number of TV broadcasts and articles about it, the squat has hosted many workshops and academic projects. For instance, the research group *Pidgin City*, affiliated to the University of Roma Tre, has organised two workshops and some initiatives for promoting the encounter between the squatters and Tor Sapienza's population, such as the so-called *mestizo* Carnival (Careri and Goñi Mazzitelli, 2012). Furthermore, in September 2011, the Development Planning Unit of University College London organised their first edition of a thematic summer lab upon the issue of the wall as an architectural and urban device at Metropolis <sup>10</sup>.

Yet the longest consolidated project inside Metropolis is the Metropolitan Museum of the Other and the Elsewhere (*MAAM, Museo dell'Altro e dell'Altrove Metropolitano*), hosted inside the central pavilions of the former slaughterhouse from the cooperation between the squatters, Blocchi Precari Metropolitani's activists, and the directors of the web-documentary *Space Metropolis*. Inaugurated in 2012 with the donated creations of few street artists, the Museum gathers nowadays a collection of hundreds of pieces of work whose richness, alongside the MAAM's fame of 'lived, inhabited museum', has brought it into the spotlight of mainstream audience and

10 See <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/dpublog/2011/11/28/the-metropolis-wall-the-architectural-dispositif-as-recalibrating-agent/>



agencies<sup>11</sup> (see Grazioli, 2017b). Regardless of this attention, Metropoliz and the MAAM keep being at odds with any conventional understanding of museum management, while negotiating the space's openness with its inhabiting profile. Indeed, the weekly opening of the museum part, and the schedule of special events of the MAAM, are tailored on the daily necessities of the squatters who live in it.

Besides, every exhibition and 'donation' of art pieces occurs on a purely voluntary basis, since a monetary trade would degenerate the museum's autonomy into the 'traditional' commercial dynamics characterising mainstream arts, museums and exhibitions. Proof is the fact that the entrance for Saturday's openings, special events and carnivals is usually for free, whilst the only source of crowd-funding is a 'pay as you feel' price for the meals cooked by the *Cucina Meticcica* (Mestizo cookery) crew. Nevertheless, the more distinctive trait of the MAAM is its collective management through the adaptation of the housing squats' assembly organisational rite into the so-called 'weekly social assembly' which regroups the squatters, the BPM activists, the 'artistic directors and supervisors' of the artistic section, and the volunteers contributing to its maintenance. Every decision pertaining the museum, from cleaning shifts to the events' calendar, is then collectively decided and implemented. Also, it is important noticing that every event and change into the museum (new art installations included) are subordinated to the approval of the general assembly gathering all the people living into Metropoliz's inhabitants, especially when it comes down to prolonged refurbishment and/or infrastructural changes.

This close cooperation has the primary purpose of producing a varied social, political and cultural barricade defending Metropoliz and its dwellers from the risk of an eviction. As the informal artistic director of the museum Giorgio de Finis explains in the first art catalogue of the MAAM published in 2015, its collective management aims primarily at 'turning on the spotlight on the serious issue of housing emergency and on an example of co-existence and social redemption that is nothing but futuristic, the one realised in Metropoliz that, it is worth reminding, has been the first Italian squat to include a Roma community. [...] Then the MAAM starts to build (and no longer 'for fun'), sustains the squatters' effort in the action of re-qualifying spaces; it invents, thanks to the intervention of the artists, new spaces for sociability, for those who live inside Metropoliz,

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11 For instance the MAAM is included into the catalogue of the private association FAI, the Italian Environmental Fund, concerned with the promotion and the defence of neglected environmental and cultural spots all over Italy.

for the neighbourhood and the city in general' (De Finis, 2015, p.8).

Secondly, the MAAM represents a living critique of the elitism of the commercial, class-based cultural consumption in the city of Rome (see Martínez, 2015, p.38; Teatro Valle, 2015, p.202), whereas the access to art is mainly commodified and enclosed within profit-based, mainstream circuits that are mainly concerned with the city centre. Lastly, it constitutes a cultural super-object and an actual urban commons to which everyone can contribute according to their own artistic inspiration, means and ideas (De Finis, 2015, p.8-10), thus fostering encounters and cooperation among urban dwellers that would otherwise quite unlikely meet in a place like Tor Sapienza (Di Vetta, 2015, p.31). In order to sustain this effort and preserve the delicate balance between the inhabited space and the museum, resilience and mutual commitment underlie the remarkable exertion of 'explosive patience that generates a space that is alive and full of both positive and negative energy' (Di Vetta, 2015, p.30), as one of the activists of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani asserts. Nonetheless, there is always the chance that frictions arise in respect to the diverse ways in which the people conceive and practice the space of Metropoliz and, most of all, the relationship with its dwellers.

### **Against cultural clash, hipsterisation, commodification**



*Figure 34: Visitors inside one of the corridors of the MAAM where the original industrial machineries are used as part of art installations (February 2015)*

M: I have just had a quarrel with this idiot... I kicked him out, or I wish I had. But I told him to go out and leave, I told him, believe me, and he has left, hopefully he won't come back and I don't give a sh\*t about what he was planning to do and whether he was *the star* of tomorrow [an event], excuse my French but I am so pissed!... Yes, he was an exhibitor. He came here, with this *puzza sotto al naso*<sup>12</sup>, and started distributing orders about how to install his art piece, and then what he wanted to eat, and how he was going to be accommodated, and this and that. Who does he think he is? And who does he think we are, his servants? We may be *extra-terrestrial*<sup>13</sup> but we don't owe him anything, actually the opposite, we are letting him in our home, he has to be here by our rules and respect us. R: For once I agree with you M, I have to say. You know I always strive to treat the visitors politely and understand they are not used to where they are, but when it is too much is too much. With the kitchen it happens so often... These people that come here and look at the food we cook as if it was sh\*t and ask for customised dishes. We are volunteer cooks, not a restaurant! Eat the *zighnè*, you can have the *cous-cous*, the *arroz con pollo*, the Peruvian potatoes. You don't like them? Starve!

S: But you know, Margarita [*addressing me by using my nickname in Spanish*], those who piss me off uncontrollably are not even these food snobs, but those whom I overhear the conversation of when they dine, I can't help it. With their full mouths they talk about this place as the MAAM... The Museum, you know, not Metropoliz! As if we didn't exist, as if we were waiters and waitresses and hostesses and stewards hired to take care of the place, as if we didn't inhabit it. And indeed, if they see the dogs running around and the kids running around they sometimes have this look of pity, and contempt, as if they were in a zoo where they incidentally meet the poor, if you see what I mean. Sometimes I just bite my tongue, sometimes I can't take it and I have to say something. This is *Metropoliz*, not the *MAAM*, it was our home before the museum even existed and will be even if it ceases to exist! And believe me, sometimes I can't stand it.

This informal conversation that I have recorded and then transcribed with the consent of the people talking occurred inside the kitchen of Metropoliz on a Friday in May 2015, and involves three of the inhabitants who are more committed to cooperating on a regular basis with the MAAM. In the emphasis of their outrage towards an artist that,

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12 A typical Italian vernacular locution meaning snobness.

13 This is a joke developed inside Metropoliz after the documentary; the squatters would define themselves *alien*, *extraterrestrians*, hinting to both the rocket project and the fact that the vast majority of them are migrants.

as they perceived it, disrespected the place and was subsequently asked to leave with no opportunity of return, it is possible to trace three problematic aspects pertaining the relationship between the inhabitants of Metropolitiz, the diverse subjects cooperating with the MAAM, and the overall political project of the squats. First of all, there is always the chance of subjective clashes among the squatters, the artists and the visitors, whereas the latter bear expectations about the place's management that conflate with that of a mainstream museum, and that therefore ignore the primacy of the interests and relations of its dwellers. Secondly, Metropolitiz can be subjected to commodification and co-optation inside the cultural grammar of urban counter-cultural or subcultural production that is focused upon what is at odds with the mainstream model of art exhibition (see Moore and Smart, 2015), yet concealing the primary function of the former Fiorucci slaughterhouse as a living space.



*Figure 35: The squatters of Metropolitiz gathered in front the Penal Court of Piazzale Clodio for the first hearing of the lawsuit settled against them by Pietro Salini (October 2016)*

Also, this potential for profitability could explain the commitment of the CA.SA Srl, and in particular of Pietro Salini, toward re-appropriating the former industrial sites after years of abandonment and lack of interest. Indeed, during the first court hearings held in 2016, his lawyers underscored on the one hand the unlawful appropriation of the area, and on the other hand the intent of the proprietor to maintain the museum sections after an eventual eviction in the role of a patron. In this light, Salini's insistence can be interpreted as an attempt to re-commodify and co-opt the cultural urban commons that the squatters of Metropolitiz, their collaborators and BPM's activists have created and nurtured in order to be able to extract monopoly revenues from it (Harvey, 2012, p.110). This connects to the last risks which pertains the 'hipsterisation', or worst, 'gentrification'

of Metropoliz. Indeed, as the conversation reported highlights, many visitors and even artists might be attracted to visiting it by its popularity and the regeneration of an industrial architecture for museum purposes, yet without understanding the fact that it is primarily a squatted dwelling space, and that participating to it requires adhering to the squatters' social and political positioning of defending the household they have reappropriated and created.

As an activist and ethnographer, I had the chance to extensively reflect on these issues and the implications they bear towards the city and Tor Sapienza in particular. Indeed, several times during my ethnographic walks into the neighbourhood and chatting with the residents, it occurred to me that the 'foreigner' attendees of the weekly opening were more familiar with Metropoliz and its activities than the inhabitants of the *borgata*. This is to say that they although the local residents wouldn't attack it, they wouldn't consider it a resource and a common for themselves. Aware of this issue, the squatters and the activists have adopted a two-sided strategy. First of all, they regularly invite the members of the local cultural and social associations, the residents' groups and the Municipality's administrators to the events they organise. Secondly, besides keeping Metropoliz available for political meetings and assemblies, they have diversified their hosted events, retaining an emphasis on sociability and culture, while promoting the values and demands of anti-racism, non-discrimination and the 'right to the city'. In the following section, I describe one of the most important annual events in this respect, which is the hosting of Rome date of the anti-racist football tournament *Mediterraneo Antirazzista* (Antiracist Mediterranean).

### **The *Mediterraneo Antirazzista*: 'The city belongs to those who play it!'**

The *Mediterraneo Antirazzista* (Antiracist Mediterranean) is a travelling football tournament for adults and kids that was experimented with for the first time by a group of local activists engaged in the grassroots regeneration of the deprived Zen borough of Palermo, and that was then replicated in other locations all over Italy including Milano, Genova, Lampedusa and Napoli. In its different territorialisations, the *Mediterraneo* has gone beyond the exclusive focus upon grassroots, 'working class' sport (albeit it remains its milestone), whilst it has gained a broader connotation as a two-day festival during

which the sociability revolving around the tournament becomes an occasion for participating in free debates, concerts and dialogues among diverse urban dwellers united by their common passion for football<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, there is no enrolment fee for the *Mediterraneo*, nor a restriction on the number of teams to register ahead of time. The only non-negotiable rules are non-competitiveness, fair play, anti-racism and a ban on every form of discrimination among the players and the supporters.



Figure 36: The football field of Metropoliz on the first day of the tournament (May 2015)

Since 2013, Metropoliz has hosted the Rome date of this event. Indeed, in the external area past *Plaza Peru* and close to the *Space Metropoliz* rocket ‘launch pad’, the squatters have managed to arrange one big football field. Progressively, they have crowdfunded in order to buy and set up all the required facilities, and then to add new pieces to improve it every year<sup>15</sup>. Besides this, the organisation of the tournament is quite multi-layered, and requires preliminary arrangements that usually start two or three months ahead the chosen date. First of all, the social assembly of Metropoliz and a larger group of activists start to discuss the cultural and political initiatives that they want to include in the calendar of the *Mediterraneo*, and start to reach out the potential guests for securing their availability and arranging their accommodation. Secondly, promotional materials such as leaflets, wall posters and banners are graphically designed and distributed online, in Tor Sapienza and the city at least two or three weeks ahead. Thirdly, the squatters and the activists start to recruit the football teams that they know might be interested in participating, such as those in social centres and housing squats, refugees’ teams, autonomous sports centres, and so on. Last but not least, they proceed to involve

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.mediterraneoantirazzista.org/>

<sup>15</sup> For the 2017 edition, the squatters have built changing rooms, showers and sanitary facilities.

as many as social and political subjectivities of Tor Sapienza. The first edition in which I took part was the one held in May 2015. The first day was dedicated to the ‘grown-ups’ tournament (16-99+ years), whilst the Sunday was devoted to the under-16s. The slogan chosen by the BPM activists and the squatters in order to promote it was ‘*The city belongs to those who play it!*’, and it bore a double meaning. First of all, it was a reference to the ‘right to the city’ and to the entitlement of dispossessed urban dwellers to re-appropriate space for moments of common sociability. Secondly, it was a counterpoint to the racist mottos that right-wing groups used in Tor Sapienza during and after the revolt against the refugee centre, and that claimed that the neighbourhood belonged only to Italian people, so that migrants and refugees were not welcome there. As a further response, the tournament was not limited to the close (and more easily defensible from fascist provocations) area of Metropolit. The first part of the adult one took place on Tor Sapienza Municipality’s football field that was rented for the occasion, located inside the elderly community centre, and close to the *Giorgio Morandi* public housing block and the former refugee centre that was emptied in November 2014.



*Figure 37: The celebration of the refugee team that won the Mediterraneo Antirazzista tournament (16th May 2015)*

This appointment was especially sensitive because among the participating teams, one, *Liberi Nantes*, was formed by refugees and asylum seekers housed in Rome by an NGO supporting migrants' rights, including the former guests of the Tor Sapienza's refugee centre. Yet, despite the concerns, the whole tournament proceeded smoothly, and with the attendance of diverse residents who either heard about the event or were curious and decided to stay in order to support the players. The teams then moved inside Metropolit for the semi-final and final rounds of the adult tournament, which was actually won by the *Liberi Nantes*, and celebrated with chants and joyful invasions of the football

field. In the late afternoon and evening, two debates took place: one about the Rome's branch of the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanction (BDS) campaign in support of Palestine; and the other about the Arab spring, with interventions from researchers and migrant squatters coming from Tunisia and Egypt. The day was then concluded with a concert aimed at crowdfunding for the expenses of the Housing Rights Movements' legal team. The following day, children from numerous housing squats joined the kids' tournament and the '*mestizo lunch*' during which dishes from diverse ethnic culinary traditions (Peruvian, Arab, *Habesha*, Roma) were served.

All in all, the success of the 2015 run of the *Mediterraneo* represented a defiant challenge towards the sense of legitimisation and entitlement that neo-fascist groups had boasted of after the forcible displacement of the refugees. Also, the cheerful, *mestizo* sociability it brought to Tor Sapienza for two days created a sharp contrast with the gloomy, enraged and disillusioned atmosphere that had fallen upon the *borgata* after the events of November 2014, and the realisation that the promises made by the politicians that showed up in those days were not going to be kept. On the other hand, the positive atmosphere that permeated the event, and the effort deployed in organising it in detail, summarises the character of the presence of Metropolit in Tor Sapienza, and the reason why it has managed so far to maintain and legitimise its social and political presence despite the multiple pressures it experiences.

On the one hand, the extraordinary experiment of the MAAM has made it a point of reference for a multifarious constellation of cultural, social and political activism within and beyond Rome that has erected a strong barrier of art and solidarity in order to preserve this space full of contradictory, yet powerful energies. Indeed, these encounters of different (and also at times clashing) subjectivities have managed to create an urban commons affirming dwelling and cultural rights in the city by turning a symbol of decay and an institutional void such as an abandoned industrial complex into a *mestizo* city where different forms of re-appropriation and autonomous regeneration coexist and contribute in defending, reinforcing and claiming each other (Di Vetta, 2015; Galdini, 2016; Avallone and Torre, 2016; Mudu and Aureli, 2016; Grazioli, 2017b). Indeed, the MAAM would not exist without the inhabitants of Metropolit, and the squat would not be the same without the contribution of the many people who have over these years have contributed to its project.

