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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DIRECT SOCIAL ACTION, WELFARE RETRENCHMENT AND POLITICAL IDENTITIES
Coping with the Crisis and Pursuing Change in Italy

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ABSTRACT: In the context of the economic crisis, research on collective action has increasingly focused direct social actions, that escape the traditional state-addressing repertoires of action and focus on a self-changing society: boycotts, solidarity action, political consumerism, alternative finance (e.g. crowdfunding, food banks), collective purchasing groups, occupations, self-management, free legal advice and medical services, to mention just a few. This article aims to address the issue of direct social action as a response to welfare retrenchment in the context of the economic crisis in Italy, focusing in particular on actors with a background in protest and social movement milieus. How do these actors keep protest and direct social action together? How do they justify the choice to engage in direct social action? How do they make sense of the contradiction between service-providing and claim-making? And what are the consequences of the choice of these forms of action on their identity? The article answers these questions through the analysis of 20 qualitative interviews to representatives of organisations engaging in direct social actions in Italy. The analysis shows that investigating the transition in the form of action as a political process, rooted in the decline of political participation, and aiming at reconstructing identity and politicisation, is helpful to understand how actors address the risk of substitution and to assess the outcomes of direct social action.

KEYWORDS: collective identity, direct social action, economic crisis, repertoire of action, welfare retrenchment

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, the economic crisis and the related public policies have been dramatically influencing both the daily life of European citizens and the public debate throughout the continent. Several episodes of political contention have been shaped or, at least, influenced by the social and economic context. In this context, research on collective action has increasingly focused on forms of participation that escape the traditional state-addressing repertoires of action and focus on a self-changing society.

Boycotts, solidarity actions, political consumerism, alternative finance (e.g., crowdfunding, food banks), collective purchasing groups, occupations, self-management, free legal advice and medical services, to mention just a few. There seems to be an increase in the types of collective action that have been defined as *direct social actions*: actions that do not primarily focus upon claiming something or other from the state or other power holders, but that instead focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself (Bosi and Zamponi 2015).

This article aims to address the issue of direct social action as a response to welfare retrenchment in the context of the economic crisis. It focuses on actors that are characterised, in collective or in individual terms, by a background in social movements and protest activities. How do these actors keep these two forms of action together? How do they justify the choice to engage in direct social action? How do they make sense of the contradiction between service-providing and claim-making? And what are the consequences of the choice of these forms of action on their identity?

The article aims to answer these questions through the analysis of qualitative interviews conducted with representatives of groups and organisations that have been engaged in direct social action in Italy, in the context of the recent economic crisis. It argues for a political understanding of these processes: engaging in direct social action, for these actors, is a response to the economic crisis and to the processes of social disintegration that have taken place in Italy, as a consequence of the neoliberal transformation of the economy, but it is also a choice related to the phase of movement latency and declining participation in protest events that have characterised Italy after the end of the 2008-2011 cycle of anti-austerity protest. Understanding the transition to direct social action as a political process is useful to understand also its outcomes, that are much more significant for the identity of the actors themselves than for society at large. These actors use a change in the repertoire of action as a device to change their identity: downplaying the organisational layer of identity, investing in a territorially-placed solidary group, reconstructing a broader community based on a more pragmatic identity. Looking at the choice of direct social action as a political process that derives

from an analysis of the political context, and which has political goals, is useful to address two of the main issues regarding experiences of welfare from below by social movements: the eventual role of substitution of public services that these experiences may have, legitimising *ex post* welfare retrenchment; and the assessment of the effective success of these experiences. In fact, we will see that the politicisation of daily life and of the access to public services, which direct social action is supposed to achieve in the activists' analysis, is exactly the way in which they aim to escape the trap of substitution; from their point of view, direct social action is a way to raise the issue of welfare retrenchment and to gain the credibility to oppose it among the depoliticised population. If this is the activists' goal, then outcomes should not be measured in terms of service provision, but in terms of political impact on the actors themselves, on their identity and on their capacity to sustain a broader and stronger mobilisation.

2. Context: Welfare retrenchment in Italy

European national governments and EU institutions (in particular the European Central Bank) mainly addressed the economic crisis of 2008 through internal devaluation policies in high-debt countries, and, in general, through the implementation of the typical deflationary measures of the so-called "ordoliberalism" (Scharpf 2011), primarily focusing on the reduction of deficit and public debt through austerity policies (Pianta 2012). Italy, from this point of view, makes no exception. The policies put in place by the Berlusconi, Monti, Letta, Renzi, Gentiloni and Conte governments, despite obvious differences, have maintained a substantial continuity in the tendency to cut public spending, in line with the indications of the fiscal compact and of other EU regulations (LIVEWHAT 2014). Nevertheless, the Italian case, in the context of high-debt European countries, shows two peculiarities. First, while European institutions have heavily intervened – through conditionality mechanisms – in the management of the crisis, Italy, unlike what happened in Ireland (Thorhallsson and Kirby 2012), Portugal (Magalhães 2012), Greece (English *et al.* 2016) and Spain (Pavolini *et al.* 2015), has not obtained a bailout from the ECB, that is, an economic aid package to avoid bankruptcy, with the consequent total or partial takeover of national economic policies by the troika; in Italy, instead, austerity policies were implemented through a mechanism of implicit conditionality (Sacchi 2015), in which the national government used EU regulations as an external constraint to justify neoliberal reforms (Ferrera, Fargion and Jessoula 2012; Pavolini *et al.* 2015). Second, when the crisis began, Italy was already coming from a long phase of restrictions on social spending. Welfare spending had increased more

slowly than was the European average until 2009, and started to decrease from that year onwards, with the result of a widening of the gap with other countries (Pavolini *et al.* 2015). The policies of welfare retrenchment implemented in response to the crisis were in substantial continuity with a process started in the 1990s, characterised by a series of reforms whose main goal was the containment of costs. Welfare cuts, privatisation of public services and labour market flexibility, implemented in many European countries in response to the economic crisis, in Italy already had a two-decade-long history (Pianta 2012). The crisis has increased the tendency to focus more on the "subtractive" part (that focused on spending reduction) of welfare recalibration, to the detriment of the "additive" one (Ferrera, Fargion and Jessoula 2012); the welfare system has witnessed a race towards the bottom, with virtually no increase in the protection of outsiders and a significant reduction of the protection of insiders (Pavolini *et al.* 2015).

