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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# CATHOLICS IN THE MAKING OF THE ITALIAN WATER MOVEMENT

## *A moral economy*

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**ABSTRACT:** The commitment of several Catholic groups and individuals within the Italian mobilisation for public water has been interpreted as an original experience of Catholic bottom up presence in social movements in the broader context of a Catholic awakening and renovated activism in public affairs, particularly in the aftermaths of the June 2011 referenda. The article analyses Catholics' role and contribution in the making of the Italian water movement, in terms of defining the contents, the identity and the practices of the mobilisation, by revisiting Edward Thompson's notion of moral economy. The thesis of the article is twofold. On one side the Italian water movement frame of "water as human right and commons" resonates Catholic Social Doctrine, facilitating the mobilisation of Catholic groups and contributing to highlight the moral and symbolic aspects of the contention. On the other side, Catholics' presence in the mobilisation has been mimetic and little influenced the movement's identity and repertoires of contention.

**KEYWORDS:** Catholicism, Italian politics, moral economy, social movements, water

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## 1. Introduction

The unexpected success of June 2011 referenda has been widely considered as one of the most striking political events of the last decade in Italy. Two of the four referenda, promoted by a wide coalition of social forces united in the Italian Water Movements Forum (hereinafter the Forum) were called against the privatisation of water services<sup>1</sup>. In spite of the boycott by mainstream media and political parties, the valid quorum of the majority plus one of the electorate turned out to vote – a target not achieved in the past 24 referenda held since 1997. The huge majority of the voters (around 97 per cent) responded affirmatively to the repeal of all the four norms. The commitment of several Catholic groups and individuals within this mobilisation has been interpreted as an original experience of Catholic bottom up presence in social movements (Costa 2011). Together with the other main political event of the year - the fall of Silvio Berlusconi's government and the appointment of the technocratic cabinet led by Mario Monti - the referenda gave a renovated impulse to the debate on Catholics and politics, celebrating their "awakening" and discussing the features that their commitment should take in order to overcome the "aphonia", "irrelevance" and "discomfort" suffered in the last years (Benecomune.net 2011, Bianchi 2011, De Rita 2011b, Popoli 2011).

The article returns on this debate, addressing the following question: which has been the role and contribution of Catholics in the making of the Italian water movement, in terms of defining the contents, the identity and the practices of the mobilisation? The relevance of this issue lies first on the fact that Catholic presence within the movement has been highlighted as a confirmation of the inclusiveness of the mobilisation (Molinari 2012). Secondly, the emphasis on the moral aspects of the contention has been considered a key factor in ensuring wide identification with the water movement and adhesion to the mobilisation, particularly during the referenda (Mazzoni and Cicognani 2012). In the Italian society, where Catholic culture and Church presence in the public sphere retain a peculiar relevance compared to other European countries (Garelli 2013), religion might significantly influence the definition of such notions of morality.

The article conceptualizes the relationship between social mobilisations and religious beliefs revisiting Edward Thompson's notion of moral economy, elaborated to analyse XVIII century protests in England over famine and the grain market (Thompson 1971). This approach allows emphasising the moral and symbolic dimensions of social mobilisations over issues related to the production and exchange of economic goods and services, linking the material aspects of

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<sup>1</sup> The two referenda against water privatisation asked to repeal: *i)* the obligation for public authorities to select the water services provider through franchise bids open to public, private and mixed companies; *ii)* the inclusion in the water tariff of a quote for the adequate remuneration of invested capitals, with a rate fixed by law at 7 per cent. The other two referenda asked the abrogation of the plan proposing the reopening of the production of nuclear energy, and the norm awarding the possibility to Prime minister and cabinet members not to appear in court sessions in case of "legitimate impediment" related to their institutional activity.

the contention with the cultural process of construction of the movement's moral and political identity.

The thesis of the article is twofold. On one side, the Italian water movement frame of "water as human right and commons" resonates Catholic Social Doctrine message on water management and the promotion of the common good. This facilitated the mobilisation of Catholic groups, particularly during the referenda, and contributed to highlight the moral, symbolic and cultural aspects of the contention, consolidating a broad popular consensus over the principles of social justice and universality that should inspire water management. On the other side, Catholics' presence in the mobilisation has been mimetic. Catholic identity little influenced the whole movement's identity and repertoires of contention. While significant in terms of individual biographies of Catholic militants, the participation to the water mobilisation failed short in reorienting the way main Catholic groups conceive their civic and political commitment.

After a methodological note, the first section of the article presents an operational definition of moral economy, in light of the different uses and theoretical debate on the notion, and discusses the relevance of its application to the Italian mobilisation for public water. The second section analyses how Catholics contributed to frame the legitimising notions of morality in the management of water services and how this framing facilitated further Catholic commitment in the movement. The third section investigates how Catholic individuals and groups, at different stages of the movement historical trajectory, have conceived their commitment and materially contributed to the mobilisation, in order to assess their influence in shaping the movement's identity and repertoires of contention. The concluding remarks discuss the added value of the moral economy approach to the understanding of the role of religion in the Italian water movement.

## 2. Methodology

The moral economy approach implies firstly and foremost "the imperative of describing" (Simeant 2011). The article consequently analyses which Catholic groups mobilised for public water, how they conceived their commitment and which has been their contribution in the making of the Italian water movement. Reference to the making wishes to reflect, firstly, the idea that this is an active process shaped by the fluency of social relationships and historical contingency, and secondly the plasticity of civic, political and religious identities, "embodied in real people and in a real context" (Thompson 1963, 10).