Secondly, the defiant affirmation of the *mestizo* identity of Metropolit's social composition, and the agency and voice it brought into the political scenario of Tor



Sapienza guarantees its legitimization in the eyes of many residents as a resource and a common that they can relate to. Ultimately, this prevents its exceptionality from turning into alienation and self-enclosure from the *borgata*, be that by means of commodification, hipsterisation or social detachment. Although this balance is a difficult one to achieve and preserve, the outcome is mostly successful nowadays, and keeps being enriched by new ideas and forms of hybridisation. Nonetheless, the fact it works does not imply that this strategy of local activism can be replicated in the same guise everywhere, and not even in *borgate* that are like Tor Sapienza in terms of historical development and social contradictions. Indeed, the following sections discuss the specular strategy that Tiburtina 770 has decided to adopt in order to relate to the nearby neighbourhoods of Pietralata and Tiburtino III, which implies adhering to its thriving history of conflict for housing rights, becoming embedded into its consolidated political networks, and creating new ones that may provide further legitimisation of the squat as a local actor entitled to making demands for the 'right to the city'.

### **The *Bar del Forte*, Pietralata and Tiburtino III: an identity lost between past and present**



*Figure 38:* On the left, the "Bar del Forte"; on the right, the videoslot saloon in front of Tiburtina 770 (December 2015)

The cityscape surrounding the Tiburtina 770 squat encompasses the bulk of contradictions, and the permanence of the thriving reminiscences of the past, alongside

the unequivocal signs of the decay characterising the present daily life of Pietralata and Tiburtino III. In my daily experience and perception of those *borgate*, one place in particular epitomises all these aspects: the so-called *Bar del Forte*, situated in front of Tiburtina 770 and the Ruffo Barracks, at the crossroads between Pietralata and the piece of street separating it from Tiburtino III. At first sight, it seems to me one of the many anonymous and stereotyped 24/7 *bars*<sup>16</sup> annexed by a video-slot space that punctuate most corners of the ancient via Tiburtina with annoying regularity (and especially towards the former industrial district of the Tiburtina valley), and where you could buy *cornetto*<sup>17</sup>, *caff  *, cigarettes and overpriced milk at any time of the day and night and regardless of any festivity<sup>18</sup>. It was to my great surprise, then, that I found out during an *aperitivo* (drinks before dinner) with a 21-year-old *pischello* (young guy) born in Pietralata, volunteering in what used to be the historical headquarters of the Communist Party of Tiburtino III after an antifascist meeting, that this was a traditional spot of the two *borgate*. More specifically, it used to be a gathering place for leftist and antifascist extra-parliamentarian formations that were particularly active in the area, especially during the 1970s. Indeed, given its proximity to both the industrial plants, the Ruffo Barracks and the inhabited public housing blocks, it was the place where the indentured labourers, the soldiers and the *borgatari*<sup>19</sup> would meet before going back home for a chat, playing cards and sipping a *campari col bianco*<sup>20</sup>. Amid drinks and sociability, as Angelo explained to me, the customers were accustomed to impromptu political speeches and informal discussions started by the local affiliates of the radical leftist groups *Autonomia Operaia*, *Lotta Continua* and *Proletari in Divisa*, who were rooted in the area and seeking to recruit from the working class people new comrades for their struggle, in which the struggle for housing rights in particular played a prominent role.

And nowadays the proletarians, nowadays, end up gambling their salary with these f\*\*\*\*\*g slot machines... At least before they used to play poker, cards, whatever... But you had a social dimension in it... Now it is not the same thing. You would not believe me, but here it has become the jungle, it has become worse than Scampia to some extent, everything is degraded and decaying... The *borgata* is today more than

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<sup>16</sup> Italian word for *caf  *.

<sup>17</sup> Vernacular word widespread in Rome and southern Italy standing for *brioche*.

<sup>18</sup> Many of these video-slot bars on the via Tiburtina have been forfeited and subjected to State receivership in June 2017 after a police operation labelled 'Babylonia', which uncovered that many of these places were owned by mob organisations for money-laundering related to prostitution and drug trafficking. See here: <http://www.romatoday.it/cronaca/arresti-roma-oggi-23-giugno-2017.html>

<sup>19</sup> The male inhabitants of the borgata.

<sup>20</sup> Campari red with white wine, a quite typical working class drink.

ever ugly, dirty, criminal... But it is also fecund and has to be cultivated, not left aside as fallow land.

(Angelo, inhabitant of Pietralata, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2015)

The diverse social and historical trajectories converging inside the *Bar del Forte*, are piercingly summarised by the words of Angelo. On the one hand, the vestiges of the social and political identities of the *borgate* Pietralata and Tiburtino III are still in place, and have become part of the bequeathed narratives of those who inhabit it. On the other hand, the transformation of the bar from a venue of political sociability to a symbol of turbo-capitalism symbolise the painful and, to some extent, incomplete transition they have undergone from being industrial, working class districts to abandoned neighbourhoods at the internal borders of the expanding urban fabric. In a similar way to what happened in Tor Sapienza, the loss of identity and the depletion of daily liveability have paved the path for unprecedented political infiltrations by neo-fascist formations like CasaPound and Forza Nuova, which once again have tried to territorialise by fomenting the social animosity against those subjects (and in particular migrants) scapegoated for taking resources from the ‘native’ dwellers. In the case of these *borgate*, the triggering episode was the opening scheduled in in late May 2015 of an asylum-seeker shelter in via del Frantoio, one historic street in Tiburtino III.

In its first appearance the far-right wing group Casapound, using the same slogans brought into Tor Sapienza, started a systematic attempt to mobilise the inhabitants of the nearby public housing blocks against this decision, purporting threats that the migrants would have posed to public health and security, and demanding the allocation of social welfare infrastructures only to native Italian citizens<sup>21</sup>. Eventually, they did not manage to trigger a revolt, whereas their public initiatives were each time countered by antifascist demonstrations and rallies that saw among the promoters also Tiburtina 770 as part of the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina*<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, the fact that such far-right groups were able to retrieve room for action in traditionally anti-fascist neighbourhoods alarmed not

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21 The mobilisation of CasaPound started in early May with a picket trying to prevent the opening of the centre (<http://tiburtino.romatoday.it/casal-bruciato/casa-pound-italia-presidio-permanente-centro-d-accoglienza-via-del-frantoio.html>) and continued until summer 2017.

22 On the 1 June 2017, one part of the centre had been closed after the City Council ended the contract with the Red Cross and announced the complete dismantlement by the end of the year. On that day, Casapound organised a demonstration claiming they had gained this victory, whilst anti-fascist groups (*Nodo Tiburtina* included), mobilised successfully in order to stop them from marching in the neighbourhood.

only the squatters of Tiburtina 770, but first and foremost also the historical ‘local’ activists, who read it as a further sign of the lack of a ‘right to the city’ which is exacerbating the social relations and stripping consolidated identities in the area. In this light, the creation of the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina* in 2014 occurred exactly under the pressure of this awareness, and the willingness to bring back the anti-fascist and left-wing values underlying the history of Tiburtino III and Pietralata for devising new autonomous responses to the challenges of the present.



Figure 39: The demonstration "Accogliamo, ma guarda come stiamo!" (We welcome, but look how we are!) organised by the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina* to counter one of the mobilisations of Casapound (November 2015)

### **Creating the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina*. The case of the Ruffo Barracks**

In these years, someone has taken advantage of the generalised loss of a certain type of culture and politics in order to strip rights, alongside disempowering all these services that the *borgatari* conquered during the Sixties and Seventies, with those big struggles of citizens, of *popolo* ['the people' more politically-inflected], of workers... [...] This was possible at the time due to the osmosis between the industrial plants and the neighbourhoods... As this complex solidarity network vanished, demands seem to have vanished as well [...] Therefore, our aspiration is that, when we spot breaches in this apathy, we are able intervene in order to stimulate

the creation of social services, self-managed and re-appropriated spaces, or at least the formulation of proper demands [...] All this turmoil, all this social disarray, let's call it this, because the migrant is suffering as well as the citizen who finds himself to be alien in a society that they do not understand, love anymore... All of this has created these conflictual situations that still do not create an alternative idea of society. Yet I think this should be our primary goal in order to supersede this phase of neoliberalism and imperialism of finance. We need to start from ourselves first. In this respect, the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina* [Tiburtina Territorial Node] has attempted to deal with the issues pertaining to where and how we live, and how we possibly aspire to live.

(Elio Romano, member of the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina* and former Municipal councillor for Rifondazione Comunista<sup>23</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2015)

The words of Elio Romano, a local activist and politician born and grown in Pietralata, represent the concerns felt by many local activists and inhabitants about the loss of the tangible and more imperceptible legacies of the struggles conducted in the Tiburtina area since de-industrialisation changed the connotation of the whole area. Indeed, the *borgate* were founded in order to accommodate the labour force of the neighbouring industrial plants. Hence, the struggles in workplaces and those in the inhabited areas for a decent livelihood reinforced each other and led to considerable achievements in terms of local victories and contribution to the broader assertions of social rights and equality, in the 1970s especially (see Villani, 2012; Armati, 2015; Santoro, 2015). As these drives dissolved in the neoliberal and post-industrial transition of the Tiburtina valley, local activists were confronted with the challenge of not dispersing the thriving legacy and identity of the *borgate*, while addressing the plurality of scattered issues that emerged as their tight territorial tissue became looser. In this respect, Tiburtina 770's squatters and BPM activists assumed a leading role by intercepting the ongoing debates in the area, the possible interlocutors, and making the squat available as a common space for gathering and discussing how to re-unite different demands and needs.

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23 *New Communist Foundation*, a leftist political party created after the dissolution of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in the first Nineties.



Indeed, the political network of the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina* was the outcome of Tiburtina 770's intervention amid the wide debate that was starting to arise inside the IV Municipality and Tiburtino III/Pietralata especially, and that revolved around the possibility of autonomously regenerating the Ruffo military complex standing beside Tiburtina 770. Even though the barracks were planned to be disbanded as a military compound in 2017, the closure has been postponed to some indefinite point between 2019 and 2020. According to Article 3 of the 2014 Housing Plan, and further administrative deliberations approved by the previously elected City Council, the barracks should be then sold together with other disbanded public infrastructures in order to compensate for budgetary gaps. Hence, Tiburtina 770 as the 'closer neighbourhood' became the catalyst and point of meeting of diverse groups and political entities that were discussing the possible grassroots options for autonomously regenerating the barracks for social purposes, instead of delivering it passively to financial valorisation and re-qualification.



*Figure 40: The public assembly organised in front of the Pietralata tube station presenting the Nodo Tiburtina's plan for regenerating the Ruffo Barracks (1st March 2015)*

What emerged from this dialogue was a composite proposal that combined the plurality of the social and political approaches which emerged during the planning effort. The project included: an area destined to people in a situation of housing deprivation; a no-tax start-up area where young entrepreneurs could open new initiatives; self-managed vegetable gardens; sociability 'hotspots'; and so on. The section elaborated by Tiburtina 770's squatters and the Blocchi Precari Metropolitani activists that cooperated with them focused on the conversion of the soon-to-be former dormitories of the barracks for housing purposes. In particular, one part of the extensive area could be converted into public housing plots where buildings could be self-constructed by the inhabitants on the model of housing squats in order to accelerate the process of allocation. The other portion could be transformed into a self-managed temporary shelter for homeless families and

individuals who had undergone evictions and foreclosures, thus finding themselves in a sudden condition of severe housing deprivation. The project was introduced for the first time at the end of 2014 to the IV Municipality's council, and then presented to the public through an assembly held on the 1st March 2015 in front of the Pietralata metro station.

This experiment of collective dialogue and political elaboration among diverse grassroots local groups active in the area did not expire with the formulation of the Ruffo Barracks planning project. In fact, it resulted in a more systematic political relationship in addressing local issues that culminated into the 'inauguration' of the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina* in Tiburtina 770 on the 27 March 2014. Nowadays, the network gathers as fixed 'members': the Housing Rights Movements' squats located in the area; members of leftist parties such as *Rifondazione Comunista*; the local anti-eviction info-points; social centres; anti-racist and anti-fascist associations and collectives; autonomous trade unions; local committees and groups of residents; individual residents. Besides, it is open to the ad-hoc participation of other subjects that might be interested in bringing specific cases to the attention of the *Nodo*, ranging from the poor maintenance of one particular public housing block to the degradation of the public green areas in Tiburtino III and Pietralata.

According to this openness in considering as many as possible demands relating to the 'right to the city', the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina* has been committed to organising a handful of different initiatives inside the IV Municipality. Its benchmark mobilisation is the annual rally that commemorates the murder of the *Autonomia Operaia* activist Fabrizio Ceruso, killed by a police bullet during the massive eviction of the public housing blocks of the *borgata* San Basilio on the 8<sup>th</sup> September 1974, and that has become a symbol of the historic struggle for housing rights in the Tiburtina area (Armati, 2015). Furthermore, as underlined in the previous sections, the *Nodo* has engaged with organising many public assemblies and social events concerned with the regularisation of the hundreds of 'historic' squatters that inhabit the public housing blocks of Pietralata and Tiburtino III (Pietrangeli, 2014; Puccini, 2016). It has also supported the anti-eviction pickets of the cases followed by local housing rights info-points, as well as the demands addressed by the local housing squats to the local Municipality for access to local social welfare provisions denied by the Article 5. Last but not least, following the renewed activism of Casapound inside the *borgate*, it has

been the promoter of diverse anti-fascist and anti-racist initiatives.



Figure 41: The memorial annual rally for Fabrizio Ceruso (6th September 2016)

Based on my observations and participation in its activities, I had the opportunity to surmise that this variety of fields of action represents the main strength and weakness of the *Nodo* at the same time. On the one hand, the purposefully undefined structure of the *Nodo* aims to collect as many political allies as possible in order to reunite and support the scattered local demands addressing issues related to the 'right to the city'. On the other hand, this can lead to a lack of focus, as well as to the difficulty of formulating a coherent and shared political standpoint. Indeed, when the subjects composing the *Nodo* are so diverse, they can have likewise different agendas, interests and goals when it comes down to deploying an effective collective strategy in occasions that require promptness and unity of intents. Last but not least, the emphasis on the 'local' dimension of the *Nodo* can be an advantage in terms of consolidating a shared identity, yet it can become a flaw when it leads to underestimating the broader implications on other scales of the city of the events that occur in the Tiburtina area. The whole of these issues and concerns are epitomised in the unravelling of the events related to the forcible eviction occurred in May 2015 of the migrant shanty-town of Ponte Mammolo, and whose passages are analysed in the following section.



## The Ponte Mammolo eviction



*Figure 42: The bulldozers demolishing the shantytown of via delle Messi d'Oro, close to Ponte Mammolo (11th May 2015)*

At 7am in the morning of the 11 May 2015 I was awoken from my sleep in the squat by someone banging insistently on the door and calling my name: “Wake up Marghe, hurry up, we have to go out! Riot police are evicting and destroying Ponte Mammolo's shantytown!” As soon as I was properly awake and had processed the information, I was extremely puzzled and surprised. The shanty-town was a renowned informal settlement going back to early 2000s. It was located in an unused agricultural area in Via delle Messi d'Oro, just behind the Ponte Mammolo metro and train exchange station, close to the public housing blocks of the area, and just ten minutes' walk from Tiburtina 770. Even prior to the forcible eviction, this was a ‘famous’ informal settlement also for the Housing Rights Movements, for it hosted hundreds of migrants, with growing numbers during the summer due to the coming and going of people in transit from Southern Italy (the usual arrival destination). Whilst the *Habesha* (many of whom refugees and asylum seekers) were the majority of the camp's inhabitants, its population included South-American and Pakistani families as well.