3. Theoretical background: Direct social action, movement latency and collective identities

In recent years, direct social actions have been investigated by different sectors of social research: the third sector (Milbourne 2013), solidarity economy (Barkin 2012), economic activism (Forno and Graziano 2014), practices of alternative resilience (Kousis and Paschou 2017; Castells, Caraça and Cardoso 2012), prefigurative politics, specifically in the anarchist and post-autonomous tradition (Breines 1989; Holloway 2002), youth participation (Yates 2015), environmentalism (Agyeman *et al.* 2016; Schlosberg and Coles 2016), political life styles (Dobernig and Stagl 2015), commons (De Angelis 2017) and social innovation (Vitale 2009), among others. Looking at these forms of action through the concept of direct social action means situating them in the context of the repertoire of collective action (Tilly 1978) at large, rather than analysing them as separate from other forms of action, such as electoral participation or political protest. This allows us to investigate the choice of direct social action as a strategic choice (Jasper 2004; Jasper 2015) by social movement actors, and to analyse, as we try to do in this article, how and why this choice is made and with what consequences.

The literature on social movements has already highlighted the strong relationship between the choice of forms of action and collective identities (Melucci 1989; Gamson 1992; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Jasper 1997; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004), pointing out that "a social movement's tactical repertoires serve as sites for negotiating the relationship and the boundaries between a set of political actors

and those explicitly opposed to them" (Taylor and Van Dyke, 2004, 270). Nevertheless, this literature has focused mainly on the influence of collective identities, movement cultures and ideologies, in shaping the choice of forms of action, rather than looking at the way in which the choice of a specific form of action impacts on collective identities. Research on social movement outcomes has argued that collection action influences both participants and the larger population (Goldstone and McAdam 2001; Giugni 2004; McAdam 1999; Whittier 2016), though without considering the shift of boundaries between the former and the latter, as one of these outcomes. Boundary definition, instead, has been identified by Mario Diani (2015) as one of the core mechanisms determining the modes of coordination of collective action. According to Diani, what unites social movements and subcultures/communities is the presence of collective identities that go beyond specific groups and organisations, while the difference between them is the weaker presence of inter-organisational linkages in subcultures (Diani, 2015, 15-23). This contiguity and continuity between social movements and subcultures resonates with Alberto Melucci's work on the phases of "latency" of collective action, during which continuity is ensured by "movement areas […], networks composed of a multiplicity of groups that are dispersed, fragmented and submerged in everyday life, and which act as cultural laboratories." These "submerged networks function as a system of exchanges, in which individuals and information circulate. Memberships are multiple and involvement is limited and temporary; personal involvement is a condition for participation. The latent movement areas create new cultural codes and enable individuals to put them into practice" (Melucci, 1989, 60). Different authors have analysed the social actors that ensure a certain continuity between different waves of mobilisation as "abeyance structures" (Taylor 1989), "social movement communities" (Buechler 1990; Staggenborg 1998), "free spaces" (Polletta 1999), countercultures, subcultures and scenes (Bennett 1999; Leach and Haunss 2009; Martin 2009). From this literature, what emerges is the tendency to transition from social movements to communities in phases of latency, sometimes coinciding with a transition from protest to direct social action. This article aims to analyse this process of transition as a political process, and to investigate, in particular, its consequences for the collective identities of actors. In order to do so, we will refer to the model of collective identity proposed by Gamson, according to whom "it is useful to think of collective identities as three embedded layers": the *organisational layer*, namely "built around movement carriers—the union maid or the party loyalists"; the *movement layer*, "broader than any particular organisation", with people supporting "different efforts at different moments while subordinating all organizations to their broader movement identity"; and *solidary group layer*, that is, "constructed around people's social loca-

tion—for example, as workers or as black women" (Gamson, 1995, 100). In the analysis we will see how activists, in a phase of movement latency, in which the movement layer loses saliency, choose to reset the organisational layer of identity of their group and construct a new one, melting in the solidary group and investing in the elaboration of "new cultural codes"

4. Data and cases: Practices of welfare from below in Italy, in times of crisis

This article is mostly based on the analysis of the interviews conducted, between 2016 and 2018, with activists involved in 20 groups and organisations, all of whom have a social movement background and are engaged in direct social actions. This is a small sample of a broader set of interviews with representatives of organisations engaged in direct social actions in Italy, in times of crisis, which were conducted in the context of the project "Living with hard times: How European citizens deal with economic crises and their social and political consequences" (LIVEWHAT), funded by the European Commission under the 7th framework programme and coordinated by Marco Giugni. The choice of qualitative interviews allows us to focus on strategies designed by activists and on the meaning they attach to them: in-depth interviews, in fact "allow scrutiny of meaning, both how activists regard their participation and how they understand their social world" and "bring human agency to the centre of movement analysis" (Blee and Taylor, 2002, 95). Interviewees were selected via a representative approach based on a reflection of reality, political and geographical differentiation, and saturation. On average, the duration of each interview was about ninety minutes.

While the analytical part of the article is based on qualitative material, in this introductory section – in order to quickly describe the phenomenon analysed in this article and summarise its most important traits – I will use the data produced through the action organisation analysis (Kousis, Giugni and Lahusen 2018) conducted in the context of the LIVEWHAT project. The Italian team of the project mapped over 3000 collective actors involved in direct social actions in Italy, identifying – and subsequently using – general and thematic hubs that provided us with the websites of the organisations and groups. Next, the content of the websites of a random sample of 500 of these organisations, active between 2007 and 2016, were coded, according to a series of variables grouped into six main categories: site, organisation, practices, aims, frame and values.