In the absence of previous studies on the Italian water movement, the present article inserts in a broader research project aimed at offering the first comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon (Carrozza and Fantini 2013) and draws on:

- i) the review of the Forum's documents, manifestos and press releases, collected from the Forum's official website and mailing list<sup>2</sup>, as well as published accounts of the movement's

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<sup>2</sup> [www.acquabenecomune.org](http://www.acquabenecomune.org) and [hyperlink@lists.riseup.net](mailto:hyperlink@lists.riseup.net)

experience by its protagonists (Bersani 2011, Jampaglia and Molinari 2010, Molinari 2007, Mattei 2012, Petrella 2001, Zanotelli 2010). The review has informed the analysis of the framing process of water issues in terms of “human right and commons” undertaken by the movement (see section 2);

- ii) the review of documents and official statements by Catholic Church institutions, groups and spiritual leaders on water related issues, the 2011 referenda and its aftermaths. Twelve Vatican documents (Popes’ encyclical letters and statements, Pontificium Consilium Justitia et Pax documents), seventeen official statements by Italian dioceses and bishops; eighteen position papers, official documents or press releases by Catholics groups and associations; ten documents by spiritual leaders (missionaries, priests,...) have been analysed. The main purposes of the review have been to assess the resonance between the Italian water movement’s frame and Catholic Social Doctrine on water issues, and to analyse how this resonance facilitated further Catholic commitment within the movement (see section 2);
- iii) the analysis of Catholic press coverage of the referenda between May and June 2011. The research was done by the keywords “referendum” and “water” (both jointly and separately) on the online archives of selected media: *Avvenire*, *Osservatore Romano* (newspapers); *Famiglia Cristiana*, *Tempi* (weekly press); *La Civiltà Cattolica*, *Il Regno*, *Rocca* (twice-monthly press); *Aggiornamenti Sociali*, *Mosaico di Pace*, *Nigrizia*, *Popoli*, *Tracce* (monthly press). In addition, a search for articles on the Catholic contribution to the referenda has been conducted on the online archives of the two main national newspapers, *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*. (keywords: “water”, “referendum” and “Catholics”; period May 2011- July 2011). The aim of the review has been to highlight Catholic press’ contribution to the amplification of the water movement frame (see section 2);
- iv) twenty-one semi-structured interviews with water movement representatives in different Italian regions (Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto, Lazio, Molise, Puglia) conducted between January and March 2013. Fifteen interviewees have been selected in order to represent main Catholic groups involved in the water movement and subsequently through snowball sampling. Information collected through the interviews have been utilised to trace the historical trajectory of Catholics within the water movement, as well as to explore Catholics’ self-understanding of their commitment for public water (see section 3). In addition, seven key informants without an official Catholic affiliation have been asked to comment on the Catholic contribution to the water movement;
- v) participatory observation to three events organised by Catholic groups during the 2011 referenda campaign (two in Turin and one in Milan) and four events organised in the aftermath of the referenda in 2012 in Turin complemented the analysis of section 3.

### 3. The moral economy revisited

Historian Edward Thompson elaborated the notion of moral economy in order to avoid the utilitarian approach to collective action and the automatic causality between economic stress and popular revolt within its analysis of eighteenth-century protests by the English crowd over famine and the grain market. Thompson argues that, in the context of a paradigmatic shift in the political economy of bread production and distribution, rather than a mere “rebellion of the belly”

these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing milling, baking, etc.... This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor (Thompson 1971, 79).

In Thompson’s analysis, the notion of moral economy refers both to a “traditional” system of economic exchange of goods and services embedded in social life, and to a set of moral norms and obligations expressing popular perceptions of legitimacy and justice in relation to collective wellbeing, economic transactions and the role of the state in governing these domains. Thompson’s interest lies in how these two dimensions interact in the formation of the conscience and identity of a group or a community – in other words, as remarked by Roitman (2000) and Fassin (2009), in the process of subjectivation (Foucault 1994) - and in orienting strategies and repertoires of popular protests.

While originally developed to analyse collective action in eighteenth-century Europe, the notion of moral economy has mainly found application in the study of social movements and popular protests in non-European contexts, particularly in African, Asian and Latin American countries, where it becomes an “almost inescapable concept” (Simeant 2011, 142). The trend has been facilitated by reference to the same formula, almost in contemporary with Thompson, by political scientist James Scott in his analysis of peasants’ ethic of subsistence and resistance to state high development schemes in south-east Asia (Scott 1977). Scott analyses “the normative roots of peasant political conception” about economic justice and their operative definition of exploitation – what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in terms of extraction over their production by the dominants. In Scott, the moral economy becomes a structural element, detectable in almost all peasant societies, that contributes to explain how practices of exploitation hold in presence of local systems of justice and why protests erupt when these arrangements are challenged. Reference to the moral economy become a key element in the analysis of the process of State formation in Africa by inspiration of John Lonsdale’s research on the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya (Lonsdale 1992) - linking the “internal architecture of civic virtue” with wealth in the process of class formation - and by its adoption as a central notion within the French approach of *politique par le bas* (Bayart, Mbembe and Toulabor 2008; Bayart 2008).

Consequently, the notion of moral economy has been applied to several analyses of water management schemes and social struggles for access and control of water resources in the context of so called “developing countries”. In these analyses, reference to the moral economy has been mobilised to challenge the thesis on the ecological-economic determinants of collective action, highlighting the relationship between material interests and the symbolical, cultural and social dimensions of water management systems. The symbolic aspect refers in particular to the role of water management schemes in influencing political communities’ identities, as powerful instruments for the “production of locality” (Mosse 1997). In addition, the analysis on the moral economy of water points to the contribution of water management schemes to articulate, reproduce and challenge social and power relations (Trawick 2001). It also highlights the moral foundations of these phenomena and the systems of norms on which they are grounded, promoting for instance reciprocity and reciprocal exchanges (Wutich 2011). Finally, in the context of more normative analysis, the moral economy of water has been associated to the notions of community and the commons, claiming that it offers the framework for “sustainable solution to the commons dilemma, creating a set of principles for sharing scarce water in an equitable and efficient manner that minimizes social conflict” and advocating for “community management” approaches against water privatisation (Trawick 2002 and 2003).