Given the large numbers of people it accommodated, the shanty-town's inhabitants had developed a network of contacts that included the squatters of the Housing Rights Movements and the diverse charitable associations that helped them to install some

basic utilities (water, chemical toilets and so on), while providing other services such as basic Italian language courses and legal support. Recently, the shanty-town had become known to a mainstream audience also thanks to the fact that Pope Francis went there during a pastoral tour in February 2015, urging local and national institutions to take action for assisting the migrants and the urban poor forgotten at the borders of the cityscape<sup>24</sup>. Hence, as the unannounced eviction took place, it attracted immediate attention even on international media outlets<sup>25</sup>, whilst the word of a call for action rapidly spread inside the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina* and broader urban networks concerned with migrants' rights.

Even though we showed up few minutes after the actual eviction began, it was already too late. The brutal scenario we were confronted with was bulldozers that were mercilessly crumpling the shacks and breaking them into pieces, while the inhabitants and the supporters who had rushed to the place were screaming in many different languages out of outrage and despair. The few objects the migrants had managed to collect were amassed in piles on the concrete pavement, while a double cordon of riot police and barriers prevented anyone from getting closer to the huts. The tension got even higher when we realised that many of the migrants had not been allowed to collect many of their personal belongings. I personally helped to translate to a police officer what a Pakistani man was saying about the fact that he rushed back from his workplace after the demolition started, and so he had his only money and the passport sewn into a pillow inside the shack that was being demolished before our eyes. The laconic reply we got was that one traffic warden would have escorted him to dig once the bulldozers were done with their 'work', which would be accomplished by 10.30am. Despite the promises made by the policemen, later access to the area was forbidden due to the (still unconfirmed) presence of asbestos in the shacks' debris.

It is worth noticing that no local administrators or social welfare practitioner from either the Municipality or the City Council showed up to check what was going on and providing first-hand humanitarian assistance, if not during the very last stages of the eviction for a rapid glimpse. Hence, once the bulldozers and riot police left, it became apparent to us that it would have been our responsibility as activists and solidarity

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<sup>24</sup> The English chronicles of the pastoral visit can be found here: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/09/pope-francis-rome-shantytown\\_n\\_6640526.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/09/pope-francis-rome-shantytown_n_6640526.html)

<sup>25</sup> One example of international articles who discussed the Ponte Mammolo eviction can be found here: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/16/world/europe/migrants-in-rome-try-to-recover-after-ponte-mammolo-camp-is-destroyed.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/16/world/europe/migrants-in-rome-try-to-recover-after-ponte-mammolo-camp-is-destroyed.html?_r=0)

supporters to cater for the basic necessities of the hundreds of scared women, men and even kids that, in the meantime, had moved with their bundles and baggage to the green the areas behind the Ponte Mammolo metro. The more urgent problems pertained to the provision of food, drinkable water and sanitation. Indeed, many people (and especially those who had arrived few days before from Lampedusa) presented apparent symptoms of scabies and other skin diseases they had fallen sick with during the boat trip, and that could be healed only with treatments that required regular access to showers. Last but not least, the dialogue with the frightened and shocked evicted people was significantly complicated by the fact that the vast majority of them spoke exclusively the *Tigrigno* or Amharic dialects, Arabic, or just few words of English.

The local solidarity network then immediately mobilised in order to cater for the first material necessities. As the word spread, the squatters from Tiburtina 770 and other local housing squats rushed on the site and started to talk with the evictees in their native languages in order to reassure them about who we were and explaining we were there to help and support them. In particular, the dwellers of Tiburtina 770 and Tiburtina 1099 (another squat affiliated to Blocchi Precari Metropolitani) arranged to bring to Ponte Mammolo pots of hot meals, water, blankets, mattresses, tents and other camping equipment. Besides this, activists of BPM and the other Housing Rights Movements immediately contacted *Medicins Sans Frontieres* (MSF) and other medical associations such as *Medicina Solidale* in order to bring doctors on the spot and check the health conditions of everyone. The bathrooms and toilets of Tiburtina 770 were rearranged to allow the evicted people to take a shower, prioritising women, kids and those on anti-scabies treatments. Hence, whereas first-hand humanitarian assistance was to easiest aspect to arrange, as the days passed, it became apparent that establishing a shared and effective course of action among the diverse subjects converging on the place, and within the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina*, was a far more difficult task.

## A 'local' or an 'urban' issue?



Figure 43: The cordon of riot police preventing evicted refugees from returning to the shantytown and the few personal belongings they managed to rescue, (11 May 2015)

During the first assemblies and debates, everyone seemed to agree about the fact that the City Council and the local Municipality (both administered by the Democratic Party, *Partito Democratico*, at the time) should be held accountable for their silence and lack of action about the modalities and consequences of the eviction without any alternative housing arrangement for the people involved regardless of their gender, age, health condition and migratory status. Also, as the activists of Housing Rights Movements and others pointed out, there were national and even transnational implications about what happened in Ponte Mammolo and the way it was (un)managed. Indeed, it was apparent that the whole operation was inscribed within the growingly repressive climate that was characterising the national and local debate about migration and border management. Nonetheless, during the very first days and weeks, the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina*, while assuming a leading role in coordinating the solidarity initiatives, tended to rely mostly on its large, yet loose network of solidarity and contacts, and to address the eviction as a mainly local issue. Consequently, it focused its political attention onto local repercussions, about which it seemed easier to find a common ground of agreement, although the priorities were still to be established.

Indeed, NGOs and charitable associations were keener on providing full first aid assistance on the ground, whilst grassroots urban movements (including BPM) and social centres contended that this would discharge the local institutions from taking

responsibility for the consequences of the eviction. Hence, as BPM we advocated for bringing the issue to the centre of the city and the political scenario, instead of hiding in the relatively peripheral and less visible area of Ponte Mammolo. On the other hand, the members of local groups of citizens claimed that they found it difficult to address what happened as an overtly anti-racist issues, because this could have undermined their bases of consensus. Indeed, they reported that many residents endorsed the eviction as they claimed to have felt insecure for a long time because of the presence of an informal and uncontrolled settlement of migrants close to their houses. Lastly, the local groups dealing with environmental issues blamed the generalised lack of attention toward the long-term environmental repercussions of the demolition, for it emerged that many of the demolished shacks had been built using toxic materials, and specifically cancerous asbestos cement powder and foil layers.



*Figure 44: The demonstration held by the refugees and the Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina in front of the headquarters of the IV Municipality (13 May 2015)*

As a consequence of these difficulties in creating a common platform of action to propose to the evicted people, the only public mobilisation organised in response to the eviction was the one that took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> May, two days after, in front of the IV Municipality, where the former Prefect Franco Gabrielli<sup>26</sup> was engaged in a round-table discussion with the then president and the local administrators about the issue of public order and security. After the exhibition of banners and diverse speeches at the loudspeaker, the Prefect agreed to meet a delegation of evicted refugees, together with a group of activists representing the diverse groups gravitating around the *Nodo* and the

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<sup>26</sup> The current chief of Italian police forces.

Ponte Mammolo issue. The migrants voiced their despair at being left more vulnerable than they used to be; Housing Rights Movements demanded public housing accommodation for them, or the provision of an empty public building to regenerate autonomously; anti-racist associations and NGOs asked for the activation of institutional projects in order to re-accommodate the people inside former and new refugees' centres; the environmental groups asked for the institution of an investigating committee that could assess the caused environmental damage. Quite predictably, this cacophony of scattered requests led to no shared demands, let alone concrete outcomes.

Eventually, as the weeks passed by without any further agreement about how to effectively mobilise, the emergency progressively disappeared, for the people left the camp of Ponte Mammolo in small groups in order to move and settle elsewhere. According to the information I collected from the *Habesha* inhabitants inside Tiburtina 770 and with the few people with whom we remained in touch as a *Nodo*, many bought train tickets and attempted to travel towards Northern Italy. Another part has chosen (or has been forced) to remain in Rome. Some of them accepted the offer made by NGOs and anti-racist associations of being relocated in refugees' centres and emergency shelters. Others were re-absorbed inside the independent squats of Piazza Indipendenza, Collatina and Anagnina, inhabited mainly by *Habesha* asylum seekers and refugees. For those who remained part of the *Nodo Territoriale*, for the squatters of Tiburtina 770 and the BPM activists, the unsuccessful outcome of this event has fostered a still ongoing reflection about the advantages and limitations of local activism. Also, it is often mentioned as an experience enquiring the notion of city that grassroots urban movements need to map and mobilise in order to make their contentious politics effective on the terrain of formulating effective demands, coalescing with other social and political subjects, and eventually achieving tangible victories.

### **The problematic scales of the squats' urban commons**

The local level is harder to handle than the urban one. Most of the time, they are parallel levels that do not intersect. We have to find the ways to make them meet more effectively.

(A., male, Moroccan, July 2015)



This bit of commentary from an activist living in Tiburtina 770 during an interview discussing how the Ponte Mammolo events unravelled implies an important question both in theoretical and political terms: what is the idea of city that the squatters and the activists bear when they engage with the production of urban commons for the ‘right to the city’ and housing rights? Indeed, as elaborated in the previous chapters, squatting is an emergency response elicited by the condition of severe housing deprivation affecting an increasingly wide and intersectional number of dispossessed urban dwellers in the city. Besides, it is a radically and inherently political act that grassroots Housing Rights Movements, and Blocchi Precari Metropolitani in particular, frame as an experiment in urban regeneration and a prefiguration of alternative forms of life vis-à-vis the permanent crisis of social reproduction that affects the urban space, in which land enclosure and privatised housing play a prominent role.

This chapter has sought to portray how the opening up of the squats to the city, starting from the proximal local level, is a necessary, yet not unproblematic and resolved step for preserving the squats from manifold forms of deterioration, enclosure and dispossession that can come both from inside and outside. Whereas the previous chapter has underlined the similarity of the organisational rites developed in order to maintain the balance of *eurythmisation* inside the squats, the current one has shown the quite different modalities of activism and social relations that Metropoliz and Tiburtina 770 have developed in their contingent spatial locations. In general, it can be said that the different quality of their urban commons rely upon some distinctive factors: their contingent spatial location; the type of autonomous infrastructure they have managed to make based on the initial potentialities of the buildings; the way in which they mobilise the rich legacy and set of practices, relations and political imaginary they have inherited from Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and the Housing Rights Movements' in Rome.



Figure 45: Visitors of the MAAM and Metropoli's kids walking into the garden hall during a Saturday opening (November 2015)

On the one hand, the social and cultural richness of Metropoli as a 'mestizo city' and an open, inhabited museum stands in a paradox in relation to the socially disarranged, and potentially hostile, reality of Tor Sapienza (Avallone and Torre, 2016). Besides, it represents a monument to the opportunities that the autonomous regeneration of neglected urban ecologies encompass in terms of reappropriating primary rights such as a roof, as well as cultural and environmental rights stripped by the capitalist enclosure predicated upon the dispossession of land and the commodification of collective knowledge production (Harvey, 2012; Galdini, 2015; Moore and Smart, 2015; Grazioli, 2017b). On the other hand, the way in which Tiburtina 770 has managed to assume a leading role in regrouping as many as possible subjects concerned with the manifold nuances of the lack of 'right to the city' in the Tiburtina area represents a successful mimetic strategy of gaining local rootedness and legitimacy. Ultimately, both these attempts validate the activists' and squatters' efforts of exerting their transformative capacity as *citadins* (Lefebvre, 1996; Purcell, 2002) onto the urban space, while combining the historical and political legacy of the *borgate* with the stances taken by Housing Rights Movements (Grazioli, 2017a).

Nonetheless, both these ways of disseminating urban commons on a local level present limitations and implications that lead to two important remarks for concluding this chapter. The first one pertains to the temporal and spatial thickness of the urban



commons that Metropoliz and Tiburtina 770 produce. Indeed, both Tor Sapienza and Pietralata/Tiburtino III are caught in the field of tension between the legacy of a thriving past of struggle and re-appropriation, and the lack of the 'right to the city' determined by the manifold forms of dispossession that neoliberal urbanisation has managed to deploy. Aware of this bundle of contradictions, the squatters of Metropoliz and Tiburtina 770 have to dwell upon the legacy of the Movements, the experience of the activists and their consolidated socio-political networks in order to find the right forms to coalesce with other subjects struggling on the terrain of the 'right to the city'. Then, through their local activism, they retain the toolbox of practices, slogans and political imaginaries encroached into the local rootedness of Housing Rights Movements within working-class districts, and update it according to the new political challenges associated with the lack of decent housing and overall inhabiting conditions (Armati, 2015; Caciagli, 2016; Vasudevan, 2015a; Grazioli, 2017a).

While doing this, they produce urban commons that are made available not only to the delimited community of the squatters, but also to those dispossessed urban dwellers that share with them the city's daily routine, and that want to contribute to exerting a transformative power over its space (Lefebvre, 1996; Stephenson and Tsianos, 2006; Blomley, 2008; Jeffrey et al., 2012; Galdini, 2015; Fournier, 2013). This is to say that squatting as practised by the squatters of Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz with the constant cooperation of the Blocchi Precari Metropolitani's activists is a spatialised, prefigurative, radical politics of infrastructure, whereas the latter is conceived not as a goal in itself, but as a starting point for rethinking how we conceive and inhabit the urban space through the daily dissemination of diverse forms of commons inside the city (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Mitropoulos, 2013; Vasudevan, 2015a).

The second consideration is about the scales and the geographies implicated in this politics of infrastructure and commons (Harvey, 2012). On the one hand, the activists – in their wording – operate spontaneously a distinction between a 'local' and a more broadly 'urban' level of action, as if the two settings were clearly distinguishable and mapped. Nonetheless, the reverberations of the events occurring inside the *borgate*, alongside the political responses deployed by the squatters, demonstrate that there is no such a thing as a clear-cut, delimited city, but an assemblage of multiple scales and geographies, whose boundaries clash and interact following different experiences of the city along intersectional lines of differentiation (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Cuppini, 2015; Sassen, 2015). Hence, the 'map' of the city they refer to relies on autonomous

geographies and spatial grammars that are formed in the interstitial spaces produced by the relations and action that the squatters articulate in their everyday life and activism (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Vasudevan 2017).



*Figure 46: Football game between the 770/Tiburtino III and the team of refugees living in the shelter of via del Frantoio at the local community centre (November 2015)*

In this sense, the problem of the scale of the commons in relation to the multi-scalarity of the neoliberal urban fabric is an inextricable one for seeking achievements in the struggle for the 'right to the city' (see Ostrom, 1990; Jeffrey et al., 2012; Bresnihan and Byrne, 2014; Stavrides, 2016). This is because it interrogates the materiality of the notion of the urban (see Rahola 2014, 2017), the diverse levels of activism required for mobilising it, as well as the diverse spatialities and material constitutions involved. Based on this reflections, the following (and last) ethnographic chapter is concerned with the forms of mobilisation that Housing Rights Movements enact on what they delineate as the 'urban level' in respect to two of their more important demands: the repeal of Article 5 of the 2014 Housing Plan; the implementation of the Regional Deliberation for Housing Emergency. This immersion has the ultimate goal of discussing what the forms of activism and organisation are that can sustain such an intense effort of re-appropriating space for experimenting with new regimes of social reproduction, making autonomous infrastructures, disseminating urban commons, and practising contentious politics for the 'right to the city' inside the neoliberal – and conflicted – post-welfare city of Rome.