In the broad context of direct social actions in Italy in times of crisis, practices of welfare from below occupy a significant space. Even when restricting the category only to the organisations responding to "basic and urgent needs", 22.29% of the sample en-

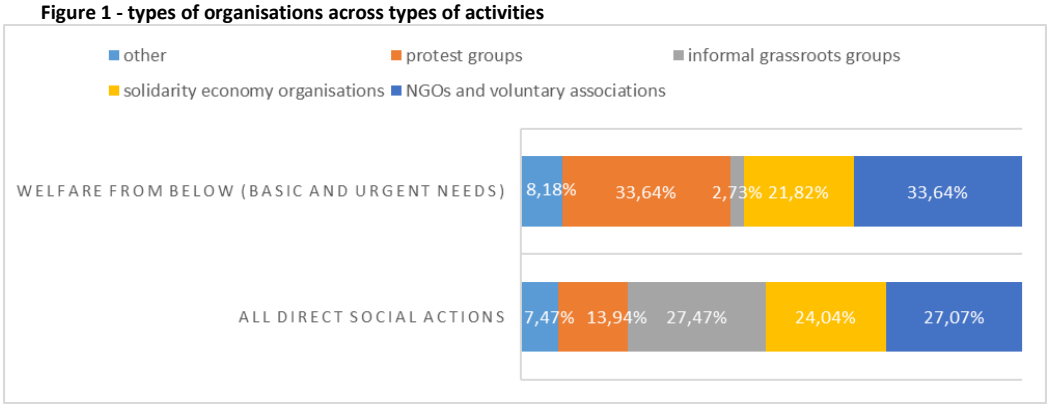
gaged in these activities, which included providing shelter, housing or accommodation (4.82%), soup, social and community kitchens that distribute cooked food free of charge (1.41%), social groceries distributing free or low cost food and home-related products (0.2%), provision of free health services and medicine (2.61%), provision of free mental health services (2.01%), social support, care and advice (9.64%), provision of clothing, shoes and other items (0.60%), educational and training activities, including language courses for migrants (10.64%), anti-eviction activities (4.42%), provision of free legal and consulting services to access state services (4.62%) and other activities (5.82%).

Who is providing these services? First of all, there are *NGOs and voluntary associations*, most of which belong to the vast world of the Catholic Church, whose role in the Italian society, in terms of service provision, and in particular of support to the poor, through big organisations like Caritas or Banco Alimentare, but also through a galaxy of parishes and groups of volunteers, cannot be overlooked. There are also secular NGOs: some of these are based on moral values of solidarity, as in the case of Emergency, which – after two decades of commitment to building and managing hospitals in war-ridden countries – has recently started a programme of social clinics in Italy; others are heirs of a tradition of cultural and civic engagements that, although not based on claim-making, was informed by a certain political belonging, as in the case of ARCI, the network of cultural and social clubs once linked to the Italian Communist Party. Next, there are *solidarity economy organisations* and *informal grassroots groups*: a wide range of small groups, cooperatives, time banks, self-managed mutual societies, fair trade initiatives and solidarity-based purchasing groups, often rooted in the environmental awakening of the 1980s and 1990s or in the Global Justice Movement of the 2000s. Finally, there are groups whose main background is in *protest activities* and in *social movement milieus*, and who have chosen – either as a supplement to their claim-making activity or as their primary form of action – to engage in direct social action.

As Figure 1 shows, protest groups account for only 13.94% of the sample of all organisations engaging in direct social actions, because of the very significant presence of informal grassroots groups and solidarity economy organisations, in particular in alternative consumption and solidarity-based purchasing. However, if we restrict the sample to those organisations and groups that engage in the response to the basic and urgent needs listed above, we see that protest groups account for more than one third of the whole sample, being as relevant as NGOs and voluntary associations. This shows the significant role of actors with a social movement background in providing welfare from below in times of crisis. In the last few years, in fact, a vast series of experiences of welfare provision by actors coming from social movement milieus have emerged:

from self-organised social clinics (like those managed by the activists of Je So' Pazzo and 081 in Naples) via childcare activities in social centres (like Làbimbi in the Bolognese social centre Làbas) to recuperated factories (like Rimaflow at the outskirts of Milan); from self-managed farms on occupied land (like Mondeggi Bene Comune, in the Florentine countryside) to the distribution of food by activists in particular neighbourhoods (like Nonna Roma, an initiative of ARCI and the trade union confederation CGIL in the 5th municipality of Rome).

Figure 1 - types of organisations across types of activities



Although these forms of action are not new, having characterised the Italian civil society and, in particular, leftist milieus several times in the past, from the origins of the Italian labour movement in the 19th century (Marcon 2004) to the 1970s (Bosi and Zamponi 2015) and the 1990s (Membretti 2003), scholarly literature has already observed a re-emergence of this phenomenon in times of crisis (Bosi and Zamponi 2019); this is clearly linked to the recent policies of welfare retrenchment and, more generally, to the crisis of the Italian welfare system, related both to the economic recession and to budget choices and increasing inequalities (Carcano 2016).

5. "We slammed our face into the truth:" Direct social action as a response to the decline of social movement participation

The choice of actors coming from a social movement background, to engage in direct social action in the context of the economic crisis, is clearly influenced by the crisis itself, by the austerity policies put in place by the government in response to it and, more in general, by the increasing demand for services, in a condition that combines

economic hardship and welfare retrenchment. The socio-economic context of crisis and austerity has played an undeniably significant role in favouring the re-emergence of these peculiar forms of action in Italy (Bosi and Zamponi 2019).

Nevertheless, if we focus on these specific actors, we see that an understanding of this change in repertoire of action solely as an automatic response to socio-economic changes – such as the crisis or welfare retrenchment – does not grasp the entirety of the phenomenon.