The analysis of the Italian water movement through the lens of the moral economy joins the trend that revisits the notion in order to understand social mobilisation in European or “developed” contexts. For instance, in his analysis of the 2011 English riots, Grover (2011) - although explicitly referring to the notion moral economy only in footnotes – points at the need to avoid mere criminal explanation of the protests based on individualistic and utilitarian framework, in order to highlight the cultural, social and material aspects of economic inequality that drove the protests. In addition, the notion of moral economy has been used as causal explanation of protests against neoliberal economic policies and austerity measures threatening moral conceptions and popular understanding of economic processes and correlated institutions of livelihood (Gemici 2013, Clarke and Newman 2012). More recently, the notion of moral economy has inspired the comparison between community managed irrigation schemes in Peru and Spain, indicating a “convergent evolution” towards systems that are “equitable, transparent robust, as well as being both socially and environmentally sustainable” and that counter the neoliberal “agronomic and technocratic model that guided government water policy throughout most of the world during the 20th century” (Trawick, Reig and Salvador 2014: 105). Finally, reference to the moral economy has been extended to the social studies of science (Daston 1995) or other social phenomena like domestic care labour (Näre 2011).

In order to avoid the concept stretching implicit in the last two uses, - with moral economy becoming almost a synonym of “popular culture” (Simeant 2011) – I will adopt a narrow definition of moral economy, referring to social mobilisations on issues related to subsistence and livelihood in the context of a political economy paradigmatic shift. Catholics’ mobilisation inserts within a moral economy of “water as human right and commons”, whose historical trajectory, protagonists and claims should be reconstructed along two main operative dimensions, strictly interconnected.

First, a vertical dimension, related to the moral and symbolic aspects of the mobilisation, highlighting what it expresses in terms of popular perceptions of legitimacy and justice in relation to collective wellbeing, economic transactions and the role of the state in governing these domains. In order to explore this dimension, I refer to the collective action frame perspective, given its analytical utility for understanding and illuminating “the generation, diffusion, and functionality of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings” within social movements (Benford and Snow 2000, 612). I adopt Benford and Snow’s definition of collective action frames as “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” and framing processes as an “active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction” (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). Consequently I analyse the role and contribution of Catholics in the framing, throughout the movement’s history, of what has been conceived as morally acceptable and politically legitimized in terms of public authorities and private actors intervention in the field of water services management.

Second, a horizontal dimension, emphasizing the communitarian aspects of the mobilisation and exploring how socio-economic aspects of the contention influenced the formation of the movement’s identity. This invites one to analyse the role and contribution of Catholics in defining the identity of the movement and its repertoires of contention, namely the “whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different types on different individuals” (Tilly 1986, 2), as well as to understand how Catholics conceive their involvement within the water movement.

This approach to the moral economy appears pertinent and relevant in understanding collective action on public water in contemporary Italy. It suggests first of all focusing on the theme of popular indignation against a paradigm shift in water management models. In Italy, this change has been introduced by the so called “Galli Law” (1994)<sup>3</sup>, restructuring the Italian sector – previously scattered into around 13.000 municipal providers - into a national industrial service inspired by market logics, namely the adoption of the competitive bidding system to identify the water service provider and of the principle of full cost recovery to finance the sector. The effects of this reform began to be evident a few years after its enactment, in terms of transformation of municipal water agencies into companies, merging former municipal water providers into multi-utility companies operating at sub regional levels and, in a few contexts, led to an unexpected rise of water bills.

These transformations have been labelled as “water privatisation” and coalesced within the Forum a vast alliance (alter-globalisation networks like the Social Fora and Attac, trade unions, civic committees, local authorities, environmental groups, consumer associations, development NGOs, fair trade cooperatives, faith-based associations, missionaries and the “friends of Beppe Grillo” (later becoming the Five Stars Movement) around a narrative centred on the notion of “water as human rights and commons”, like elsewhere around the globe (Bakker 2007). Through the reference to this notion, the movement articulated its conceptions about the legitimacy of public authorities, private actors and local communities in the management of water

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<sup>3</sup> Law n. 36, 5 January 1994, “Disposizioni in materia di risorse idriche”.

services, and more generally about the role they should play in the promotion of the common good.

Second, the Italian mobilisation for public water has not been “a revolt of the thirstiest”. Besides few local exceptions, material and instrumental claims linked to the rise of water bills, to poor management of the services or resource’s pollution did not represent the main drive for the protest. On the contrary, a recent survey indicated that the overwhelming majority of the Italian population is “highly satisfied” (62 per cent) or “satisfied” (23 per cent) with the quality of the water service (Istituto Piepoli 2012). Consequently, the Italian mobilisation for public water should be considered as an attempt to halt the process of privatisation of water services, preventing the effects popularly associated with these processes: the rise of water bills, the dis-possession by local authorities and communities of a strategic resource in favour of private interests. In this context, moral condemnation of the alleged violation of the basic right to water and the defence of ethical values linked to the idea of the commons have been among the main factors behind activism for public water during the 2011 referenda (Mazzoni and Cicognani 2012).

Third, the movement contributed to restore the centrality of water in the public debate, reversing the processes of “de-socialisation” of water management in western “modern” or “developed” countries (Van Aken 2012), where water has lost most of the symbolic and material role historically played in shaping cultures and societies (Teti 2003, Sorcinelli 1998). By affirming the centrality of water in the management of the territory, the mobilisation contributed to uphold local governments interests and their agenda on public services management. The mobilisation also contributed to rediscover or reinvent political allegiances and local identities centred for instance around the notions of “the commons”, “the major’s water”, the protection of springs from commercial exploitation by the bottled water industry, or the defence of local co-operative water management schemes.

Finally, the Italian water movement effectively managed to influence the official public discourse about water services management, framing it in terms of an issue first and foremost related to democracy (Carrozza 2012). The mobilisation for public water acquired the role of paradigmatic battle in defence of democracy and against the commodification of life, powerfully synthesized in the movement’s motto: “It is written water, it is read democracy”. This contributed to the consolidation of a narrative about norms and values like justice, dignity and democracy that spread beyond the boundaries of the Italian water movement and influenced other social struggles (Carrozza and Fantini 2013).