## CHAPTER 7. The squatters' activism for the 'right to the city'

### The squatters as political actors in Rome



*Figure 47: The squatted Central Registration Office in via Petroselli, Rome (25 January 2015)*

The previous chapters have analysed the manifold ways in which housing squats develop from the moment of 'cracking' onwards in community, infrastructural and political terms. On the one hand, the role of housing squats as coordinates of autonomous geographies of the squatted city (see Vasudevan 2015b, 2017) derives from the encounter in the city between a varied social composition of dispossessed urban dwellers seeking a solution to their condition of severe housing deprivation, and the activists of Housing Rights Movements who deploy their political and organisational skills in order to support the act of squatting and expand its political scope. As the cases of Metropolitiz and Tiburtina 770 have demonstrated, the more compelling tasks after 'cracking' into a place pertain to the process of coordinating community-building, the making of space and daily social reproduction through the establishment of a set of resilient organisational rites. On the other hand, the squatters need to avoid self-enclosure and relegation as forms of segregation from the hostile urban fabric. On the contrary, they need to assume the broader city as the inevitable space onto which they have to stake out the legitimacy of their practices of urban regeneration, alongside the forms of life they have produced, framing them within the broader struggle for reappropriating 'right to the city'.

Given this premise, the persisting and osmotic relationship between the squatters and the surrounding neoliberal, post-welfare urban fabric has been the thread that has unified the analysis. Besides, it has contributed to pinpointing the coordinates for mapping discursively, and bodily practising (de Certeau, 1984; Grazioli, 2017b), the spatialised temporality within which housing squats are made from abandoned buildings into autonomous infrastructures where urban commons are nurtured and disseminated. More in detail, the last chapter has discussed specifically how Metropoliz and Tiburtina 770 have opened up their organisational rites and skills for the production of diverse local urban commons initially directed towards the *borgate* in which they are located, but whose repercussions implicate diverse scales of the urban fabric. In this light, the chapter has problematised the squatters' perception of the relationship between the multi-scalar, 'official' city and the autonomous geographies onto which they are action is deployed. Indeed, this spatial perception is determinant for deciding which kind of politics should be deployed in order to consolidate the squatters' presence as social and political actors on a local level, as well as their role within broader grassroots urban movements engaged for claiming and re-appropriating their 'right to the city'.

Following the analysis of the squatters' local activism and conceptualisation of the urban, this last ethnographic chapter addresses the role of the squatters in the city as political subjects included within Housing Rights Movements in the post-crisis, post-welfare urban fabric of Rome from a dynamic perspective. This is fundamental because, regardless of the static approach of many definitions addressing the subjectivity of urban squatters in relation to criteria such as their class positioning and the prevalent motivations for their occupying (e.g. Prujit, 2012), the squatters do not behave in the same way after squatting as they did before 'cracking' and experiencing these forms of living in common (see Cattaneo and Martínez, 2014; Di Felicianantonio, 2016). Insofar as they enter into the squats as scattered individuals and/or families willing to sort out their compelling materialities, they change into representing manifold identities, that they in turn articulate inside the urban fabric: their communities of origin; the squat to which they belong; the often-conflicted local communities in which they happen to be incorporated; the Movements to which they are affiliated; finally, their belonging to the urban community of the housing squatters mobilised together with the unitary social movement *Movimento per il Diritto all'Abitare* (Movement for the Right to Habitation).

Hence, the emphasis upon the role played by the squatters inside the city leads

me in the current chapter to focus on the contentious politics deployed by Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and the *Movimenti per il Diritto all'Abitare* as movements of social relations that are developed across a number of spatio-temporal scales and dimensions (The Free Association, 2011). On the one hand, they need to adapt their political tactics, strategies and even goals to the contingencies they are confronted with. Besides this, they need to develop new forms of activism that can combine the peculiarities of their social composition, support a very intense level of mobilisation, and cope with the sustained governmental effort to repress the social reproduction of squatting within the ongoing housing crisis in Rome. Indeed, despite the attempts to neutralise the ideological virulence of the ongoing anti-squatting legislation behind the curtain of lawfulness and public order, it is apparent that these laws are designed to uphold the primacy of private property, enclosure and marketisation of housing over collective necessities (Blomley, 2008; Linebaugh, 2008; Stavrides, 2016; Vasudevan, 2017).



Figure 48: The protest camp in front of the Minister of Infrastructures (28th March 2015)

Starting from this approach, while the previous chapter has described what the squatters conceive of as ‘local’, the current one begins with presenting their notion of ‘the urban’, engrained in the squatters' daily experience of the autonomous geographies of the city as part of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani in the first place, and then as members of a grassroots urban movements, *Movimento per il Diritto all'Abitare*, which as Chapter 3 presented, unifies BPM and other Housing Rights Movements<sup>1</sup> concerned with

<sup>1</sup> In particular *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa*; *Comitato Obiettivo Casa*; and, for a more

coordinating an unitary claim for the right to inhabit the city and their the co-organisation of contentious politics inside the city (Grazioli, 2017a). The chapter then continues with an excerpt from my ethnographic fieldwork diary agenda, where I have recorded the impressive string of mobilisations that the Movement for the Right to Habitation has deployed. Blocchi Precari activists and squatters have deployed together with the other Housing Rights Movements that mobilise with them in respect to three of their most prominent campaigns: the abolition of Article 5 of the 2014 Housing Plan; the activation of the *Extraordinary Plan for Housing Emergency* approved by the Lazio Region, which is still unimplemented; and anti-repression mobilisations. More in detail, it accounts for the manifold strategies and tactics they deploy in order to combine contentious politics and institutional negotiation: squatting; protest camps; flash mobs; public assemblies; rallies; anti-eviction pickets; and so on.

Then, the chapter addresses one of the most debated aspects of the current movement for housing rights in Rome and not only, which pertains the organisational and political forms that can sustain such an intense effort of mobilisation, alongside the maintenance of the daily life inside each squat and politics. In order to do so, I problematise the already blurred dichotomy between ‘experienced activists’ and the political innovation presented by the emergence of a broad cohort of ‘social activists’. The latter are identified by the fact that their, whose voluntary participation to developing the Housing Rights Movements’ political project stems mainly from their daily living and socialisation in the squats, rather than from a pre-existing ideological orientation. Indeed, whereas this forms of activism constitutes the political benchmark of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and Housing Rights Movements in general, it can represent a potential liability as for the stability of the model of political organising it configures. Also, the activism of the squatters can attract an extremely negative attention against the more experienced activists, accused to exploit the squatters’ condition of necessity in order to co-opt them in their struggle. In order to develop this critical analysis, I describe the multiple forms of activism that I have had to deploy first-hand as a fellow-squatter and an activist of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, and how they stretch the notion of activist into the realm of day-to-day political support, to the point of almost subsidising the functions traditionally exerted by social local welfare practitioners and offices. Indeed, as I recount, the repercussion of repressive tools such as Article 5 leads the

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limited timespan, *Resistenza Abitativa Metropolitana*.



squatters to consult the activists who live and cooperate with them for solving problems such as the denial of access even to basic welfare services like healthcare and primary education. Yet, in turn, the number of ‘experienced’ activists (i.e. those who constituted the foundational core of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani or that bear a previous political experience as me) who are more familiar with handling this kind of controversies is a handful in comparison to the thousands of squatters inhabiting the dozen of squat affiliated to BPM and scattered inside the city.

Therefore, through my own experience inside Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz, I recount the extent to which the activists are required to develop skills pertaining to other fields than politics, and then to transmit this surplus of knowledge, skills and tricks to the social activists. This constitutes a remarkable effort, on top of the necessity to maintain a leading role in directing the Movements’ political discourse and diversified urban engagement for ‘right to the city’, ranging from the participation to the Movements’ political assemblies to the organisation to the enabling of the manifold initiatives they project. Then, I discuss this relationship among activists in the light of the repressive backlash that the Housing Rights Movements’ more recognisable speakers are currently undertaking as ‘socially dangerous subjects’. In the light of the previous analysis, I finally discuss in the last section how the squatters’ complex presence and activism contributes to configuring a renewed conceptualisation, and then enactment, of the struggle for ‘the ‘right to the city’ in the peculiar context of Rome as a self-made, post-welfare, neoliberal urban fabric.



*Figure 49: The demo banner against the Mafia Capitale scandal shown in front of the Campidoglio at the end of a march in the city centre (31 January 2015)*

## A diary of permanent mobilisation

13<sup>th</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> January 2015: 14 days of occupation of the central ‘Anagrafe’ (Registration Office) in via Petroselli in order to demand the abolition of Article 5 and demanding that the Democratic city council contravene the ban on registering squatters as residents in squatted buildings. After the eviction on the fourteenth day, a spontaneous demonstration in the nearby streets and city centre took place in order to demand the release of six people who were arrested during the police intervention, reported as undocumented, and deported to the CIE<sup>2</sup> at Ponte Galeria.

31<sup>st</sup> January 2015: collective demonstration in the city centre against the *Mafia Capitale*<sup>3</sup> scandal and to demand the management of the housing emergency through the implementation of the Extraordinary Regional Deliberation for Housing Emergency. The banner exhibited by the demonstrators while marching on the streets of the city centre says ‘Let's take down the high-up world!’, hinting at the wiretapping record of the *Mafia Capitale* boss Salvatore Buzzi<sup>4</sup>, who used this term to describe the way in which the political world is mixed with the money-laundering economy (defined as ‘the middle world’) financially speculating upon the management of urban emergencies, including the housing one.



Figure 50: The Housing Rights Movements protesters in front of the main entrance of the Lazio Region headquarters at via Rosa Raimondi Garibaldi (10 February 2015)

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<sup>2</sup> Acronym for *Centro di Identificazione ed espulsione* (Centre for identification and deportation).

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 3 and Grazioli, 2017a.

<sup>4</sup> Salvatore Buzzi was the head of the cooperative enterprise *29 giugno*, involved in the scandal *Mafia Capitale* scandal, where as many contracts obtained in the public sector were deemed to be the result of bribery actions. See: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-italy-corruption-idUKKBN0OK0NL20150604>



10<sup>th</sup> February 2015: Hundreds of squatters from BPM, Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa and other movements occupy the headquarters of the Lazio Region in the Garbatella neighbourhood. The unifying banner they brought says ‘Against the business of emergencies/ let's take back the city’. After hours of negotiation and dialogue between the activists, the police and the staff of the Democrats' President of the Lazio Region<sup>5</sup>, a meeting between the Democrats and a delegation of the Movements takes place. The outcome is the obligation undertaken by the Regional government to foster the re-opening of an inter-institutional table also involving the City Council for the purpose of planning necessary steps to start to implement the Regional Deliberation.

28<sup>th</sup> - 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015: demonstration and *acampada* (protest camp) in front of the Ministry of Infrastructure, responsible for introducing the Article 5 within the 2014 Housing Plan. The demonstrators' demand is to obtain a meeting with the Minister or his staff in order to demand that the Democratic Party speak up for their perspective on the social, political and even administrative repercussions of this provision since its implementation.



*Figure 51:* The banner unrolled during the occupation of the roof of the Basilica Madonna di Loreto (15 February 2015)

23<sup>rd</sup> April 2015: flash mob and appearance on the rooftop of the basilica of Madonna di Loreto, with climbers unrolling vertical banners saying ‘Senza casa mai!’ (Never Homeless) while a crowd of squatters is chanting and protesting below. The

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<sup>5</sup> The Lazio Region is governed by the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, the main Italian centre-left wing party) since March 2013.

demand is to meet the Prefect, whose headquarters are situated in front of the same church, in order to foster the opening of an inter-institutional table with City Council and Region about the implementation of the Regional Deliberation and the problems caused by the application of the Article 5. After the meeting with the Prefect is achieved, the roof of the church is abandoned by the demonstrators without further legal consequences.

28<sup>th</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup> May 2015: A building named 'Acqua Marcia' behind the headquarters of the Lazio Region is squatted by the movements together with 120 families in a condition of severe housing deprivation, whilst other two simultaneous initiatives are deployed at the same time in order to signal empty buildings in the same area. The building was chosen because it belongs to the powerful builder Caltagirone, one of Rome's biggest *palazzinari* (speculative builders), and it lies abandoned and unused as it infringed the local building regulations. During the night, the housing squats' inhabitants take picket shifts and sleep in tents in order to notify the people who are barricaded inside the building in case of police intervention. Riot police actually intervene in the late morning of the second day, evicting the building and clearing the area. After denouncing the eviction in front of the Region's headquarters, the demonstrators demand once again the opening of an inter-institutional table for implementing the Regional Deliberation in order to offer a response to the ongoing housing crisis that still leads people to squat.



Figure 52: The former hotel Gemini, situated in front of the Tiburtina bus station, the morning after the attempt of cracking in (18 July 2015)

17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> July 2015: two days squatting of the former Hotel Gemini, an abandoned and empty tourist structure located in front of Tiburtina bus station. Overall, 100 families ‘crack’ into the building during the night, with the support of the Movements’ squatters and activists. The neo-squatters are some of the people previously evicted from the Acqua Marcia, alongside other families and individuals who had recently undergone evictions, seizures or who live in a condition of homelessness. During the night, the squatters start to arrange internal barricades to secure the entrance and the first floors against an attempt of eviction, while the Movements’ activists and squatters monitor constantly the area, which is packed with riot police vans and policemen. Despite these efforts, the following afternoon, a massive deployment of riot police clears the area and evicts the building, forcing the families to get out. The former hotel is promptly sealed and subjected to surveillance by private guards after the eviction. It has been empty and unused ever since.

16<sup>th</sup> October 2015: Following a communication campaign proposed and activated by Blocchi Precari Metropolitani against the effects on children of Article 5, a national demonstration of the so-called ‘#kidzbloc’ takes place in the city centre. The official promoter is the national network of Housing Rights Movements *Abitare nella Crisi*. The march is opened by hundreds of children living in housing squats dressed with orange shirts branded with the logo of the #kidzbloc. The main demand of the demonstration is the abolition of Article 5 the respect of childhood rights. During the duration of the march, a series of communicative initiatives take place. The more relevant ones are the handing by the children of a letter to the headquarters of the newspaper *Il Tempo*, which has been engaged for years in a derogatory campaign against squatters. Besides, painted balls are thrown towards the Anagrafe headquarters in via Petroselli, which regularly denies new-born children to be registered as residents inside housing squats. Lastly, a meeting with the president of the Democratic Party takes place in the Parliament, during which he announces he will present an amendment to Article 5 in the 2016 Fiscal Law due in early November 2015 to the Parliament’s scrutiny<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> This attempt was completely unsuccessful, as the government ally of the Democrats, the New Centrodestra, refused to change the benchmark norm designed by their member and former Minister of Infrastructure Maurizio Lupi. No further attempts of repealing or amending the norm have been pushed in until the moment of revising the current chapter (September 2017)



*Figure 53:* Squatters on the roof after 'cracking in' the empty building owned by the Monfortani Order in the outskirts of Rome, simultaneously with the inauguration of the Jubilee Year for the Poor by the Pope (8 December 2015)

8<sup>th</sup> December 2015: Simultaneously with the inauguration of the Jubilee Year dedicated to the poor, the Movements occupy with the 100 previously-evicted families a building owned by a Catholic fraternal order (the Monfortani one) in the village of Colli Monfortani, just beyond Rome's outer border along the Prenestina street. The slogan of the initiative is 'Let's open the doors of housing rights!'; it recalls the opening of the first Holy Door with which Pope Francis was engaged in the same moment in which the squatting action took place. The squatters claim that, since the Region and the City Council are not implementing the Regional Deliberation, people in a condition of housing deprivation have to solve their condition by means of re-appropriation and squatting. Besides, they demand the political and religious protection guaranteed by the status of the area as property of Vatican State against the pending threat of impromptu eviction. After the direct intermediation of a Pope's emissary with the priest of the order living inside the building, the families are allowed to stay, and start to settle inside the building<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The building was evicted on the 20<sup>th</sup> January 2017 following a request presented by the head of the Monfortani fraternal order. The eviction was enacted through the use of 30 riot police vans and two water cannons. During the operation, some squatters were arrested and charged with 'resistance'. They were released two days later: <http://www.romatoday.it/cronaca/sgombero-occupazione-colle-monfortani.html>

## **Movements inside a city in motion**

The previous extract from my fieldwork diary agenda portrays the extraordinary intensity of the mobilisations undergone by BPM and the network *Movimento per il Diritto all'Abitare ringred* during my year of fieldwork. And yet this is yet a quite partial account, insofar as whereas it covers only the mobilisations concerned with three main objectives: demanding the abolition of Article 5; soliciting propelling the opening of the inter-institutional procedures required for implementing the *Extraordinary Deliberation for Housing Emergency*; and attempting to establish new squats for housing purposes inside the city. Hence, because of analytical limitations, I have omitted a plurality of demonstrations concerning other issues relating to the ongoing housing crisis and 'right to the city': sit-ins in front of the immigrants' deportations centres against the current border management systems; pickets in order to prevent bailiffs and seizures against families in rent arrears within the privatised housing markets; spontaneous rallies in solidarity with housing squats evicted in other cities; national gatherings and meetings with movements from other cities engaged for housing rights; interventions to public debates; and so on.