This is particularly clear when we analyse the reconstruction of the process that led to the engagement in direct social action by activists themselves. In these accounts, what emerges is the existence of another significant trigger of the transition to direct social action, that is, the decline in protest participation that activists have experienced in the last few years. For example, when asked why a group of Neapolitan social centre activists had decided to open a self-managed social clinic in a squatted building, one activist explicitly mentioned both the socio-economic context and the decline in movement participation:

> There are two reasons: collectives have realised that, if you try to aggregate people only via a political identity, you don't succeed anymore. "I am a comrade, me too, I come with you:" this does not exist anymore, or at least it is more difficult. What works, instead of pursuing the very high goal of changing the law, making a party, running for office, and so on, is to try and conquer the spaces of political possibility, freedom or reappropriation, in the little things, creating things from below. This creates consensus, probably. And then there is a decline in people's material conditions, because before they didn't pay 50 euros [of copay in public hospital] for an ultrasound scan, and so people didn't come. (I1)

Together with the "decline in people's material conditions" related to the crisis, what triggers the choice to open the social clinic is the observation that, "if you try to aggregate people via a political identity, you don't succeed anymore." There is, in the analysis of this activist and of others, a widespread crisis of participation and activism, an increasing difficulty to mobilise people. The consequence of this crisis is a change in the repertoire of action, with the choice of direct social action. The same double answer, linking together both the economic crisis and the decline in political participation, was given by an activist of a Roman social centre, who is involved in a vast series of community-related activities of "welfare from below," in the capital's Garbatella neighbourhood:

> On the one hand, the economic phase has played a role, with the crisis. On the other hand, the collapse of the political organisations we have known over the last few decades also played a role. The disappearance of that model of response to the needs of society meant that even the social centres have grown old and found themselves in a different world than the one in which they were born. This is a very important and very delicate debate, on the transformation of the social role of the occupied spaces of the 1990s and 2000s. Today, what plays a role is not only the economic phase, but also the transformation, in terms of effectiveness, of political organisations, compared to a few years ago. Today, going back to mutualism is necessary not only because there is a crisis, and poverty is once again a topical issue in a city like Rome, but also because those who nowadays decide to act politically in this city need to face the insufficiency of the organisations as we knew them in the past. (I3)

There is, from this activist's point of view, a visible decline in the "effectiveness of political organisations". Organising, mobilising and protesting seem to have a significantly weaker effect than in the past. "Even social centres have grown old". This past, as we will see, is rather vague: in this case, he is not referring to a remote past, but to the previous two decades. The declining effectiveness of political organisations that he denounces takes place in the context of the crisis, and clearly mirrors the exhaustion of the anti-austerity cycle of protest in Italy after 2011. From this point of view, actors who have a protest-based background, in a phase of movement latency, find in direct social action an interesting alternative. An activist of Làbas, a social centre born in 2012 that focuses mainly on direct social actions, from education projects for children to a market hosting small farmers, puts it even more directly:

> We prefer that there are movements. […] It is not as if there won't be anything ever again. But in this moment we are in a phase of non-movement. However, you have to find other forms of struggle. The fact that there is no movement does not mean that there are no struggles. So how do you do it? […] Where is it written that, if you call yourself a movement, then you will be in charge of that movement when it emerges? It isn't written anywhere. If you are not ready to renew yourself, to get out of your identity, to be free from certain rhetorical languages... (I4)

Direct social action is thus a form of action these actors choose, from their repertoire, in a context of movement latency. It is not simply an automatic response to welfare retrenchment, or to the emergence of certain socio-economic needs; it is the result of a political strategy, aimed at addressing the decline of political mobilisation in Italy after 2011. Activists have the feeling that a certain way of organising and mobilising is in a deep crisis, and strategically decide to change. This process of self-reflection

is interestingly described by another Neapolitan activist, member of Je So' Pazzo, a social centre created in 2015 when it occupied an abandoned asylum, focusing mainly on providing services to the neighbourhood, from healthcare to sports:

> It was a self-critical choice. The discussion, with all the concerns, was the result of having a scientific perspective on the situation. When you realise that certain models of struggle that belonged to a different economic and political phase are no longer effective, the debate is very honest. When you realise that ten years ago you launched a demonstration against the war [in Iraq], and a million and a half people showed up, while more recently there was the war in Libya and you found yourself with 2,000 people in the square, you have to reckon with the fact that there is a problem. That is not a problem of lack of sensitivity or of change of opinion on the war, but probably a mistrust of certain tools that once had an efficacy, leading people to participate. When this element is lacking, an element of strong depoliticisation emerges, also thanks to 20 years of Berlusconi government and to an ideological dismantling that took place. […] There was a strong desire to find a new form of organisation, a concrete way to start doing something again, something that, in reality, the Left had always done, in reality it wasn't such a new idea, it just responded to a condition that – in some ways – resembles what we experienced towards the end of the 19th century, when there was total precarity, and the first socialist organisations started exactly from creating institutions of solidarity in the territories. (I2)

In this activist's account, the choice of direct social action is not an automatic response to the crisis or to changes in the socio-economic context, although these clearly played a role. It is the result of a conscious process of analysis of, self-reflection on and strategising the efficacy of different forms of action in a particular political context. Traditional protest activities are described as "tools that once had an efficacy," but that people now "mistrust". Thus, there is the need to "find a new form of organisation". The decision to change the form of action is strategic, and it is the direct consequence of a certain interpretation of the present political context, as a context of "depoliticisation", of "ideological dismantling", a context in which people feel the need to do something "concrete". Coherently with what was cited in the previous quote, activists take latency as a chance to invest in something different, namely direct social action, and to conduct a process that should allow them to "renew yourself, to get out of your identity, to be free from certain rhetorical languages". What triggers this strategic choice is the activists' realisation that what they were doing was not working, as the same Neapolitan interviewee clearly explains:

> We slammed our face into the truth; we came from a history that was based on a level of politicisation that, in the meantime, had been completely lost in Italy. This led us to come to terms with the idea that we had to start over, focusing first and foremost on the social fabric and no longer on more political opinion struggles, because it was clear that there was now a real disconnection between ordinary people and those who had to represent those instances. (I2)

The people who started this social centre came mainly from the student movement, and in particular from collectives rooted in the Marxist-Leninist strand of the Italian radical left milieu. From their point of view, the radical struggles in which they had historically been committed require a certain "level of politicisation", otherwise radical movements risk becoming a small vanguard, "disconnected" from "ordinary people". If we put it in the language proposed by Gamson's multi-layered identity model, we are witnessing an increasing distance between the organisational, movement and solidary group layers of identity; in Gamson's perspective, there is a disalignment. This perception of a disalignment is widespread among activists. As the activist quoted above said: "If you try to aggregate people only via a political identity, you don't manage them anymore."