#### **4. Catholics and the framing of water as human right and commons**

The 2011 referenda marked the success of the Italian water movement in framing the issue of water services management in terms of human right, the commons and democracy, against competing frames referring to the technical aspects or to the governance of the water sector (Carrozza 2012). This success represents the culminating event of a conscious strategy of frame



construction, elaborated by the movement since its initial stages at the end of the 1990s, as recalled by Rosario Lembo, who is among the founders of the Italian Committee for the World Water Contract and its current chairman.

The referenda victory is the result of a commitment longer than a decade to promote a new water culture. Following the input of Riccardo Petrella we created in March 2000 the Italian Committee for the World Water Contract. Our main goal was to promote a new water culture, in order to integrate water issues among the priorities of the national political agenda and to raise awareness about the problems related to the lack of access to clean water and privatisation of water services around the world. In fact a main source of inspiration came from the participation to the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre where we met the representatives of indigenous peoples struggling against water privatisation in Latin America<sup>4</sup>.

The “new water culture” promoted by the movement revolves around the frame affirming that “water is a human right and a commons and not a commodity”. Through this reference, the movement articulated its conceptions about the legitimacy of public authorities, international institutions, private actors and local communities in the management of water services, elaborating on the role they should play in the promotion of the common good. These conceptions evolved throughout the history of the Italian water movement, which is characterised by a slightly different significance of the frame of “water as human right and commons”. This is due to the plurality of cultural and political repertoires that coalesced in the movement, as well as to the polysemic nature of the notion of the commons, both in the theoretical debate and within the mobilisation. Specifically, the frame of “water as human right and commons” has been constructed and evolved by referring to different sets of beliefs and meaning, corresponding to three different interpretations of the notions of the commons. These interpretations did not generate open frame disputes within the movement (Benford 1993). Rather, they inspired the articulation of different subframes that coexist, overlap, blur and sometimes collide within the movement’s narratives and practices, depending on political contingency, the movement’s historical trajectory and the influence of different groups and intellectuals (Fantini 2012).

First, there is a *cosmopolitan* subframe, expressed through the reference to “water as common good of humankind”. This subframe stems from the international origins of the Italian water movement, with development NGOs and so called “no global” groups at the forefront. Referring to the human rights approach, this subframe stresses the global dimension of the issue, connecting it to international solidarity and to the criticism of globalisation. The main issue of contention is the promotion of the universal access to water. Consequently the movement demands the explicit recognition of the human right to water in international fora, calling for an active role of institutions such as the United Nations in the fulfilment of this right (Petrella 2001).

Secondly, there is a *local* subframe, emphasising the role played by water resources in influencing the identity of local communities and the governance of the territory. This subframe

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with the author, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

draws on the theoretical debates on decentralisation and local governance, and resonates with the longstanding Italian culture and politics of localism, which celebrates the excellences of its various territories. This subframe emerged from the encounter with local authorities' concerns about the reform of the water sector. Therefore it conceives the management of water services as a primary responsibility of local authorities and actors "deeply rooted in the territory" (Petrini 2010), countering the interventions by national government, water multinational corporations or big national multi-utility companies.

Thirdly, there is a *radical* subframe focusing on the direct participation of citizens and communities to the management of water and other commons as the central element of a political project going "beyond the state and the market" and "beyond the public and the private" (Mattei 2012). Three main theoretical references influence this subframe: Elinor Ostrom's research on collective management of common pool natural resources (Ostrom 1990), Micheal Hardt and Antonio Negri's thesis on the need to re-appropriate the commons against neoliberal expropriation by state and market apparatus (Hardt and Negri 2009), and the work of lawyers who took part to the Rodotà Commission, created by the Italian Ministry of Justice in 2006 in order to reform the civil code articles regulating public property (Mattei, Reviglio and Rodotà 2007). This subframe oriented the legal and political processes leading to the referenda and the subsequent demand for re-publicisation of water services in different Italian cities. The three subframes share the tendency to overlap and blur the notions of *the commons* and *the common good*, transforming the opposition to water privatisation in a paradigmatic battle for democracy and against the commodification of life.

The coexistence of different subframes facilitated the inclusiveness of the movement's message and its resonance (Benford and Snow 1988) with Catholic Social Doctrine (CSD). In fact, the Italian water movement frame and subframes find relevant correspondence with the CSD. The acknowledgment of water as a human right and commons has been explicitly included in the CSD, affirming that "as God's gift, water is a vital element, essential for survival and therefore a universal right; water resources and its uses should be oriented to the satisfaction of everybody's needs and in particular to the need of people living in poverty". Moreover, CSD recalls that "given its nature, water cannot be treated as a mere commodity among others and its use should be rational and fair" and that "the right to water, like all human rights, stems from human dignity and not from mere quantitative evaluation considering water only as an economic good. Without water life is in danger. Therefore, the right to water is universal and infeasible". Consequently, the management of water should be inspired by the principles of fairness, sustainability, international cooperation, and poverty alleviation (Pontificium Consilium Justitia et Pax 2004, § 484 and 485). These positions have been reaffirmed in Pope Benedictus XVI's statements (Benedictus XVI 2008 and 2009), Catholic Church's official documents (Pontificium Consilium Justitia et Pax 2013) and Italian bishops' declarations (Toso 2011).