Given this elucidation, the previous selection of mobilisations was chosen for its relevance in the light of the changed social, political and even institutional framework in the post-crisis, post-welfare city of Rome. Indeed, the combination of capitalist restructuring, the peculiarities of Rome's urban fabric as a self-made city, and tailored legislative devices against squatting has forced Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and other grassroots Housing Rights Movements to coalesce together under an unitary signature (*Movimenti per il Diritto all'Abitare*, Movements for the Right to Habitation) in order to unite their social and political capital. Besides, they aim to convey the solidity of a social and political network of dispossessed urban dwellers and grassroots urban movements that have created an autonomous geography of the squatted city (Vasudevan 2015a, 2017) through acts of re-appropriation and autonomous making of manifold urban commons that aim to decommodify and common alternative modalities of inhabitation and social reproduction within the urban fabric. Last but not least, this political alliance aims to express greater credibility in soliciting from institutional subjects a shift in the approach to the elaboration of housing-related policies, which should encompass the demands and expertise cumulated by the Movements over the years of mobilising.

This new modality of organising has also determined the peculiar characteristics

of the mobilisations for housing rights, as depicted in the fieldwork diary extract. First of all, the combination of contentious tactics and strategies, targeted campaigns and negotiations performed in the city centre and addressed towards institutions are a way of legitimising the squatters' and Movements' role in the city by elevating their range of action to the level of representation (The Free Association, 2011; Mudu, 2014). Besides, the repetition of the same slogans and demands throughout diverse initiatives pursues effectiveness and becomes constituent of an alternative notion of 'cityness' (Harvey, 2012; Vasudevan, 2015b; Stavrides, 2016). Thirdly, these mobilisations configure a way of crystallising the autonomous geographies that movements like Blocchi Precari Metropolitani have managed to create through the re-appropriation of the most neglected parts of the city, as well as of the symbolic potential borne by the political reappropriation of central areas and institutional sites (Lefebvre, 1996; Merrifield, 2011; Grazioli, 2017a). This diversification in territorialising political interventions implicates the assumption of the porosity of the notion of the urban that, in the experience of the squatters, is a kaleidoscope of layers and scales that are defined through intersectional dynamics, moving fields and experiential frictions (de Certeau, 1984; Gaeta, 2017; Rahola 2017).

I can't give you a definition of what is 'urban' at a geographic or political level... But the way in which we [as activists] conceive the difference between the local and urban level depends upon the initiatives we make, and the people with whom we mobilise or build other things together... For instance, we understand the local level as the one formed by all those entities with which we create initiatives for what is closer to us and the squats in terms of services, demands to local politicians, the consequences of the Article 5 that depend on the single Municipalities... [...] Or, for instance, if you have a problem of protests against immigrants, this is something happening in your own territory that has to do with you... So you have to answer on a local level.... Obviously, if there is an eviction of another squat, this is something that concerns you as well, but also the city in general... So you think of what is local and what is urban bases on what everything that happens to you on a daily basis and who is responsible for that... If you don't have the residency you have to go to the Municipality to pressure them, so you can say that these but are things that are about your own territory... You talk to the political entities existing in your geographic area, and this is what we mean with the territorial level... Whilst the urban level goes beyond that... Both for its political contents and the political entities that are involved [...] When you create a dispute that pertains to everyone you are talking about a

broader urban level. So it is not just a geographic or political distinction... It is about the services you need to have, about the institutions you need to address, and the political organisations you need to involve [...] These levels sometimes are parallel and would not intersect, sometimes they do... It depends on how you create relationships...

(A, Moroccan, male, September 2015)

### **The contradictory government of squatting after the *Tsunami Tours***

If the core of the Movements' action is based on a relational and autonomous understanding of the urban fabric, it can be said that the necessity to adjust their contentious politics of reappropriation and for 'right to the city' to the contextual contingencies these incremental shifts in the contingencies within which the Movements operate, and the resilient adjustment of their modalities of practising contentious politics of re-appropriation and for housing rights inside the city, have become particularly pressing since the rupture produced by the *Tsunami Tours* performed in 2013 and 2014 (Armati, 2015; Caciagli, 2016), and during which Tiburtina 770 was also occupied. Indeed, these simultaneous rounds of squatting in different areas of Rome represented an impressive concerted campaign that extended into every part of the city, and territorialised experiences of squatting. Besides, it demonstrated its replicability and potentialities, while disseminating the knowledge about how squatting can actually be practised (Hodkinson, 2012, p.440). Last but not least, these simultaneous rounds of squatting uncovered the appalling number of empty buildings that could be traced basically in each part of Rome, and that stood out as a joke in the light of the growing need for housing that could be yet rapidly sorted addressed solved through autonomous regeneration and re-usage (Cattaneo and Martínez, 2014; Galdini, 2016; Mudu and Aureli, 2016).

Two main consequences stemmed from the rupture produced especially by the 2013 *Tsunami Tours*. First of all, they consolidated an actual autonomous geography of the squatted city (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2006; Vasudevan 2015a, b) in Rome. Secondly, they triggered an intense legislative effort in order to discredit squatting as a replicable modality for regenerating and inhabiting the city. Indeed, as the fieldwork diary has shown, creating new squats has become virtually impossible, insofar as the evictions

occur almost immediately, with military precision and impressive marshalling of personnel and equipment (Di Felicianantonio, 2016; Vasudevan, 2017). The only exceptions can be traced to when the buildings are subjected to a different legislative jurisdiction than the Italian one, as in the case of Colle Monfortani (occupied on the 8<sup>th</sup> December 2015), which as a clerical property belongs to the Vatican territory.

Besides this, the debate sparked after the *Tsunami* in terms of the hundreds of families involved and its uncontrollability has furthered an unprecedented institutional effort aimed at coping with the phenomenon of squatting in three main respects, whose purpose and underpinning logic are also dissonant. Indeed, the forcible invisibilisation of the squatters stemming from the application of Article 5 aims at hindering the squats' social and political reproduction. Nonetheless, as Chapter 3 described, the introduction into the National Housing Plan of Article 5 against squatting actually hindered the application of the Regional Deliberation. Besides, it played a twofold function in the process of restricting the consistence and visibility of squatting as an urban issue that should be acknowledged because of the existence of housing squats, while setting the parameters for making the squatters invisible as urban inhabitants (Grazioli, 2017b). Indeed, whereas squatting itself is blatantly visible as an urban phenomenon, Article 5 acts as a tool that aims at concealing the presence of the squatters as urban poor by producing 'differential regimes of access and material inequalities in the access, use and perception of a portion of territory' (Mattiucci, 2017, p.30).

Basically, Article 5 works towards betokening in negative terms the opposite of the subjective figure of the 'social citizen' (see Marshall and Bottomore, 1992), designated as the legitimate recipient of welfare provisions in exchange for accepting the foundational inequalities of an efficient capitalist system. Consequently, those who do not comply with this social scaffolding are considered as socially dangerous subjects that should be restrained as such. In this light we can read the retrieving of tools like special surveillance and oral warnings as serving the purpose of singling out and criminalising the more well-known activists and the political organisations to which they belong. This is also displayed by the case of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, for the vast majority of its activists are currently subject to preventive law devices and/or administrative tools such



as special surveillances and oral warnings.



*Figure 54: Police evicting the solidarity picket in front of the Acqua Marcia building (29 May 2015)*

On the other hand, the rationale underpinning the formulation of the *Extraordinary Deliberation for Housing Emergency* approved by the Lazio Region a few months before the introduction of Article 5 goes in the opposite direction from the systemic delegitimation of the squatters and the social movements to which they are affiliated, for it acknowledges their coalition as the consequence of an undeniable, and inadequately addressed, housing crisis. Hence, it returns urban visibility to the squatters by listing the census (and therefore acknowledgement) of 105 existing buildings squatted for housing purposes in Rome before December 2013, Metropolitiz and Tiburtina 770 included (Armati, 2015; Caciagli 2016). Also, the Deliberation earmarks about 200 million Euros for starting projects for self-renovation of empty and unused public properties by the future assignees (squatters included), thus recognising the autonomous regeneration of empty buildings as an environmentally and economically sustainable practice for addressing housing deprivation in the short term (Galdini, 2015; Grazioli, 2017b). The following sections address and problematise the forms of mobilisation and activism that Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, together with Housing Rights Movements, have elaborated in response to this fluid legislative frame.

## **Activists as subsidisers of grassroots social welfare**

The previous sections have addressed, on the one hand, the level of urban mobilisation enacted by Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and the network of the Movements for the Right to Habitation in relation to their main demands pertaining the implementation of the Regional Deliberation for Housing Emergency, the repeal of the Article 5, and the attempts to practice squatting as an autonomous response to the rampant housing crisis affecting the dispossessed urban inhabitants of Rome. On the other hand, they have outlined how these modalities of deploying contentious politics have been affected by the governmental response towards the rupture produced by the *Tsunami Tours*, which consolidated the autonomous geography. Ever since, the institutional subjects involved in the governance of Rome (ranging from the national government to the single Municipalities) have been confronted with the necessity of recognising squatting for housing purposes as a relevant urban phenomenon, and legislated accordingly. Yet, the rationale underpinning have resulted into mutually contradictory pieces of law, with a prevalent accent upon the repressive intent to hinder the social reproduction of squatting.

In this light, the governmental backlash around squatting for housing purposes in Rome did not bear exclusively on political consequences in terms of disempowering the Movements' demands and achievements. It has also implied quite concrete consequences in the everyday life and social reproduction of the squatters and activists. As a response, the squatters and the Movements have had to invent innovative modalities of distributed activism, and that fall into what Blocchi Precari Metropolitani name 'social activism'. The latter implies not only the participation to the Movements' mobilisations, but also a panoply of actions concerned with the management of everyday life that often slips from the narrative of the Movements' forms of mobilising. Indeed, confronted with a forcible invisibilisation in the light of local administrations such as the Municipalities, and prevented from accessing even basic welfare provisions, the squatters consult those who they deem more 'expert' activists living in the squat, such as me, in order to understand how to cope with a number of circumstances. Quite often, they would ask the activists to intervene when a child is denied the registration for childcare or health services, as the following conversation (written down and transcribed with the consent of my interlocutors) between me and two squatters of Tiburtina 770 recounts:

[V.] Margherita, this doesn't make any sense. When we lived in Roma camps, police

use to come around in September to force us to enrol kids in school... They said they would take them away with social services to put them in foster care otherwise! And now... They wouldn't accept them in primary school. This is insane.

[G.] Yes!! And by the way... What happens if social services... Or police ... Come [at the housing squat] for something else... Like checking on the guy on house arrest... They would see the kids at home... What if they want to take them away from us saying we neglect them? We are Roma, we know how it works! I don't want problems, I tried to enrol the kid even last year... This does not make any sense!

(V and G, Roma, male, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2015)



*Figure 55: The #kidzbloc demonstration for the abolition of Article 5 of the 2014 Piano Casa (16th October 2016)*

This conversation occurred while I was walking with two Roma heads of the household towards a primary school just beside Tiburtina 770. Indeed, they both tried to enrol their grandchildren in the first grades, but the school administrators did not seem very eager to help them. On the opposite, they tried to dismiss them right away, claiming there were no vacant places and without offering any alternative space, regardless of the fact it is supposed to be compulsory education. Nonetheless, when I showed up with them, they changed their mind, yet claimed they needed a valid residency address to enrol them. It took me two separate mornings and seven hours overall to master the school's bureaucracy and explain to the school board the reason why the parents were incapable of supplying a registered address. Afterwards, I took responsibility for filling in the enrolment forms and applying for school benefits, for the family are semi-illiterate and

asked me to step in for them. And this was one of the reasons why they asked me for support to go through the whole procedure, for they assumed that as an Italian researcher I had a good knowledge of the workings of the school system. Another reason was that they were worried about whether and how to explain to the school that they were living in a housing squat, and what to do in case the school evoked Article 5 of the National Housing Plan as a motivation for not enrolling the kids to school. Last but not least, they felt that my intervention as an Italian activist and researcher would have diminished the discrimination associated with their Roma ethnicity, which they felt was a primary reason behind the denial they received in the first place, together with their poor language skills.

This example, gleaned from my own experience as a researcher and activist living in a housing squat, gives an understanding of what is stake with the norms tailored not to only to punish actual squatters, but to be a deterrent for the potential counter-hegemonic reproducibility of organised practices of housing re-appropriation. Indeed, the inability to access basic welfare provisions like school and healthcare is a quite a high price to pay for already dispossessed urban dwellers. Hence, future squatters might want to give up the risk and try to get by in the niches they can afford of the housing market or make alternative arrangements. The episode I reported, indeed, displays the potential consequences of the invisibilisation in the eye of the local administrations established by Article 5, which enacts a form of biopolitical manipulation of one's role within mainstream social reproduction, and whose consequence can escalate on the basis of everyone's intersectional differences. This situation thus requires the activists to engage on a daily basis with a type of activism that basically subsidises from grassroots the functions that would be usually demanded to local social welfare practitioners and offices.

In so doing, they activate their own knowledge and skills, as well as multiple territorial networks that may help to circumvent the norms, and find informal solutions for the families that would otherwise be denied their legal and social personhood altogether, as have the ones I described here. Indeed, I happened to look after dozens of similar cases during my fieldwork; this required me to acquire skills I did not have in terms of mastering bureaucracy in respect to a number of issues, ranging from enrolling kids to the educational and care system to visas. Where I did not have enough knowledge or experience, I relied onto the broader social and political networks in which *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani* is included: NGOs (e.g. *Médecins Sans Frontières* and other similar associations for problems related to medical care); local politicians that could provide access to the inner offices of Municipalities and City Council; social practitioners; legal

teams close to the Movements; and so on. This knowledge, and the social capital of contacts that have been gathered, is then disseminated during the assemblies, the political meetings, and socialised with the squatters and the members of the *comitato* that learn how to manage certain bureaucratic issues.

This less visible, yet pivotal type of grassroots, ‘social activism’ delineates an innovative form of grassroots, underground welfare that connotes Blocchi Precari Metropolitani claim in their public discourse as part of their everyday political action and mobilisation. Nonetheless, given the degree of complexity of the Housing Rights Movements’ action within the urban fabric, it is relevant to discuss to what extent these forms of activism may represent a strength or a liability in organisational and political terms. Indeed, the problem of how activism is articulated by the squatters within the Movements and in the city is pivotal in order to sustain their effort of reproducing squatting as the starting point for alternative forms of social reproduction and reappropriating ‘right to the city’. To this purpose, the following part of the chapter discusses the conundrums relating to the differential forms of activism emerging within Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and the *Movimento per il Diritto all'Abitare* in respect to three main issues: the persisting, yet problematic dichotomy between ‘experienced’ and social activists; their use as a political and judicial leverage for delegitimising the more ‘popular’ activists of the Movements as socially dangerous subjects; their implications for the endurance of the Movements’ political organising and structures.