It is not something that activists observe and analyse only from the outside: rather, it involves them directly. A union activist we interviewed was among the founders of Sparwasser, an ARCI club in Rome that – other than hosting concerts and cultural events – also provides a grassroots service of legal and union aid for freelance workers. Here is how she explains in what way the choice of direct social action resonates with a certain feeling of urgency that she felt, in a context of the ineffectiveness of claim-making actions:

> The feeling that I had in my previous experiences, not in all but in many of the things I have done, was a perception of substantial lack of influence; that is, not being able to produce true change, true results, even if union action should be the one that responds to concrete needs *par excellence*. Yet, I often had a rather frustrating feeling of lack of influence. The idea of trying to do things that immediately gave me feedback, that I was improving the condition of something or someone, and that this built the premises to do something interesting, gives me back the meaning of what I do; it provides a sense of engagement. (I17)

The reasons for this disalignment are not always specified. Some activists interpret it as a short-term phase of movement latency, stating that "in this moment we are in a phase of non-movement" (I4), with mobilisation re-emerging sooner or later. Others describe a context in which "people stay closed in their own backyard, society is frag-

mented, politics does not give credible answers, representation is as it is" (I18), talking about "depoliticisation" (I2), "ideological dismantling" (I2), "disillusion" (I12), "the transformation, in terms of effectiveness, of political organisations" (I3), "fragmentation" (I17), "crisis of classical organisation" (I9), a historical "defeat of the workers' movement" (I15), and a context in which "they have corroded the foundations and now you have nothing to build on" (I12), alluding to something broader and deeper, to long-term processes of transformation of society and politics that resonate with the sociological literature on depoliticisation (Flinders and Buller 2006; Burnham 2001; Burnham 2017) and individualisation (Beck 2000). The two diagnoses have a different impact on collective identities: are we witnessing a disalignment between organisational and solidary group identities in times of latency, or have deep historical processes disintegrated solidary groups? These two elements – long-term processes of social transformation, on the one hand, the decline in protest participation after the exhaustion of the anti-austerity cycle of protest, on the other – tend to overlap in the activists' analysis. What is clear is that there is a depoliticised society, and the change of forms of action is necessary to repoliticise it. This does not mean that activists understand direct social action as non-political; they consider it as a form of action whose concrete and immediate nature makes it fitter than protest for the depoliticised phase.

6. Politicising society

For these actors, the goal of direct social action is not limited to the response to specific socio-economic needs; instead, the choice of engaging in this form of action aims at answering the perceived depoliticisation of society. As we have seen in the previous section, activists are sceptical of the possibility of processes of mass political participation in the present phase. But this does not mean that they renounce this possibility; rather, they work to create the conditions for it, and – in their analysis – direct social action is central to this process. A Neapolitan activist described the process, from direct social action via mass mobilisation to political representation, as follows:

> The goal is to build a [social] fabric of immediate resistance to the problems we face because of the crisis, but above all to ensure that this type of resistance can create a recomposition of all those subjects that have no say in the political matters of the territories, and of the country. We imagine building from those instances, from below, an overall political project that could also have the ambition to return to represent those instances, and to ask the institutions to take on the concrete problems of the people. (I2)

In this specific case, there is a clear model that activists aim to follow: Greece. The relationship between anti-austerity mobilisations, the experiences of direct social action put in place as a response to the crisis in terms of welfare from below, and the electoral success of SYRIZA becomes, in the minds of certain activists, a textbook example of how to repoliticise society:

> On this, Greece has opened our eyes. Notwithstanding the way that story ended, we have reflected a lot on the political and social process that led SYRIZA to the government of that country. What we discovered is that that experience started not only from a high level of political mobilisation – more than 30 general strikes, a very strong level of labour struggle – but, above all, from a whole level of connection that was created between all these entities that practiced mutualism. These social instances were effectively able to reconnect and give an immediate answer to the concrete problems of the people, and to immediately build a hope of redemption, but not only an immediate help, through the construction of a political subject that was directly emanating from that experience. (I2)

Interestingly enough, there is no significant difference – in this interpretation of direct social action as a tool to repoliticise society in response to the decline of political participation – between those who consider this decline to be a temporary phase of movement latency and those who believe it to be the result of long-term trends of depoliticisation and individualisation, or of the historical exhaustion of the propulsive force of the workers' movement. A young member of a post-Trotskyist party, which recently dissolved exactly as a result of the choice to massively invest in direct social action, has joined Rimaflow, a recuperated factory at the outskirts of Milan. He recounts the reasons for this choice rather precisely:

> In other words, the problem today is that, with the defeat of the workers' movement, there is the need to rebuild a political praxis, but starting from the bottom. We should no longer have a theory that falls, from above, on situations, a sacred Word, a truth, but we have to merge, instead, with the social in order to rebuild it together, to create those networks that in the future will form the new labour movement. [...] Our ideas are no longer present in society. It means that you have to rebuild it. It means that an alternative idea needs to be reconstructed piece by piece. [...] At this stage, […] I think it is important to reconstruct, from the basis, the idea that an alternative is possible, and the action is that of building networks of real initiatives on migrants, who work on environmental issues, who are able to build a revolutionary movement. (I15)