In addition to explicit reference to water, the notion of common good remains a central topic within the CSD, as an organising principle of the society and the main goal towards which it should be oriented (Matteucci 1983). In the Church's teaching about the role that Catholic should play in the political sphere, the understanding of the notion of common good has

evolved throughout history (Coatanéa 2013), addressing the main issues that feature the Italian water movement's understanding of the commons and the common good. Firstly, the *cosmopolitan* subframe reflects the link between the common good and the human rights approach emphasised in the encyclical letter "Pacem in terris" (Johannes XXIII 1963) and integrated in the CSD compendium. This interpretation echoes also the principle of universality associated to the notion of common good, as affirmed in the encyclical letter "Gaudium et Spes" (Vatican Council I 1965), as well as its connection with the primacy of the principle of solidarity over "the greed for profit" and the "thirst for power" stated in the encyclical letter "Populorum progressium" (Paul VI 1967). Secondly, the *local* subframe resonates with the principle of subsidiarity affirmed in CSD. Among other things, this principle opposes forms of centralisation, bureaucratisation and unjustified state intervention and apparatus (John Paul II 1991), emphasising the contribution of civil society and intermediary bodies to the promotion of the common good. The movement's *radical* subframe is inspired by a holistic approach to the common good that echoes the one of the integral human development, as proposed for instance in the encyclical letter "Caritas in veritate" (Benedictus XVI 2009). Moreover, in CSD, from the notion of common good stems the principle of universal destination of the goods, acknowledging the natural and universal right to the use of the goods to satisfy human basic needs, and the primacy of this principle over private property (Pontificium Consilium Justitia et Pax 2004, § 171 and § 177). The recognition of the social functions of every form of property, as well as the anthropologic vision of the humans as relational beings that founds these ideas, present several affinities with the *radical* subframe, emphasising access to the resources and their use value over their private property (Rodotà 2012). CSD and the Italian water movement frame share also an anthropocentric approach to water management. Water, like the rest of the Creation, is considered as God's gift to humankind. Human beings, compared to other forms of life, hold a peculiar and privileged place in taking care and enjoying the fruits of Creation. The Italian water movement's frame echoes this anthropocentric approach. Water, "indispensable for human life", is considered firstly and foremost in terms of a basic social service providing water for direct human consumption, neglecting other issues such as water uses in agriculture or the hydrogeological problems of the country.

Given the strong affinity between CSD and the Italian water movement frame, one would expect Catholics playing a key role in defining the content of the frame itself. In fact, Catholic groups have been involved since the very beginning in the Italian water movement. The international roots of the mobilisation defined the profile of Catholic actors and organisations that initially took part to it. These actors belong to the group – a relative minority within the broader Catholic constellation - of individuals and associations inspired by Christian pacifism and internationalism. Since the 1950s, these Catholic groups have developed a tradition of dialogue and collaboration with left-wing social movements with similar focus on international justice, peace, and environmental issues (Tosi and Vitale 2009). Thus, faith based development NGOs belonging to FOCSIV-Volontari nel mondo (the Christian Federation of Italian Development NGOs) and alter-globalisation groups encompassing Catholic activists such as Rete di Lilliput or pacifist associations such as Pax Christi actively contributed to articulate the movement frame and to

promote a “new water culture”, particularly at the initial stage of the process. This commitment translated into grassroots information campaigns and educational activities targeting schools, associations, and parishes, which heavily drew on the expertise and on the social capital of development NGOs. Water became one of the main topics of NGOs education campaigns, as testified by the rich production of publications and education material by NGOs and missionaries groups<sup>5</sup>. Framing water issues within the broader principles of sustainable development and international solidarity, these Catholic groups have significantly contributed to articulate the *cosmopolitan* subframe. The religious inspiration of these endeavours, however, remained implicit. In contributing to define that subframe, the Catholic NGOs did not make explicit reference to CSD. As explained by one of their representatives,

of course we have been inspired by our Catholic background. But in our projects on water issues we talk about human rights and development adopting a lay approach, as we do in the rest of our education activities<sup>6</sup>.

However, the resonance of the Italian water movement frame with CSD ensured its cultural compatibility with Catholic social and political traditions and facilitated its alignment with consolidated feelings on human rights and the common good belonging to large portions of the Catholic world (associations, parishes, cultural institutions, missionaries, and media). This resonance inspired the commitment of additional Catholic actors within the Italian Water Movements Forum, created in 2006. Among them, the most active - the Diocese of Termoli-Larino and the Dioceses Network for Sustainability<sup>7</sup> - explicitly referred to CSD’s norms and to the idea of “water as God’s gift and commons” in their official statements, contributing to bridge the water movement frame with Catholic feelings and positions. For instance, the Dioceses Network’s campaign on “Water, God’s gift and commons” has been instrumental in fostering parishes’ mobilisation for the referenda. Moreover, during the referenda campaign, in order to reach a wider audience and mobilise it for the vote, the Forum promoted strategic actions of frame bridging, for instance organising ad hoc events on water and religions.

Furthermore several official statements by the Catholic Church’s hierarchy amplified the water movement frame, ensuring its credibility and salience to Catholic believers and legitimising their engagement in the referenda campaign. In February 2011, Pontificium Consilium Justitia et Pax secretary, Mons. Falvio Toso, recalled that “water is not a commodity and cannot be managed according to mere economic and private criteria”<sup>8</sup>. In May 2011, the Vatican newspaper “L’Osservatore Romano” hosted an interview with Luis Infanti De la Mora, bishop of Aysen

<sup>5</sup> See for instance the rich catalogue in terms of publications on water issues by Editrice Missionaria Italiana (EMI), the Italian missionaries publisher.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with the author, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

<sup>7</sup> The network was initially composed by 25 dioceses which later become 67, also as a result of the water campaign <http://reteinterdiocesana.wordpress.com>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.diocesipistoia.it/news.asp?id\\_news=474&lingua=ita](http://www.diocesipistoia.it/news.asp?id_news=474&lingua=ita)

(Argentina). Infanti de la Mora is one of the leaders of the mobilisation against a hydropower project seeking to construct five large dams in Patagonia. In his pastoral letter "Gave us our daily water" he defined water privatisation as an "institutional injustice" (Infanti De la Mora 2010). In the months prior to the referenda, Infanti de la Mora presented his pastoral letter in a tour reaching parishes throughout Italy. Moreover, at the end of May, the secretary general of the Italian Bishops Conference stated that "water is an issue of social responsibility and common good", "the commons shall be preserved for the common good" and "the referenda should be valued as one of the expression of popular will"<sup>9</sup>. During the days prior to the referenda, several bishops and priests explicitly invited believers to vote the fulfilment of the civic duty of every citizens and believers, thus implicitly supporting the reaching of the quorum. In some cases they also openly expressed their orientation against water privatisation, quoting for instance the water movement motto "It is written water, it is read democracy"<sup>10</sup>.