## Social and political activists: a problematic distinction



*Figure 56: Public general assembly of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani at Tiburtina 770 (15 September 2015)*

The osmosis among the urban fabric, the activism of Housing Rights Movements, and the tools designing for curtailing their freedom of action and dissent has resulted into manifold repercussions, including the stretching of the boundaries of ‘traditional’ activism to a series of activities that end up subsidising from grassroots those forms of social local welfare denied by punitive laws such as Article 5. Whereas the more experienced activists are constantly committed to transmitting the knowledge and experience they have cumulated to ‘social activists’ who have chosen to mobilise in order to bestow them further voice and agency, the hiatus between them still persists, generating both negative and positive implications. Indeed, whereas the social activists engage diffusely with the level of day-to-day problem-solving, in my observation they seem more prone on delegating the level of political elaboration and visibility to the activists they recognised as more experienced and charismatic. Whereas this relies on the credibility and reliability of the latter in the eye of the community of the squatters, this can result in being overwhelmed with too many different sets of tasks, as well as being singled out by police officers and anti-squatting media outlets as the masterminds exploiting subjects in a condition of housing emergency for providing visibility to their political projects.

We are different activists from you... And other people... Who have more experience, who were grown inside the university, as activists, who understand more of politics. I used not to understand a lot of politics, but I am here because this is my struggle. But it is not a problem, I mean, it is a matter of trust...

(M, female, Chilean, July 2015)

You always have a sort of hierarchy... Not in the sense of power, but based on the growth you experience as an activist, on your credibility, on the growth you manage to achieve. Because, yes, if you talk about me, I think I am a bit out of the ordinary as a case... You know, the vast majority of social activists do not have a prior strong political consciousness... And so in these situations then they act as they can, they move as they can, relying on someone else's ideas for the general political frame, they execute and endorse someone else's idea and that's it... [...] And so the main debate always seem to occur amongst the same heads that keep thinking and thinking... Sometimes I can't find myself with you [he considers me as a 'political class' activist] ...60 percent... Not 100... But still [...] I think that in my case I can do more, and it depends on the fact that how I developed my consciousness and activism here because of the beliefs I had before, my values, how I had been brought up, how I lived... At the end of the day everything you do lines up with whom you actually are... The qualities you have, the experience, the passion you have for politics... And I got passionate here in Italy more than everything, I was watching political talk shows all the time to understand how Italy was working politically...

(N, Moroccan, male, September 2015)

As the interviews with M and N imply, social activists are different political actors than other urban squatters such as those involved into social centres, whereas they decided to squat compelled by the urgency of their condition of housing deprivation, and therefore without the intent of experimenting with alternative forms of life and challenge the reproduction of the neoliberal urban fabric (see Mudu, 2004; Piazza, 2013). Yet, they decided to assume an activist role once they decided to make their time skills, knowledge and even individual character traits available in order to help the other squatters, and facilitate their communication with BPM and Housing Rights Movements in general.

From the previous excerpts, it emerges that there are some distinctive contingent and subjective factors which affect the degree of political consciousness and involvement they may achieve: one's previous interest in politics or involvement in other types of political activism (e.g. trade unionism on the workplace); the temporal accumulation of experience they have accumulated within Housing Rights Movements, or other grassroots urban movements with similar practices; one's communicative skills and self-confidence; the amount of time they can regularly devote to activism; and so on.

Following this inherently subjective approach, their role during marches and political initiatives can entail a range of different functions, ranging from the gathering of the squatters to using the loudspeaker for chanting, yelling slogans and making speeches during demonstrations, interacting with journalists, and so on. Hence, the social activism that is developed within Blocchi Precari Metropolitani is an incremental process. As such, it cannot be categorised through rigid understandings of the political, social and class relationship between squatters and activists, for these parameters develop dynamically during the experience of squatting. For instance, a social activist plays a quite changed role than from one they played when they initially squatted towards their squatters' community, their local neighbourhoods, and also the city in which they assume new credibility and recognisability as part of an identifiable Movement.

Besides, as the interviews point out, social activists bear a credibility and respect, as they are recognised by the squatters as peers whose interpretation of the current political phase and words can be trusted and conveyed straightforwardly, without the apprehension that sometimes colours the relationship between the older activists and the squatters. Therefore, social activism and its development cannot be analysed according to static patterns that only consider the initial conditions at the moment of squatting (Prujit, 2013). Nonetheless, the interviews also stress the unresolved gap between the 'social' activists and the more 'experienced' one in terms of political elaboration and in respect to the presence of an 'invisible' hierarchy based upon prior experience, recognisability and trustworthiness towards the community of the squatters, mastering of political and discursive skills.

Whereas these aspects can be understood as intrinsic to the Movements' extremely heterogeneous social composition, they can become a double-edged sword whereas they exposed the more recognisable squatters to being considered 'socially dangerous subjects' who manipulate the squatters' condition of emergency for forcibly co-opting them into political mobilisations and initiatives. As this derogatory framework



began to take the toll between courts and mainstream media, BPM and their networks countered it by affirming that what is socially dangerous to the neoliberal governmentality is the realm of possibility of autonomy, emancipation and reappropriation that the Movements and the squatters have been capable of prefiguring and delineating through their actions and mobilisations. Therefore, each and every one of them is proud to be considered as ‘socially dangerous’. The following starts to draw a series of reflections about the relationship between diverse forms of activism, the attempt of criminalising and repressing Housing Rights Movements, and the implications this bears as for the endurance of their political project and legacy inside the city.

**‘We are all socially dangerous!’**



*Figure 57: Banner stating "We are socially dangerous" during the: sit-in in front of Piazzale Clodio court for two some housing rights' activists subjected to the request of special surveillance (14th July 2016)*

As the previous sections have delineated, the complex scenario in which the Movements are operating affects the forms of activism that emerge within their social composition in two main ways. Firstly, the activists are demanded to acquire and then deploy a complex set of skills for juggling the bureaucratic repercussions of the squatters' legal framing condition as illegal urban dwellers by the means of the in the eye of public administrations as established primarily by the Article 5. Secondly, they have to disseminate this

knowledge to the broader cohort of social activists living in each squat, while building up with them the scaffolding of political mobilisations required for achieving their political goals. Insofar as this transmission occurs amidst the management of the remarkable intensity of the Movements' action inside the city, it requires a temporal length which is often incompatible with the urgency of distributing as many as possible responsibilities throughout the process of organising. Besides, the component of the social activists is often prone to delegating the phase of the elaboration of the political messages, campaigns and goals to what N defines as 'the same heads that keep thinking and thinking'. The latter are clearly identified with the more recognisable and 'ancient' activists who are acknowledged as personalities of the movements because of their militant background, recognisability among the squatters, and charisma.

This leads to the main liability that social activism bears towards movements like *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani*, which is the overexposure of single activists to the negative attention of media outlets and courts engaging with the criminalisation of squatting for housing purposes through the systematic delegitimising of the Movements' political modalities, goals and composition. First of all, the fact that the social activists make a path of politicisation from the moment of squatting onwards leads police forces to singling out the more recognisable and 'historic' activists as people who compel the squatters to participate in their mobilisations in order to gain visibility and social leverage towards institutions. In this sense, the combination of contentious politics and negotiation from which the *Regional Deliberation* stemmed is interpreted as a form of extortion realised through the forcible mobilisation of people not willing to participate in the struggle, but driven exclusively by their need for maintaining their housing arrangement, albeit precarious and illegal. This kind of rhetoric aims at undermining the credibility and legitimacy of the Movements through a twofold operation: describing activism as a form of racket; depriving the squatters of their autonomy by depicting their economic fragility and material dispossession as a form of non-verbal, yet compelling constraint.

This double framework, then, lies at the core of the motivations put forward for justifying the provisions of special surveillance emanated against the activists of *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani* and *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa* on the basis of their alleged 'socially dangerousness' (Antigone, 2016; Nalbone, 2016), as anticipated in Chapter 3. Once again, the Movements are demanded to cope with a series of diverse steps in order to deconstruct this derogatory and misleading rhetoric, while ensuring an adequate legal support to the people undergoing these restrictive provisions. First of all,

the Movements need to rely on trusted legal teams that can follow the diverse trials and controversies with a sympathetic and shared approach towards the activists. Secondly, they need to work on more long-term legal initiatives that might underline the contestable contours of such a use of a body of normative that, as Chapter 3 outlined, has been conceived and retained in the Republican legal code to the purpose of repressing a completely different type of offences related mainly to organised crimes and terrorism. These can include appealing to diverse courts (including the international ones) in order to contend the unconstitutional and anti-democratic profile of the application of special surveillances and similar provisions against political activists.

Alongside the specialist work developed by the legal support team, the Movements also aim at soliciting the mobilisation of their broad networks socio-political alliances through the activation of solidarity campaigns aimed uncovering the specific ideological, economic and political interests underpinning the criminalisation of Housing Rights as socially dangerous, felonious associations. This is the case of the ad-hoc campaigns like '*Freedom of Movement, freedom of dissent*'<sup>8</sup> and '*Siamo tutti socialmente pericolosi!*' ('We are all socially dangerous!'), launched since the first court hearings held in summer 2016 for subjecting the activists Luca Fagiano (Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa) and Paolo di Vetta (Blocchi Precari Metropolitani) to a one year long special surveillance. The request made by the state's attorney includes a set of restrictions of the activists' freedom of movement and even speech such as the ban from taking part to public initiatives and demonstrations, the prohibition to leave the Municipal area of Rome, the home curfew during night hours, and the revoke of their driving licence because of the alleged 'lack of the necessary moral prerequisites' for driving a vehicle. Also, they are obliged to circulate bringing a 'red book' which they need to exhibit each time they are stopped for routine controls by police forces.

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 3.

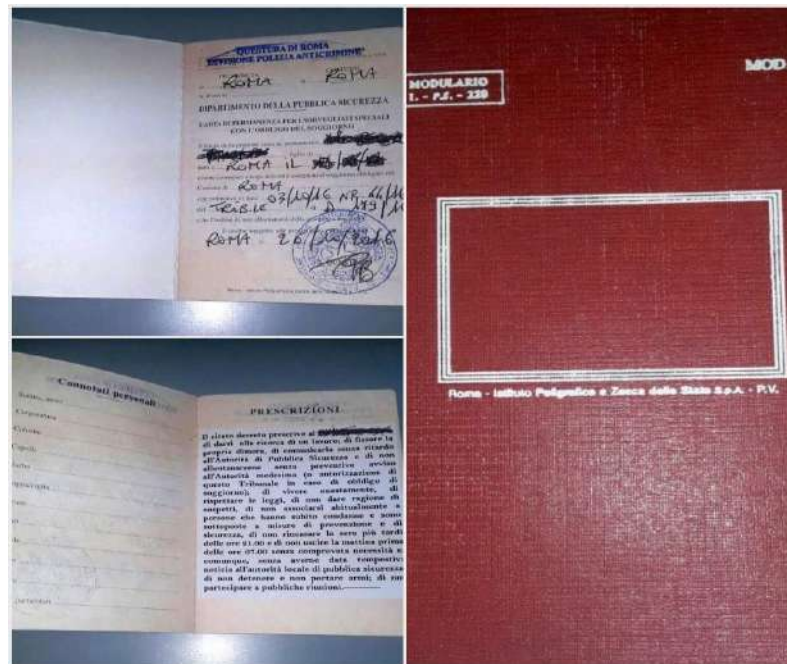


Figure 58: The red book of special surveillance handed in October 2016 to the Housing Rights Movements' activists Luca Fagiano and Paolo di Vetta (Source: Blocchi Precari Metropolitani Facebook page)

At the time of revising this chapter (September 2017), the activists are still subjected to the same restrictive measures, regardless of the diverse initiatives, conferences and interventions that involved also influential constitutional lawyers and even politicians such as the Democratic MP and sociology professor Luigi Manconi (see Manconi, 2016) and the former magistrate Livio Pepino during events such as the convention entitled '*Misure di prevenzione personali tra controllo sociale ed idolatria del decoro*' (Measures of personal restriction: between social control and idolatry of public order) held in June 2017 in the Rome's headquarters of the prestigious Basso Foundation<sup>9</sup>. Besides, the state's attorney has requested in September 2017 to extend the special surveillance for other two years based on the irredeemable social dangerousness and persisting action of the activists as recognised mediators with institutions.

Given this persistence in framing the activists as such, it is not surprising that this criminalising framework has coupled, as shown with the fieldwork diary agenda, with the lack of repeal of the Article 5, the missing implementation of the Regional Deliberation, and a sustained police effort in hindering the consolidation of each new

<sup>9</sup> Here the outline of the convention: <http://www.fondazionebasso.it/2015/22-vi-2017-16h30-misure-di-prevenzione-personali-tra-controllo-sociale-ed-idolatria-del-decoro/>

attempt of squatting. Therefore, the short-term challenge that the activists are currently confronted with in the attempt of reversing the delegitimising campaign thrown against them pertains how to uphold their organisational efforts and how to defend the housing squats, which have become a proper household for hundreds of families in a condition of severe housing deprivation, and that would be otherwise one again homeless after an eventual eviction. Besides, as Paolo di Vetta himself contends, the long-term problem regards how to leave a durable organisational legacy inside the city, while preserving the political innovations that characterise the experience of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and the Movement for the Right to Habitation since the crisis of housing and social reproduction unfolded in the peculiar, self-made context of Rome:

The problem is the endurance of this political project, especially nowadays in the light of the lack of responses in terms of planned, socially-oriented housing policies. These circumstances are pushing movements to reflect about the type of perspective we should devise for this movement struggling for housing rights. We need to take into account of the lack of public housing as a political horizon, whereas it and that has been the political goal practised and achieved during the previous decades of struggle. [...] Another of the new challenges that Housing Rights Movements are confronted with nowadays is the issue of migration. The social composition of this movement is strongly connoted with the presence and activism of migrants. Indeed this and this is a strongly mestizo movement. Yet, this is a movement that is really mestizo not only as for the housing part, but also into the logistics sector, in the farm-hand sector, where migrant vanguards are quite engaged in the struggle. Here I think there is the innovation that could give further development to the struggles towards a more generalised and comprehensive sense, for the freedom of movement, against the drift towards urban securitization, against the attempt to erase the residence of those who cannot guarantee their own economic survival in the city... Erasing the poor by decree, criminalising the activists using administrative the laws... This is the novelty upon which we are currently reasoning as Movements, and on whose basis we are trying to create the necessary organisational steps.

(Paolo di Vetta, activist, Italian, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2016)

## **Rethinking political organisation, rescaling the ‘right to the city’**

Despite the constant presence of housing crises and re-adjustments in the history of capitalist societies (Hodkinson, 2012, p.433) and in the specific history of Rome as a self-made, makeshift city (Cellamare, 2004; Vasudevan, 2015a), the ongoing crisis presents distinctive peculiarities that affect the width and depth of the repressive crackdown deployed against Housing Rights Movements. Indeed, as Vasudevan (2017, p.7) asserts, situated laws such as the Article 5 against the mass of the squatters and individual restrictions are connoted with a specific ideological frame aimed at upholding the primacy of private ownership, enclosure and marketisation as linchpins of the city’s spatial organisation within the specific geographic arrangements on which they are deployed. In general terms, they thus play a double function within the ongoing phase of neoliberal urbanisation: preventing the social reproduction of autonomous modalities alternatives of dwelling in the city based on the concept of housing as a collective social, political and cultural asset. Secondly, they aim at setting an explicit contraposition between the deserving, hard-working, citizens who have decided to abide by the social compact founded on the privatisation of social reproduction and housing, and the squatters who are ‘socially dangerous’ for they have withdrawn from it the maintenance of this capitalist modality of perpetuating social reproduction.