The Catholic press contributed to amplify the water movement frame, in sharp contrast with the lack of visibility of the referenda throughout mainstream media. The media coverage analysis of the referenda highlights how Catholic newspapers and magazines contributed to break the silence over referenda issues, publishing at least one article on water management issues in their printed editions or in their websites during the weeks preceding the referenda (see Table 1). The majority of the Catholic press adopted either a neutral stand, offering to the readers both opinion in favour and against the referenda as a tool to uphold informed civic participation, or a supportive stand, giving directly voice to the movement through interviews or articles written by its militants. Among those there are the most popular and influent Catholic media: the Italian Bishops Conference newspaper "Avvenire" and the popular weekly "Famiglia Cristiana" - whose vice-director is the "hydro-inquisitor" journalist Giuseppe Altamore. On the contrary other Catholic media, in particular those close to Comunione e Liberazione (CL), like the magazines "Tempi" and "Tracce" adopted a critical approach to the referenda, hosting opinions and comments against it.

In fact, the Catholic world turned out to be far from monolithic in aligning to the water movement frame, as shown by the referenda. CL, for instance, kept a low profile without paying too much attention to the referenda issues. In the context of the referendum, where voters' mobilisation is essential in order to reach the validating quorum, coldness and indifference implicitly signal opposition to the referenda and automatically turn into a negative vote. Mons. Gianpaolo Crepaldi, Bishop of Trieste, made the Catholic most quoted explicit stands against the water referenda. The CISL (the federation of Catholic trade unions) secretary general, Raffaele Bonanni, expressed his personal opinion against the water referenda. The Catholic trade unions, however, left freedom of choice to their members. On the blog "Il landino" – written by former

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.adnkronos.com/IGN/News/Politica/Referendum-Mons-Crociata-acqua-rimanga-bene-comune\\_312052729491.html](http://www.adnkronos.com/IGN/News/Politica/Referendum-Mons-Crociata-acqua-rimanga-bene-comune_312052729491.html)

<sup>10</sup> Arcidiocesi di Trani-Barletta-Bisceglie, "Recarsi alle urne", 31 May 2011; Diocesi di Nola, "Referendum, dovere di tutti partecipare" 4 June 2011; Diocesi di Novara e Vercelli, "Acqua bene di tutti", 1 June 2011.

FUCI (Catholic University Students Federation) members – lawyer and MPs Stefano Ceccanti (Democrat Party) expressed his opposition to the water referenda, in particular to the one concerning the water tariff. In Ceccanti’s view, the referenda were inspired by “an archaic perception of the relationships between society and public administration, according to which the latter has got the monopoly over public interest”.

Criticism and perplexities about the referenda outcomes have been expressed also by Catholic sociologists in their commentaries on national newspapers. For instance, Giuseppe De Rita in the newspaper “Corriere della Sera” blamed Catholics for having “followed the flock” and for having “fallen in the simplistic trap” linked to the “theological belief that water is a gift by God and everybody’s good” (De Rita 2011). Along the same lines, Luca Diotallevi on “Avvenire” stigmatised the lack of capacity to build consensus over “courageous reform proposals”. He attributed this deficiency also to Catholics who in the past “have been protagonist of the most incisive season of reform featuring Italian Republic history” (Diotallevi 2011).

**Table 1 – Catholic press coverage of the referenda (May-June 2011)**

<i>Media: name, type [Newspaper (N), Weekly (W), Bi-monthly (BM), Monthly (M)] and publisher</i>	<i>Coverage of the water referenda</i>	<i>Stand on the water referenda</i>		
		<i>Neutral</i>	<i>In favour</i>	<i>Against</i>
L’Osservatore Romano (N, The Vatican)	No	-	-	-
Avvenire (N, Italian Bishop Conference)	Yes	X		
Famiglia Cristiana (W, St Paul Congregation)	Yes		X	
Tempi (W, Comunione e Liberazione)	Yes			X
La Civiltà Cattolica (BM, Jesuits)	No	-	-	-
Il Regno (BM, Dehonians)	Yes		X	
Rocca (BM, Cittadella di Assisi)	Yes		X	
Aggiornamenti Sociali (M, Jesuits)	Yes	X	X	
Mosaico di Pace (M, Pax Christi)	Yes		X	
Nigrizia (M, Missionaries)	Yes		X	
Popoli (M, Jesuits)	Yes	X	-	X
Tracce (M, Comunione e Liberazione)	No	X		

*Sources: selected media’s online archives*

In spite of perplexities and rejections, the water movement frame alignment with Catholic positions proved successful in highlighting the moral and cultural aspect of the contention, appearing as particularly salient for Catholics. In turn, within the Catholic world this allowed to overcome the boundaries of the groups traditionally active over social justice issues, and to

reach a wider - and usually quiet - majority of parishes, and individual believers. These latter participated in the “light campaign” carried out by the 16% of the overall voting population that, without any previous experience of political militancy, performed non-traditional, informal, and often individual practices of political activism (Diamanti 2011). The inclusiveness and elasticity of the water movement frame facilitated this process and proved effective in holding together a vast coalition of heterogeneous actors. Through this frame, the movement successfully inserted into a moral economy expressing popular consensus around the notions of legitimacy in water management: considering water as a human right and a commons and not as a commodity, advocating for its public management, and forbidding to make profit over it.

## 5. Catholics and the water movement identity and repertoires of contention

Beside the above mentioned activities of information and education, the moral economy of water as “human right and commons” translated into a plurality of initiatives and political practices. The *cosmopolitan* subframe inspired the Italian movement’s contribution to international events like the Alternative World Water Forum, in order to counter pro-privatisation policies promoted by institutions like the World Water Council<sup>11</sup> through the triennial World Water Forum. This approach inspired also the support to international solidarity projects to promote access to water in low-income countries. The *local* and the *radical* subframes stimulated claims for the re-publicisation of water services management, including: the adoption by local councils of proclamations recognising water as “service without economic relevance”; a comprehensive proposal for a national reform of the water sector framed as a popular initiative law, subscribed by more than 400.000 citizens’ signatures and presented to the Parliament in July 2007 (where it had no follow up); the 2011 referenda and their aftermaths - particularly the re-publicisation processes aiming at transforming water services providers in different Italian towns from companies under private law into special agencies under public law, and a civil disobedience campaign suggesting a self-reduction of the water tariff in compliance with the result of the second referenda.

The *radical* subframe inspired also the internal organisation of the movement and its self-representation, implying the critic of traditional political parties and democratic representative institutions, and the search for original practices of participation in the name of the commons. As explained by Paolo Carsetti, member of the Forum’s national secretariat,

the very fact that our fight is about the commons implies that in our internal organisation we cannot adopt the same practices of the old politics. You cannot defend the commons with hierarchical and

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<sup>11</sup> The World Water Council presents itself as “international multi-stakeholder platform” that includes representatives of national governments, UN agencies, international professional associations, NGOs and private companies. Among its main tasks there is the organisation of the triennial World Water Forum.

centralised structures like the ones of the political parties. What you need is a horizontal structure that facilitates citizens' participation<sup>12</sup>.

Consequently, the Forum codified and emphasised the adoption of several organisational patterns inspired by the principles of spontaneity, inclusiveness, horizontality and equality among all the participants: a decentralised and non-professional structure based on local committees of volunteers and militants, the decisions-making process by consensus, the refusal of charismatic leadership (Bersani 2012: 74-76). This suggests the idea that frames might contribute to shape the identity and the organizational structure of the movement. In fact, the mobilisation contributed to promote new political identities expressed through the "water people" label: at the local level, by (re)discovering territories or (re)inventing communities, with militants initially joining in representation of political parties or trade unions dropping their original allegiances to embrace the "water people" one; at the national level the referenda success legitimated the role of the Forum as a national political actor and the official voice of the movement.

What has been the Catholic contribution in crafting such identities and the movement's repertoires of contention? In the absence of structured Catholic presence and material interests at stake like in other social sectors (such as education or health), the Catholic commitment for water has been mainly related to the local trajectories of individual believers, priests or groups.

Initially, the Catholic participation to the movement was limited to a few actors and perceived as controversial. Beside the above-mentioned NGOs, contributing to the movement cultural endeavours with their global citizenship education repertoires, two specific experiences emerge as particularly relevant for the whole movement and its Catholic component. First of all the missionary Alex Zanutelli commitment in favour of the remunicipalisation of Naples water services, influencing local public performances with a religious touch (recurring for instance to blessings and prayers in addressing people and political adversaries, and storytelling the mobilisation). Thanks to his charisma and moral reputation – built on a longstanding activity of assistance in the Nairobi slum of Korogocho (Kenya) and advocacy for peace and social justice – Zanutelli emerged as one of the influential figures within the movement, both at the local and national level. He thus played a key role in terms of brokerage within the water movement between left-wing groups and the Catholic world (Tosi and Vitale 2009). On one side, Zanutelli accredited and made visible the Catholic presence within the movement in front of the left-wing press and groups traditionally attentive to his positions. On the other, he contributed to promoting awareness on water issues among a wider Catholic audience. The second experience is that of the Diocese of Termoli-Larino, which, through its Labour and Social Office has been among the founders of the Forum. Besides being one of the main actors of the mobilisation in the Molise region, the Diocese played a pioneering role, being the first Catholic institution to officially join the movement and stimulating the commitment of other. However, this presence

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with the author, 14th September 2012. A theoretical foundation of this approach can be found in Mattei (2011, 81).



was initially perceived suspiciously both within the Forum and within the Catholic Church. As remarked by Antonio De Lellis, director of the Diocese Labour and Social Office,

in March 2006, at the official launching assembly of the Forum in Rome, we were already there, as founding members, bringing with us our material inspired by the Catholic Social Doctrine. But it hasn't been an easy integration. We were perceived in a bad light by the rest of the Church, as not aligned with the orthodoxy of the "not negotiable values" defended by the Church. Within our dioceses there were doubts about the decision to go with No Global and social forums, seen as anticlerical. We received also many phone calls from other dioceses. One of those accused us of being a Communist diocese. We were seen with diffidence within the Forum too. They were asking: Why water matters to the Church? What are they doing among us? In fact, initially we were the only Catholic institution present at the Forum, beside a few missionaries participating personally. I remember at the first Forum assembly in 2006 only two priests: Don Silvio Piccoli of our diocese and Alex Zanotelli. (...) We received also strong criticism when we denounced the privatisation of water services in Molise by people saying that the Church was heavily entering into the political arena<sup>13</sup>.