In the light of these evidences, the excerpt of interview included in the previous section has underlined the challenges that movements like Blocchi Precari Metropolitani are currently confronted with since the crisis and the post-*Tsunami Tours* phases unfolded. Indeed, from the Movements' perspective, the entanglement between the post-welfare governance of the city, their new *mestizo* social composition, and the organisational innovations they introduce question the activists about how to uphold a durable legacy of their struggle inside the city. As discussed throughout the chapter, a primary response has been the unification of some Housing Rights Movements’ action under the unifying flag of *Movimenti per il Diritto all’Abitare*. This alliance represents a political opportunity to increase the effectiveness of the manifold practices related to squatting for housing purposes in Rome, consolidating their autonomous geographies, as well as for disseminating the urban commons they produce on multiple scales of the city. Besides, it represents a solid base for establishing networks of solidarity with other grassroots urban movements engaged on the terrain of the ‘right to the city’ vis-à-vis the sustained governmental effort of curtailing their spaces of action and dissent.



*Figure 59: Housing Rights' Movements sit-in in Porta Pia during a meeting between the activists and the Minister of Infrastructures (22 July 2015)*

Nonetheless, the previous analysis may raise more questions and concerns than certainties in terms of the capacity for resistance that Housing Rights Movements' can guarantee in order to preserve their counter-hegemonic spaces of possibility in the city, protect their community, and at least proliferate practices and knowledge as a form of political legacy. Indeed, as also Paolo di Vetta's words also underline, the political elaboration about the more effective forms of organising that the Movements should implement in order to fulfil these tasks is the subject of an ongoing, yet unresolved discussion. On the one hand, the pervasiveness of the governmental intervention against squatting and the squatters requires the Movements to be as rapidly responsive as possible in order to cope with the repercussions stemming from it. On the other hand, the urgency forced by the unfolding contingencies does not dovetail with the extended temporality required for creating durable organisational structures within Movements characterised by such a heterogeneous social composition and the prioritisation of daily social reproduction as the foundation for reappropriating an alternative 'right to the city'.

As an activist, squatter and researcher inside Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, I often happened to reflect by myself and with others about what this implicates in terms of the capacity of resisting to an eventual attempt of eviction which might dissolve the housing squats as autonomous infrastructures, alongside the urban commons they have



managed to produce within such a conflicted and saturated environment. Besides, I have also reflected extensively about the repercussions of such a dissolution for the other urban dwellers towards whom the squatters have opened up their organisational rites and dwelling spaces. In the case of Metropolit, for instance, it would imply the dismantlement of one of the few free cultural hotspots inside Tor Sapienza, or even worse, its commodification into an institutionalised exhibition where Salini could whitewash his image as an art patron. In the case of Tiburtina 770, it would destruct an essential node of the *Nodo Tiburtina*, and deprive the near *borgate* Pietralata and Tiburtino III of a recognised point of reference for organising local mobilisations and initiatives. Nonetheless, it occurred to me that the cycle made of dispossession by eviction and repossession by squatting is ingrained into the history of Housing Rights Movements. Nonetheless, it has not compromised their presence as propellers for grassroots urban movements inside the city of Rome (see Armati, 2015; Di Felicianantonio, 2016).

Hence, I understood that the more tangible legacy of Housing Rights Movements and squatters in respect to the struggle of 'right to the city' is not necessarily the maintenance of housing squats as permanent sites (although their defence represents a top priority to the Movement). Rather, it is constituted by the endurance of the squatters' communities that, after coalescing in the act of cracking into a place, have changed their role in the city from dispossessed urban dwellers to *citadins* who claim their legitimacy to inhabit, reappropriate and transform the urban space according to their collective necessities and desires (Lefebvre, 1996; Purcell, 2002; Merrifield, 2011; Mudu and Aureli, 2016; Grazioli, 2017a; Vasudevan, 2017). Besides, the Movements' legacy is represented by the concrete enactment of the possibility to radically repurpose every empty building, neglected wreck, mistreated assemblage of differential ecologies in the urban environment into urban commons where experimenting with new forms of social reproduction and habitation through collective acting and reasoning (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011; Galdini, 2015; Stavrides, 2016; Grazioli, 2017b; Papadopoulos, 2018).





Figure 60: Housing Rights' Movements sit-in in solidarity with the people evicted from the market of housing rents (30 June 2015)

Hence, the inhabitants of housing squats and the activists innovate and territorialise the concept of 'right to the city', leaving an indelible mark onto the cityscape, in relies on three main aspects. First of all, the way in which BPM and their allies understanding the role of housing within a broader crisis of neoliberal urban reproduction allows them to frame squatting for housing purposes as a prefigurative practice that combines living-in-common, autonomous urban regeneration, cooperative forms of habitation and activist forms of urban citizenship inside an increasingly conflicted urban fabric (Fournier, 2002; Linebaugh, 2008; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Hodgkinson, 2012). Secondly, starting from the squatters' daily experience of differential lines of inclusion/exclusion, they broaden their scope of action towards countering of the manifold manifestations of urban inequality, from facilitating the migrants' freedom of movement to the reappropriation of the access to cultural rights (Mudu, 2006; Cattaneo and Martínez, 2014; Chattopadhyay, 2015; di Felicianantonio, 2016). Last but not least, the modalities in which they redistribute knowledge, share urban commons and socialise organisational rites produce multi-layered forms of social, yet inherently political activism, that configure the squatters as *citadins* reappropriating their 'right to the city' as the realisation of the even more fundamental right to be in the city (Lefebvre, 1996; Purcell, 2002; Merrifield, 2011; Grazioli, 2017a; Vasudevan, 2017).



*Figure 61: Mobilisation in Piazza della Repubblica against Mafia Capitale and the lacked implementation of the Regional Deliberation for Housing Emergency (18 June 2015)*

In conclusion, the squatters as part of the Housing Rights Movements update and territorialise the conceptualisation of the ‘right to the city’ by rooting it in the organisational capacity and autonomous geographies stemming from the daily encounters occurring in the urban space among grassroots urban movements, dispossessed urban dwellers, and various allies coalescing in the production of urban commons aimed at recasting social justice inside the urban fabric (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Harvey, 2012; Vasudevan, 2015a; Grazioli, 2017b). Dwelling upon these considerations, the conclusive chapter summarises the main reflections emerged during my ethnographic fieldwork and the writing of this dissertation. The purpose is to elucidate its main contributions to the field of studies concerned with urban squatting. Besides, it aims at delineating and the possibilities for expanding this project in future research aiming at furthering the knowledge about squatting, and the recognition of autonomous regeneration as an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable way of responding to the ongoing crisis of social reproduction and housing affecting cities like Rome (Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014; Moore and Smart, 2015; Caciagli, 2016; Grazioli, 2017a).

## **(OPEN) CONCLUSIONS. For future activist research about the squatted city**

### **Structuring a new analytical framework**

The intensity of the experience I have lived as an activist ethnographer in Tiburtina 770, Metropolitiz and the movement *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani* can hardly be wrapped up into a coherent, organic set of conclusions. And in fact, as addressed within the methodological Chapter 2, this thesis does not aim to formulate grand generalisations and rigid analytical frameworks that might apply to the scattered galaxy of the housing squats punctuating the urban landscape of Rome. Nor was the purpose of this thesis to elaborate an organisational ‘recipe’ that could be foisted onto movements. As this thesis has sought to demonstrate, Housing Rights Movements and squatters, in the light of their *mestizo* composition and subjective orientation, have to operate in the city by establishing some ethical and political coordinates, and then adopting creative resilience as a compass of their action for reappropriating their ‘right to the city’, starting with housing rights. Hence, even when they cooperate with others as in the case of the network Movement for the Right to Habitation, they do not act according to a rigid organisational formula.

Nonetheless, what emerged throughout the analysis is the necessity to at least structure a debate around the organisational practices of Housing Rights Movements such as BPM. Its purpose should be to understand how to preserve their autonomous infrastructures and commons in a conflicted and contradictory environment like Rome's urban fabric. Following this idea, the current ethnographic work has attempted to provide a situated insight into the richness of existential and organisational modalities that can be traced into the housing squats affiliated to organised movements, and that have been largely under-analysed in recent decades in comparison to other forms of urban squatting. In fact, as underlined throughout, the recent decades of literature analysing urban squatting in Italy (and in Rome's setting as well) have focused more intensely on politically-oriented forms of occupations like social centres (e.g. Mudu, 2004; Piazza 2012, 2013; Moore and Smart, 2015). Otherwise, they have tended to conflate squatting for housing purposes with deprivation-based arrangements (see Prujit, 2013). Yet this kind of taxonomy provides a static and reductive account of the role played by housing

squats, as well as about the complex subjectivity of the squatters' development from dispossessed urban dwellers into political actors in the city.

Besides, even the more recent bodies of literature that have given more attention to squatting for housing purposes in Southern Europe (e.g. Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014; Mudu 2014) have not always accounted extensively for the peculiarities and differences that these Movements present in terms of social compositions, modalities of conflict, and even scope. Indeed, whereas some older housing rights organisations have chosen the path of combining grassroots forms of struggle and institutionalisation through their entrance into the mechanisms of political representation (see Mudu, 2014), other movements such as Blocchi Precari Metropolitani have chosen to reject institutional co-optation, and refuse to endorse specific political parties. Rather, they have opted to foster changes in policies through constant mobilisation, combining contentious politics with the negotiation with institutions, while analysing the new role played by the management of the housing crisis in the current neoliberal urbanisation of Rome.

Consequently, they have chosen to prioritise alliances with socio-political subjects and grassroots urban movements with whom they share an open and radical understanding of what the 'right to the city' should entail in a context like Rome, as well as the everyday experience of troubled inhabitation. The social and political alliances that the squatters and Blocchi Precari Metropolitani have managed to gather over the years are then circulated in order to reinforce the contentious politics deployed inside the city by the broader network Movement for the Right to Habitation. The subjects with whom they cooperate, indeed, can reinforce the Movements' demands to be involved in the designing of socially-oriented housing policies based on the principles of autonomous urban regeneration. Furthermore, they cooperate with the activists on a local and urban scale in subsidising those forms of grassroots welfare that are required in order to cope with the legal exclusion endured by the squatters because of laws as the Article 5. Last but not least, these alliances allow the Movements to advocate for the de-criminalisation of squatters, and to ameliorate the legal support they provide to activists singled out by repressive measures through the enlargement of their political and social network of solidarity and consensus.

## **The real issue at stake in the struggle for housing rights**

Based on these reflections, this thesis contends the necessity of elaborating an analytical scaffolding that might interpret the relevance of squatting for housing purposes in re-appropriating the ‘right to the city’ and circulating urban commons in a post-welfare city of Rome. The perspective I have articulated starts from the situated standpoints of Tiburtina 770 and Metropoliz, affiliated to the Housing Right Movement Blocchi Precari Metropolitani which, during its ten years of activism, has contributed to constructing a pragmatic approach towards the subject matter of squatting and housing policies. On the one hand, they have removed ideological approaches to occupying that could be unintelligible to their social composition by stressing how squatting derives from the unbearable existential precariousness that affects a wide portion of urban dwellers who find themselves stripped of their assets for living a decent urban life, and therefore subjected to intersectional patterns of housing segregation and social marginalisation. On the other hand, they underline how squatting can become a means of individual and collective emancipation outside the mainstream housing ladder by proposing a new model of commoning social reproduction.

Indeed, the pamphlets and public documents of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani acknowledge the depletion of the horizon of universal welfare, and therefore public housing provided by the Welfare State, as an achievable political goal in the short or even medium term, especially in relation to the pressing figures of the current housing crisis (Puccini, 2016). Besides, they claim the necessity of hybridising the thriving legacy of practices and political discourses that Housing Rights Movements carry in Rome with the necessity of many urban dwellers who would not be in any case legitimate recipients of housing welfare, for instance because of their nationality and/or migration status, but who are currently subjected to violent patterns of housing segregation and deprivation (Mudu, 2006; Mudu and Chattopadhyay, 2017). Lastly and consequently, they advocate for the necessity of tracing the structural connection between these new forms of social marginality and the dominant patterns of urban governance in order to forge broader networks of solidarities that could produce actual forms of counter-power within a conflicted neoliberal urban fabric, while retaining the historic role of Housing Rights Movements as propellers of social mobilisation (Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014; di Felicianantonio, 2016; Vasudevan, 2017).

Following these analyses, the political tactics and strategies adopted by BPM

and the Movement for the Right to Habitation have managed to bring to the centre of the political arena the by now irreversible and unbridgeable gap between the mainstream patterns of social reproduction and the living conditions of a broader cohort of urban dwellers who cannot afford to comply with its standards (Lazzarato, 2012; Mudu and Aureli, 2016; Vasudevan, 2017). On the one hand, they have elevated squatting for housing purposes to a practice of radical repurposing and regeneration of the urban space, while uncovering the paradox immanent to the presence of so many neglected and abandoned urban buildings in the light of a growing housing need. Secondly, they have contested the forcible invisibilisation of urban squatters by opening up the space of the squats to the development of a plurality of urban commons with diverse scopes and constitutions. Thirdly, they have innovated and diversified their modalities of practising contentious politics inside the city, thus leaving a replicable political legacy for other grassroots urban movements engaging with the conflict for the 'right to the city'.

Hence, the reason why I chose to begin my research about squatting for housing purposes and 'right to the city' within a movement like Blocchi Precari Metropolitani is the fact that it hybridises the thriving legacy of Housing Rights Movements in Rome with the idea of creating a social block that is capable of reflecting and acting upon the role of housing within the diverse scales of everyday social reproduction. Insofar as they do not restrict themselves to acting upon a level of controversy and negotiation about housing, they articulate a multi-scalar discourse and plan of action that pertains to the broader meaning of inhabiting the city, while considering squatting as a propeller for social mobilisation against neoliberal urbanisation (see Cattaneo and Martínez, 2014; Di Felicianantonio, 2016). Hence, BPM's action is relevant for conceptualising the notion 'right to the city' in a deeply situated and radically open notion, as well as for reflecting upon the issue of scales pertaining to the production of urban commons within highly saturated, conflicted and neoliberally managed urban environments such as Rome.

### **The contradictions of the self-made, squatted city**

The contribution that I wish to make with this thesis as for the role of squatting for housing purposes in the city of Rome from an activist-researcher standpoint cannot assume a naively apologetic posture. As I have tried to highlight throughout the thesis, there are

multiple contradictions that characterise this practice in the light of its situatedness within the spatial, social and political context of Rome. The description of the contemporary social composition of Housing Rights Movements, and the discussion of the squatters' spatialised self-perception underpinning what I defined as the 'squat effect' (Chapter 5) had the purpose of underlining how the autonomous counter-power of housing squats can be jettisoned by inward dynamics that may lead the squatters to relegate themselves to the margins of the city, as well as to undermine the ethical principles and coordinates that underpin squatting as an act of commoning. Secondly, the discussion of the issues of scale underpinning the Movements' contentious politics from the local to the broader 'urban' level underlines the extent to which the conceptualisation of the urban space can affect the effectiveness and openness of the commons that the squatters articulate by opening up their organisational rites to the city.

Last but not least, Chapter 7 has discussed how the forms of social activism developed within *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani* can present criticalities in terms of the necessity to structure homogeneous and resistant organisations, vis-à-vis a sustained and unprecedented repressive effort against the broader cohort of the squatters and single activists. Indeed, regardless of the fact that squatting has never been officially regularised or condoned within Italian legislation, it has been largely tolerated by Italian governments. Even more, squatting could be considered as a central part of how housing and urban planning have been structured during recent decades, since it has constituted a subsidiary form of accommodation for a population of urban dwellers who are simultaneously excluded by residualised forms of welfare, incapable of accessing the privatised housing market, and that do not even meet the criteria for those privatised forms of social housing that have replaced public housing. This aspect is even more visible in the urban development of Rome as a self-made, makeshift city (Cellamare, 2004; Vasudevan, 2015a) that I have analysed from the standpoint of the historical role played by squatting practices and informal settlements.