Catholic participation to the mobilisation widened during the referenda. Groups like ACLI (Christian Workers Association) or "Beati i costruttori di pace" (Christian pacifist group) joined the Referenda Promoting Committee. Others like AGESCI (Catholic Scouts Association) or the Jesuit Social Network gave official external support. Additional support came through the adhesion of the Conference of the Missionary Institutes and the Dioceses Network on Sustainability. The commitment by all these groups shares with the whole water movement its spontaneous and bottom-up nature. In fact, the Forum is a nation wide network that emerged from the bottom up convergence of different actors. The Forum's participants remain highly jealous of their independence vis-à-vis political parties and institutions. Moreover, they scrutinize the conduct and the acts of the Forum central secretariat, in order to guarantee internal plurality, horizontality and autonomy of local groups. In line with this approach, the Catholics' involvement in the mobilisation for public water has not been promoted and orchestrated by the Church hierarchy, as it was for instance the case during the 2005 referenda on assisted fertilization. Rather, Catholic activism has been the result of local groups and individual believers' interests and commitment. Even in the case of national associations like ACLI or AGESCI, which officially joined the referenda promoting Committee, effective mobilisation on the ground considerably varied according to local sections tradition and individual members' interest for water issues. During the referendum campaign, activists of those organisations joined the movement's local common initiatives, rather than being involved in national events promoted by their respective associations. In some cases, like that of the Tuscany ACLI section, due to the peculiarity and the urgency of the regional struggle involvement in the water movement at the local level anticipated the national board decision to join the referenda promoting Committee. Therefore, in many cases, endorsement of the water struggle by national bodies and elites has mainly served as a source of legitimation and support for itineraries of mobilisation already developed. Similarly, official

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with the author, 18th April 2012.

documents and statements on water issues issued by the Church hierarchy played an important role in legitimating Catholic individual and collective commitment for public water. However, the Catholic hierarchy's official positions merely reinforced an already existing commitment, rather than initiating it.

Another feature of Catholic activism for public water is its ecumenical character. The mobilisation for public water offered the opportunity for many people to get involved in politics - for the first time or as a renewal of past commitment - on a "noble" theme, perceived as being above partisan and short term interests. Thus, for several Catholic believers and organisations, the mobilisation for public water offered the space to conjugate the affirmation of principles and identities with cooperation and relationships with actors inspired by different backgrounds and orientations. Militants describe their experience within the movement as a "beautiful relational experience"<sup>14</sup>, and the referenda campaign as "an opportunity to overcome our self-reference and work with other groups in a way that should be replicated in the future"<sup>15</sup>. The very nature of the issue facilitated the adoption of such ecumenical approach, "being water less divisive than the bioethical problems or the not negotiable values defended by the Church"<sup>16</sup>.

Consequently, Catholic activism has been mimetic with the rest of the movement rather than trying to affirm a distinctive identity and to weight in with its specific influence. The multifaceted character of water issues, implying political, spiritual, civic, social, and cultural dimensions, nurtured a plurality of itineraries among the Catholics activists themselves. Several of them got involved in the water movement by virtue of multiple belongings: to the parish, to the Scouts' group, to a civic committee or association, or as member of the Forum itself. Within these itineraries, civic and political motivations often overcome religious considerations as main drives inspiring and orienting the commitment for public water.

The spontaneous and mimetic character of the Catholics' commitment within the Italian water movement inevitably implies a certain degree of fragmentation of their presence and therefore the difficulty to overall assess the scope and the specificity of their contribution. With the exception of a few experiences, like those of Alex Zanotelli and of the Diocese of Termoli-Larino, and a few NGOs, the Catholic presence has not been particularly evident in influencing the movement in terms of identity and repertoires of contention. Beside the first two cases mentioned above, Catholics do not appear in the forefront of the organisation of the Forum. This fragmented participation scarcely influenced or transformed the way Catholics interpreted their civic and political commitment, except for an increasing attention to ecological issues within the Church's pastoral and social activities<sup>17</sup>. Thus the patterns of participation proposed by Catholic groups stem from their traditional specificities, missions, and charismas: educational activities targeting children and their families in the case of AGESCI, signature collection in support of the

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<sup>14</sup> Antonio De Lellis, cit.

<sup>15</sup> Alfonso Totaro (AGESCI), interview with the author, 6th June 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Roberto Santoro (ACLI), interview with the author, 3rd June 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Interview to Simone Morandini, theologian, Dioceses Network for Sustainable lifestyles, 17th May 2012.

referenda in the case of ACLI, and pastoral activities in the cases of parishes and dioceses. The lack of consistency and endurance over space and time of the Catholic mobilisation is one of the consequences of its spontaneity and autonomy. Beside the few Catholic actors historically active in the Forum, most of those who joined the movement during the referenda disengaged immediately afterwards, just like the majority of the peoples involved in the voting campaign.

## 6. Conclusion

The analytic utility of the moral economy approach lies in holding together the cultural and symbolic dimensions of social mobilisations - the “moral” - with the material aspects of the contention - the “economy”. In the context of mobilisations over issues related to livelihoods such as water, this approach suggests the need to integrate the constructivist analysis of the processes of formation of the movement’s cultural and political identity with the influence of material claims and practices related to the production and distribution of basic goods and services. Thus the moral economy approach invites to discuss dynamically the framing processes and the repertoires of contention, by detecting the militants’ itineraries of moral and political subjectivation in the context of the broader historical trajectory of the mobilisation.

Understanding the Catholic contribution to the Italian water movement in terms of moral economy allows recalling once more the plasticity of the religious phenomena, translated in the plurality of Catholics’ itineraries within the mobilisation. Catholic participation in the water movement has been a spontaneous and bottom up phenomena, influenced by local specificities and by the peculiarities of the charismas of the Catholic individuals and groups involved in the mobilisation.

Since the very beginning of the mobilisation, Catholics contributed to elaborate the water movement frame and subframes, by highlighting the moral and symbolic dimensions of the contention and by consolidating popular consensus over the notions of moral and political legitimacy in the management of water services. The resonance of the water movement’s frame with CSD principles fostered additional commitment by Catholic groups and individuals, widening the mobilisation and decisively contributing to the referenda success.

While playing a relevant role in re-socialising the moral and symbolic dimensions of water management, Catholics little influenced the material aspects of the contention. In fact, water remains managed through industrial services disembedded from social life, demanding technical knowledge and little accessible to ordinary citizens. In the water sector Catholics do not have a structured presence and material interests at stake, like in other social services such as education or health. Consequently, the Catholic presence within the water mobilisation has been mimetic, failing in shaping the identity of the whole movement and its repertoires of contention, as well as in influencing the way the main Catholic groups interpret their civic and political commitment. Rather than awakening political and religious identities, Catholic activism diluted itself in the broader moral economy of water as “human right and commons”.

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