Indeed, as narrated through the paradigmatic examples of Tiburtino III/ Pietralata and Tor Sapienza within Chapter 3, the urban fabric of Rome has been historically crafted within the field of tension between makeshift housing and official urban planning. On the one hand, the creation of informal settlements and the act of squatting have historically represented a modality of inhabitation adopted by the urban poor, as well as a political leverage for demanding more sustained support to public housing policies. On the other hand, the diverse political forces that have governed Rome

throughout the past decades have tolerated the phenomenon of squatting and makeshift housing as a sort of ‘social buffer’ that could allocate those pockets of poverty that would otherwise remain on the streets while authorities figured out how to solve the problem (Santoro, 2015; Cellamare, 2016). In this respect, squatting can involuntarily represent a social security cushion that yet relieves public authorities from taking action and responsibility about the dramatic impact of the housing crisis, whilst at the same time they refuse to officially decriminalise it as the direct outcome of such inaction.

This aspect is even more apparent in the ongoing context of neoliberal austerity management, which is regularly put forward by public authorities as an excuse for not providing any alternative housing arrangements for people who are evicted from squats, informal settlements or even from the house they have either rented or tried to buy through a lifetime of indebtedness and sacrifice. In these cases, movements like BPM are confronted by the dilemma of finding a resolution for those who became homeless, while not transforming solidarity into a way of removing the proportions of the housing crisis from the political arena. Besides, a lack of visibility would amplify the effect of bodies of legislation such as Article 5 and special surveillances, which promote the forcible invisibilisation of the squatters and the curtailing of the activists' freedom of movement and dissent as a bargaining chip for urban ‘decency’ and securitisation against ‘socially dangerous’ threats. This is to say that the autonomous, squatted city (see Vasudevan 2015a, b; 2017) necessarily has to co-exist in a constant interplay with the mainstream city and to make itself visible in order to maintain the linchpins of its own existence.

### **‘Right to the city’, empty spaces and urban commons**

Aware of the tensions between the squatted, autonomous city and the ‘official’ one, Blocchi Precari Metropolitani have structured their role within grassroots urban movements and the political message they convey to the people squatting with them according to some fundamental discursive coordinates that I have stressed throughout the thesis. Firstly, they contend the inevitability of squatting in the light of the almost total inaccessibility of affordable, let alone public housing for a heterogeneous population of urban dwellers. Secondly, they solicit institutions to promote the self-renovation and re-use of the urban void in order to buck the trend of housing policies that, in the city of



Rome, have been mainly oriented to favouring an unruly urbanisation in order to extracting profit from the enclosure and building of new, yet often empty houses. Indeed, as the experience of Metropoliz epitomises particularly, it is possible to obtain a decent household even out of a slaughterhouse in ruins. Thirdly, they claim the possibility of articulating alternative, cooperative models of urban citizenship vis-à-vis the attempts to set a class war against and among the urban poor.

Hence, BPM and the *Movimenti per il Diritto all'Abitare* have established an autonomous political scaffolding that directly connects the debate around the 'right to the city', the reclamation of neglected urban ecologies, and the burgeoning trend of discussion about the urban commons and their material constitution. Firstly, the urban commons and the forms of life-in-common crafted by the housing squatters within Housing Rights Movements interrogate the modalities of distribution of territorial resources within urban inhabitants in terms of the right to access, possess and transform them. The idea according to which it is a prerogative of the owner to enclose and consume land and subsequently let an empty building go to rot, regardless of the social and environmental degradation it creates, furthers the idea that private ownership trumps whatsoever common sense about the rationality of letting big areas of the city degrade whilst many people need space for their dwelling, social and cultural lives.

This uncovers the extent to which the systematic emptiness of buildings in Rome is not an accident, but the deliberate outcome of processes of financialisation, accumulation by dispossession and enclosure of urban resources (Harvey, 2012), as well as the ideological apparatuses pertaining to the legitimate models of inhabiting, owning and transforming the urban space (Blomley, 2008; Linebaugh, 2008; Lazzarato, 2012; Vasudevan, 2017). This inherently ideological posture is confirmed also by the fact that public authorities systematically marshal military equipment in order to evict newly squatted places, and then leave them unused (as shown in the case listed in the diary agenda included in Chapter 7). On the contrary, the activists contend that these empty urban spaces should be considered as commons that need to be confiscated, repossessed and repurposed for fulfilling the social necessities of the urban dwellers who have been stripped of their livelihood assets within the mainstream model of social reproduction.

The fact that the empty, unproductive urban spaces and the deprived *borgate* have become the fulcrum of the production of manifold urban commons also rescales the notion of 'right to the city' by delineating new autonomous geographies of the city, in which the material and symbolic value of the spaces that the Movements and the squatters

transform is not related to their nominal, mapped value, but from the plot of encounters, relations, actions and solidarities that the Movements and the squatters manage to create on a daily basis. They dislocate their actions inside the city according to the purpose and meaning it assumes in relation to a specific controversy and situated political aspect. Hence, they reappropriate their 'right to centrality' and its symbolic potential (see Lefebvre, 1996; Merrifield, 2011) by performing demonstrations and initiatives that bring the squatters at the political core of the city. At the same time, they root themselves in the urban peripheries with multi-scalar actions and initiatives that aim at addressing the daily life problems they are confronted with because of the repercussions of neoliberal urbanisation and institutional neglect (Santoro, 2015; Grazioli, 2017a).

This rescaling of the urban space, in turn, comes down to the Movements' conceptualisation of the relation between 'right to the city' and urban citizenship. Indeed, as underlined throughout the thesis, BPM and the other organisations claim publicly their *mestizo* composition as a benchmark and compass of their action. Besides, they demand equal access to housing and social rights for all the squatters and the dispossessed urban dwellers enduring a condition of housing deprivation, regardless of their formalised statuses and origins. Hence, they conceptualise new forms of makeshift urbanism and citizenship that are based on a fluid, mutual recognition between urban dwellers sharing the same routines and exerting collectively a transformative power over the cityscape and its sovereignty (Lefebvre, 1996; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013; Vasudevan 2015a, 2017). In this light, the *citadins* as a whole become the legitimate recipient of the right to reappropriating the city and its resources. The latter configures the struggle of the squatters for the 'right to the city' as one about the deeper constitutions of rights, and the materiality of the subjective figure of the citizen as the subject formally appointed to benefit from them (see Marshall and Bottomore, 1992; Purcell, 2002; Grazioli, 2017a).

Ultimately, this is to say that what is at stake in the relation between empty spaces, squatting for housing purposes, urban commons and 'right to the city' as practised by Housing Rights Movements like BPM pertains to the projection of a radically different model of society onto the cityscape (Lefebvre, 1996) through the repurposing of empty spaces for creating alternative forms of life and social self-organising (Armati, 2015; Caciagli, 2016; Di Felicianantonio, 2016; Grazioli, 2017b; Vasudevan, 2017). Besides this, the activists and the squatters as a collective movement in the city reject the disempowering myth of poverty, as well as to the notions of spatial marginality and segregation. They become those Lefebvrian *citadins* (see Lefebvre, 1996; Purcell, 2002)

who gain their right to produce the urban space in the dynamic process of coalescing with other dispossessed urban inhabitants in order to counter the dispossessing processes of capitalist accumulation (Grazioli, 2017a). Hence, it can be said that their function (and legacy) in the city of Rome has been to pave the path for the other grassroots urban movements struggling for the right to inhabit, re-common and de-commodify the functions, symbols and spaces of the city for collective, common purposes.

### **The beginning of a new activist-research journey**



*Figure 62: The protest camp inside the Basilica of SS. Apostoli (17 August 2017, one week after the eviction of the housing squat located in via Quintavalle 88)*

In these concluding remarks, I have attempted to summarise the main findings which emerged during my ethnographic fieldwork. They correspond to the both analytical and political goals I have delineated in the introduction of the thesis, and that pertain the impact that this study aims at having on the studies and policies concerned with contemporary forms of urban squatting. Chapter 1 theoretically framed squatting as a response to neoliberal urbanisation and the broader crisis of social reproduction. This contributes to the interdisciplinary debates concerned with grassroots organising, commons, social reproduction, and urban mobilisations especially in Southern Europe, where diverse practices of squatting are more rooted and encroached in the history of urban development and governance (see Squatting Europe Kollektive 2013, 2014;

Vasudevan, 2017). The extensive re-appraisal of the ‘right to the city’, and the systematisation of housing squats as forms of urban commons, correspond to the goals of contributing to wider theoretical debates concerned with assessing the contemporary relevance of the Lefebvrian concept on the one hand, and with an enrichment of the elements composing the definition of urban commons on the other hand. Both of them indeed are relevant not only in the guise of conceptual tools. They are also a relevant part of the portfolio of slogans and analysis of grassroots urban movements that are attempting to make the narration of their struggles intelligible and relatable beyond their local scales.

Besides, the notion of ‘eurythmisation’ elaborated within Chapter 4 constitutes an addition to the study of urban rhythm elaborated by Henri Lefebvre (2014), as well as a confirmation of the both accuracy of Lefebvrian theory nowadays for reading contemporary urban movements’ mobilisations, demands, and strategies of territorialisation. This couples with the analytical emphasis on the notion of autonomy in respect to the geographic and infrastructural impact of squatting on the urban fabric, which I analysed both empirically and theoretically throughout the thesis. Furthermore, the original conceptualisation of ‘housing squats’ proposed from Chapter 1 onwards aims at providing further accuracy and analytical depth to those interdisciplinary studies concerned with urban squatting and its taxonomies (i.e. Prujit, 2013). Appointing a specific and more comprehensive definition to this form of squatting is in fact necessary for delineating its peculiarity, hence relevance, in respect to urban social reproduction in the light of the ongoing housing crisis and post(?) -crisis neoliberal restructuring.

This is ultimately preliminary to addressing the last, and possibly more important ambition of this thesis, which is having a positive impact on the ‘toxic’ narrative about squatting for housing purposes, and especially with the criminalising trend in policy-making on the matter, with whose implications movements like Blocchi Precari Metropolitani are confronted on an everyday basis. Indeed, this thesis emphasised how housing squats are far from being marginal, or even criminal acts performed by ‘socially dangerous’ movements and individuals who refuse to contribute to the city’s reproduction. On the other hand, they prefigure a socially, environmentally and economically viable pathway to the progressive resolution of the rampant and diversified housing crisis that structurally affects cities of Rome. Also, they constitute a grassroots modality of regenerating the urban space according to the necessities of the collectivity who inhabits it, instead of according to the imperatives of land speculation and enclosure. The hope is therefore that this thesis, and its possible future development, will further an

alternative orientation in future legislation about housing squatting, while providing inputs for systematic and long-sighted housing policies on a local as well as national level. Aware of the width and ambition of these goals, this ethnographic work cannot but comprehend analytical and empirical limitations that future research will possibly critically address, expand and modify.

First of all, due to the immanent situatedness of the activist-ethnographic methodology, it also represents only a preliminary effort to address more comprehensively the implications of the phenomenon of urban squatting in a context such as Rome. First of all, the organisational modalities in terms of daily living and the mobilising of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani are different than those of other movements active in Rome (like Action or Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa), with which they have more or less stable connections of cooperation, although they present common organisational traits and shared political goals see Mudu, 2014; Armati, 2015; Caciagli, 2016; Mudu and Chattopadhyay, 2017). This is even more true in the case of the many ‘independent’ or temporary squats scattered in different parts of the city, whose functioning and daily life routines are quite far from the organisational rites and forms of social reproduction presented in the current thesis.

Secondly, the fluidity of the legislative, political and governmental context in which the Movements operate can significantly affect their political agenda in terms of practices and even priorities of demands. At the moment of reviewing these conclusions in September 2017, two extremely violent evictions of housing squats had just occurred in the previous month (via Quintavalle<sup>1</sup> and Piazza Indipendenza<sup>2</sup>). As a response, the Movements were forced to bring to the centre of their politics the issue of the resistance against evictions, alongside the reinforced demand addressed to institutions to start the application of the yet unimplemented Regional Deliberation in order to find accommodation for the evicted people that are currently living in protest camps right in

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1 The eviction of the housing squat of via Quintavalle 88 (affiliated to the Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa) occurred on the 10<sup>th</sup> August 2017 and involved 66 families that are living at the moment of writing under the colonnade of the Roman Catholic basilica of SS. Apostoli. They have not yet received any satisfactory response from the City Council about their demands for alternative housing accommodation besides homeless shelters. Information and commentary can be found here: <https://en.squat.net/2017/08/29/rome-italy-never-again-without-a-home/>

2 The eviction of Piazza Indipendenza, which happened on the 19<sup>th</sup> August 2017, involved a building in the city centre of Rome close to the Termini station that was inhabited since October 2013 by almost 1,000 refugees and asylum seekers. The eviction had huge media coverage even abroad due to the extreme brutality of riot police, who beat up women and children and made heavy use of water cannon in order to clear the area from the people camping there after being left homeless. An example of international press commentary is the following: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/04/world/europe/italy-rome-migrants-eviction.html?mcubz=0>

the city centre (see Feigenbaum et al., 2013; Brown *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, a series of racist raids enacted by neofascist groups in Tiburtino III during the summer of 2017 have moved the attention of grassroots urban movements concerned with freedom of movement and antifascist activism towards the Tiburtina area, so redirecting the action of the *Nodo Territoriale Tiburtina* in a conflict whose outcome seems anything but predicted in its outcome<sup>3</sup>.

Last but not least, I have addressed the dilemmas entrenched in the resilient organisational forms adopted by Housing Rights Movements in a collective perspective. My choice has thus been to focus upon the action of the squatters and the activists as a community that is engaged with a collective, sustained effort of coping with the violent impact of the post-welfare scenario in terms of precarisation of life, fragmentation of society mainly along lines of class and ethnicity, and processes of capitalist urbanisation in a neoliberal direction. For these reasons, I have not had the opportunity to delve into a number of more detailed aspects pertaining to the impact of housing squats that yet deserve to be investigated in greater depth: the contradictory relationship between the collapse of the welfare State and the autonomous forms of welfare devised by the squatters; the extensive impact of housing squats upon institutional urban planning and local housing policies; the contradictory politics unravelling in the daily negotiation of gender relations, ethnicity, religious and cultural habits in housing squats; the specific impact of border management upon the patterns of housing segregation and deprivation; and the full mapping of the diverse forms of squatting for housing purposes which have emerged in the city of Rome.

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3 An English summary of the latest events in Tiburtino (updated 13<sup>th</sup> September 2017): <https://libcom.org/news/community-action-shuts-down-fascist-meeting-rome-13092017>



*Figure 63: The refugees protesting after the eviction of the Piazza Indipendenza housing squat on the background (23 August 2017)*

In a nutshell, as suggested by a fellow activist, this thesis is primarily a snapshot of the reality I have experienced during my year of fieldwork, which has continued to unravel and change before my eyes as my activism continued in the field. So, my hope as an activist-researcher is to fill the analytical gaps I have mentioned in future projects that will dwell upon and expand on the existing research I have developed during this exciting doctoral journey. In this light, I consider this thesis as the beginning of a new strand of activist research that aims at furthering the relevance of urban squatting to make the city accessible to those who are segregated at the margins of mainstream social cooperation. In addition, I hope this will be a starting point for networking with other scholars that are engaged in the same field of research, and who are willing to cooperate with activists and grassroots urban movements in debating how to contend, and collectively create, a new ‘right to the city’, both in conflicted cities like Rome and beyond.



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