The strategy described here is crystal clear: activists need to "merge with the social in order to rebuild together" the politics, so as to renounce existing political identities

in order to blend into the depoliticised fabric of society, and then, from there, create the basis "that in the future will be the new labour movement", All this should happen through direct social action, which allows activists to "politicise the need" in order to "politicise the social". This reconstruction almost perfectly mirrors the analysis of movement latency proposed by Melucci (1989), with the idea of movement areas acting as "networks composed of a multiplicity of groups that are dispersed, fragmented and submerged in everyday life, and which act as cultural laboratories", with the goal of creating "new cultural codes" for mobilisation (Melucci, 1989, 60). This activist is not imagining a brief phase of latency; instead, he conceptualises the present context of decline in political participation as the outcome of a long-term process, namely the "defeat of the workers' movement". Nevertheless, even with a slightly different diagnosis, the prognosis is the same: downplaying political identities, investing in society in order to gradually politicise it and, through this process, creating the condition for a future phase of mass political participation.

The same dynamic of reaction to a landscape of declining political participation, decision to invest in direct social action, and conceptualisation of this form of action as something that is useful to a long-term process of re-politicisation, is described by an activist of a squatted building in the centre of Florence. The occupation started in 2014 and provides a setting for various activities, from concerts to a farmers' market:

> In 2007-2008 the neoliberal campaign of crisis, cuts, austerity, etc., started, and we saw that there was no political actor. Not only was there no class-based political actor, but not even a political actor that could act as an alternative to the dominant ones. [...] We thought of a space […] that gives answers, even concrete ones, a space that gives people a chance to do something. [...] In my opinion, there is a lot of growth margin for these grassroots experiences. Because when there is no political actor that can be a reference, when there is so much disillusion, criticism of the state, when everything is missing, then self-organisation is the solution that many are choosing. There is need for an accumulation of strength. This conception of doing politics as a continuous mobilisation does not pay, you need to accumulate victories, even small ones, to give a little hope and to make this hope sediment. From what you do, you accumulate forces to then counter-attack. Many are thinking about building solid bases for a new alternative project, because, given the power relations, it is more important to sustain a certain level of radicality and alternative to the system, so that, whatever happens, you can go on […]. There's no point in trying to have an effect on the political level, in five years they have scorched the earth, they have corroded the foundations and you have nothing to build on. So it is better to work where capitalism gives you the space, and now there are so many: the state does not have legitimacy, presence […]. It is better to work in society, to socially

> transform the situation as much as possible, in order to have a more favourable situation to express a political alternative. (I12)

In the context of latency and depoliticisation, activists feel as if "there's no point in trying to have an effect on the political level", because "they have corroded the foundations and you have nothing to build on". Politics needs to be rebuilt from scratch, from the "scorched earth" that is Italian politics, five years after 2011—the year of the debt crisis, of the grand-coalition governments, of the triumph of austerity and the failure of anti-austerity mobilisation (Zamponi 2012). People are disillusioned, there is the need to build hope, and hope needs small victories from the grassroots level. What emerges here is, once again, the idea that direct social action is interesting to these actors not *per se*, that is, not for the immediate and concrete results (although considered relevant) that it produces in responding to the people's needs in terms of welfare from below; rather, direct social action attracts activists for its potential in terms of mass repoliticisation. There is the idea that the small scale and down-to-earth characteristics of direct social action are ideal to attract people, to "give a little hope and make this hope sediment" into politicisation, accumulating forces for "a more favourable situation to express a political alternative". This process needs to take place "where capitalism gives you the spaces, and now there are so many": From this point of view, the economic crisis is interpreted more as an opportunity than as a threat; given that "the state does not have legitimacy, presence", there is the chance to invest in welfare from below, in this perspective of repoliticisation. This same idea – of the crisis as an opportunity – is reproduced by an activist of Mondeggi Bene Comune, a self-managed farm not far from Florence:

> In our opinion it is a path [that of direct social action] in continuous growth. If ten years ago a story like Mondeggi was unthinkable, today, after the crisis, after all these fields that have been abandoned, the time is ripe. The Genuino Clandestino network[1] is constantly growing, it is growing more and more. (I13)

Activists do not draw a precise line between what is "social" and what is "political", and it is very clear that they also consider direct social action, as they perform it, to be inherently political. But what is most important is that they see, in direct social action, a potential antidote to depoliticisation: a way to bring people back to an engagement in the public sphere. What is political, notwithstanding the characterisation that can be

[1] A national network focusing on food sovereignty, alternative agriculture, biodiversity and solidarity economy.

given of the different forms of action, is the process activists aim to engage in, from the analysis on which this process is based to the goals it aims to achieve.

7. Politicisation as an antidote to substitution

Activists are well aware of the main risk that providing welfare from below carries in a context of welfare retrenchment: legitimising *ex post* the cuts to public services and providing a cushion that satisfies people's needs, dispersing the potential for political contention. This contradiction is well summarised by an activist of a self-organised social clinic in a Neapolitan social centre:

> We talk about "welfare from below" experiences when they are transformative, while many only replace public services, which is the main problem of the clinics: you do the clinic, but are you just doing voluntary work or are you doing politics? Are you helping the public to decongest, so that people feel the contradictions less, or do you need it as a means to get into a social fabric and start a fight? What we always say is that our goal is to close. We would like to be able to conduct such a big struggle that healthcare in Campania works and there is no need for the clinic anymore. On the banner that we hung up in the entrance we wrote: "We do not do charity, we create a community." This is the idea behind what we would like to do. (I1)

Understanding the choice of direct social action as a political process helps to understand how activists face this contradiction; since, in their analysis, direct social action has a politicisation goal, it will not disperse the potential for political contention, but it rather favours the accumulation of strength and the politicisation of society that, in turn, will create the condition for more political participation in opposition to welfare retrenchment. All the interviewees describe internal discussions on how to politicise their action in order to make it as different as possible from market or third sector experiences, as explained by an activist of a self-managed farm:

> We said to ourselves: Mondeggi should not be the classic organic farm, because then you die like everyone else. We want to create a movement for small farmers that publicly claims the principles of Genuino Clandestino, and creates an alternative model of economy that can save Italian agriculture. (I13)

A similar attitude is displayed by an activist of Nonna Roma, a project of food distribution in the 5th municipality of the city, promoted by the trade union confederation CGIL and the leftist cultural network ARCI:

> We have decided to address the poorest in our community, avoiding the dynamics of assistance that often characterises these initiatives, to create instead processes of politicisation and activation. We started from a less typical experience for the Left: that of food distribution. Then the legal aid, the anti-eviction pickets. This summer we have organised an outdoor cinema, because it is not true that bread is all you need if you are hungry. (I9)

Both activists cited above express the will to differentiate their projects from non-political cases of welfare from below. This difference is based on the fact that they "publicly claim" certain political goals, that they aim "to create processes of politicisation and activation". What distinguishes them from the market, the third sector, volunteering and, in any case, from mere substitution, is that they do not want their process of service provision to be peaceful and to consist only in the mere satisfaction of certain needs; they want the fact that those needs are satisfied by a political actor to count, and to have a politicisation effect on beneficiaries. As the activist of Rimaflow said in a previous quote, they aim to build "experiences that are, first of all, able to respond to the needs […] but at the same time to produce contention". An activist of a Roman social centre – engaged in welfare from below – clearly explains this line of thought:

> All these projects here immediately become contentious when they clash with the fact that the answers are given by the social centre, and not by the state. (I3)

The idea is that satisfying certain needs that the state is not addressing in times of welfare retrenchment inherently points out that welfare retrenchment is taking place, if this process is interpreted politically. How does this happen? The process that many activists describe is long and tiresome. The experience of the Neapolitan social clinic is particularly interesting from this point of view:

> Today aggregation is difficult to obtain directly through a political or identity issue. If, before, you said, "you are a worker, come with me, we do the collective, join the PCI", now aggregations respond to needs, and this certainly has a contentious potential […]. The clinic allows you to be recognised in the neighbourhood and also to convey messages. Then, it depends on how you do it. […] When we work at the clinic, there is a small group of people who are sitting. All the people, immigrants, they create very nice scenes.

> You give a woman a flyer, saying "Madam, do you know that the Annunziata hospital is closing?" and you start to convey, very simply, certain messages, which are then recognised, because last week some of the ladies that often visit the clinic came to the rally against the closure of the public hospital, they came to bring solidarity. It is undoubtedly not the thing that makes you spark a revolution, but we have had some answers. (I1)

From this point of view, the clinic aims to allow activists "to be recognised in the neighbourhood and also to convey messages", in order to favour the expression of the "contentious potential" of welfare from below, which needs to be "transformative". If the choice of direct social action is understood as a political process, following a political analysis and geared at achieving political goals, then our conception of what the outcomes of direct social action are changes. The outcomes of experiences of welfare from below are not limited to answer a certain need in itself, but they rather consist in politicising a certain sector of society. In fact, activists claim to be partially successful ("we have had some answers") not when many people use their services, but when some of them become politically active in protest events: "Last week some of the ladies that often visit the clinic came to the rally against the closure of the public hospital, they came to bring solidarity".[2]

8. Politicisation through direct social action and identity work

The politicisation process that activists aim to trigger in the people and communities they meet through direct social action requires a certain identity work. As we have seen in section four, activists aim to "merge with the social," to immerse themselves in the community of people whose needs they address through direct social action, in order to develop this process of politicisation. This means merging with these people and communities, offering the chance of multiple levels of commitments, building a mechanism in which those who participate with a depoliticised attitude have the possibility to gradually evolve. This process is well described by a social clinic activist:

> Then we also do other things, given that we want to give a somewhat political connotation and not just do voluntary work; there is an organisational assembly, then there is a somewhat more political assembly, where documents are written, et cetera […] There is

[2] This goal of repoliticisation is widely shared, while there are obvious ideological differences regarding the role the state should have in public services, as has already been shown elsewhere (Bosi and Zamponi 2019).

> the plan of the visits, the political one, and then some cultural activities, presentation of books, these kinds of things. [...] The doctors who also do the assemblies with us are all young, specialising, while the more adult ones do not participate in assemblies with us; sometimes, if it happens, but they get pissed off. […] Let's say that the doctors join at the beginning because they want to volunteer, then afterwards we try to develop things with them slowly, trying not to be too boring, say a political discourse, but it is not that we consider it necessary—if you only want to help, no one forces you to do the assembly, but we always try. (I1)

If we put it in terms of Gamson's multiple layers of identities, what we see here is an attempt to correct the disalignment described in section three. Activists with a social movement background that choose to engage in direct social action aim, as we have seen, to "merge with the social:" to renounce a part of the organisational and movement layers of identity in order to realign the latter with the solidary group layer, and to create the preconditions for politicisation. This implies a partial renunciation by activists to the things that distinguish them from the people and communities they address through direct social action; they aim to merge with the people that are involved in their activities, reconstruct with them a new shared identity and emerge from this process with a new politicisation. An activist of Nonna Roma describes this process as follows:

> We do not conceive of ourselves as volunteers who help others, but as a self-organising association. Our volunteers and the people we help are equally members of our association, and we have held collective assemblies. Some have started coming to the pickets, helping to run the warehouse. There is a great need for these experiences, in the crisis of classical organisations, to repoliticise people within processes of participation. There is an enormous need for democratic literacy. (I9)

Thus, renouncing a part of their own identity (or, at least, its organisational layer) is necessary for activists to shift the boundaries of their community and build new, broader identities in new, broader communities together with the people they meet through direct social action. An activist of the Roman ARCI club Sparwasser puts it very clearly:

> At the beginning we didn't know what identity to give ourselves, and still, after a year of activity, we don't have a complete answer. So we said, "let's build identity by doing the things we told ourselves to do". (I18)

As we have seen earlier, some activists locate the roots of the disalignment between the different layers of collective identity in the crisis of the solidary group layer. If people do not feel as if they share a certain objective condition, if they do not share a certain social group identity, it is obviously difficult to mobilise this identity. Thus, for many activists, direct social action is not simply a way to make other people develop a movement layer or an organisational layer of their collective identity; it is a tool to reconstruct the possibility of a solidary group layer, to build links between people, to overcome fragmentation and individualisation. Another Sparwasser activist, with a background in union action, explains why she and others decided to offer union aid service for freelance workers in the club:

> In 20th-century society, on which trade unions and the representation of labour were based, it was assumed that people discovered the similarity of their conditions and needs because they were in the big workplaces, in the large factories, doing the same job, and they compared themselves with each other and recognised that they all did the same job and had the same problems. In the world of fragmented labour, where the unifying spaces of work are much fewer, […] this cannot be assumed as a given. Or at least it is very fragile. This is probably why there are other spaces, places where one can build this dimension of recognising oneself, of sharing one's needs, one's desires, and from where to build an organisation, a network, a collective action. This, in my opinion, is the ambition. So, making a mutualistic initiative that addresses the issue of work, within a social space, necessarily gains a different flavour. It is not the same as doing it in a union service centre, because people do not go there to drink a beer in the evening, they do not recognise themselves, they do not understand that they have the exact same problem as others. One goes there to respond to a need he or she has already decoded, but probably in individual terms. (I17)

The diagnosis is the one we have already encountered in section three: people "decode their needs in individual terms" because society is "fragmented" and there is the lack of "unifying spaces". Politicisation does not only consist in providing a movement layer and an organisational layer that align with an existing solidary group layer; what activists need to do is to build the basic layer of collective identity, the one that allows people to "decode" their needs in collective terms. The choice to "merge with the social" is necessary since what is lacking is the social itself, not simply its political projection.

The choice of direct social action, as we have seen in this last section, implies a certain identity work for social movement activists. The outcomes of this identity work end up being among the most significant outcomes of the choice itself. Many activists explicitly describe a transformation in the way they conceive and develop their activi-

ties. For example, the self-managed farm Mondeggi Bene Comune was started by activists who had previously been involved in a university collective. One of them explains the transformation, in terms of language, symbols and style, from one experience to another, as follows:

> We made a very important revision of all the slogans, the terms, the ways of doing mobilisation. When we were at the university, we talked much more like "anti-capitalist struggle against the master," using the same slogans of the 1970s, the 1980s, flyers for which you needed three degrees to read... We said: "Enough. This way of doing politics, however, has led to nothing, because in any case we are always struggling for the same things", and we completely changed the vocabulary, the words, the way of establishing relationships. […] We have used a lexicon that concerns everyone. In any statement we have written, we haven't used certain words. You can do practices to achieve the same goals, but using a completely different vocabulary. People appreciate it, and hear it. For example, when I brought my mom a flyer from the university with the words "anti-capitalist struggle, yada yada yada, the comrades", my mother used to say: "I'm not a comrade, what the fuck does capitalism mean, what's the alternative, communism is all shit", and she would throw it away. […] It is a process at which we have arrived without ever talking about it explicitly, but it happens if you put people in their 70s with 20-year-olds in meetings. The intelligent thing was to be able to let go, not wanting to impose oneself. [...] We never called it squatting. We call it popular custody. [...] A public custody, because we consider ourselves a horizontal movement that defends a common good; when we leave this common good we will leave it better than we found it. (I13)

The new organisational layer of identity of Mondeggi Bene Comune is very different from the one the activists shared before transitioning to direct social action, and this transformation in identity is a very significant outcome of the change of the form of action; it will allow activists to make a different choice in the future, in a community the boundaries of which have been redefined by direct social action.

9. Conclusions

This article aims at providing a more nuanced understanding of the experience of welfare from below, developed by actors with a background in social movements and protest activities, highlighting the nature of a political process that characterises the choice of direct social action as a response to welfare retrenchment. The analysis shows that activists view this choice as the result of a phase of decline in political par-

ticipation, other than as a reaction to the emergence of socio-economic needs that the welfare state does not answer.

This decline in political participation is not reconstructed in a homogeneous way by all activists, who point to both a short-term process, a phase of movement latency after the exhaustion of the 2008-2011 cycle of anti-austerity protests, and a long-term process, the result of decades of depoliticisation, individualisation and neoliberal transformation of society.

Through a transition in the repertoire of action, actors work on their own identity, downplaying the organisational layer and aiming to merge with society in order to reconstruct a territorially-placed solidary group, with its own identity as the basis for a new politicisation. If we conceptualise this new politicisation, and not the immediate answer to socio-economic needs, as the goal of the choice of direct social action, we may better understand both how activists aim to avoid the trap of substitution and *a posteriori* legitimation of welfare retrenchment, and how to assess their success or failure. In fact, the outcomes of direct social action, at least with regards to these actors, mainly reside in its capacity to repoliticise the communities in which they act, and to change the actors themselves. While the former process seems very ambitious to be conducted on such a small scale, we may already observe significant developments for what regards the latter: actors of the Italian social movement milieu have gone through significant changes during this phase of latency. What remains to be seen is the deployment of the new cultural codes that direct social action has helped develop in future collective action.

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Interviews

I1: Interview to activist of Presidio di Salute Solidale, Naples, July 1st 2016.
I2: Interview to activist of Je So' Pazzo, Naples, June 30th 2016.
I3: Interview to activist of La Strada, Rome, April 28 2016.
I4: Interview to activist of Làbas, Bologna, May 18th 2016.
I5: Interview to activist of Action, Rome, April 28th 2016.
I6: Interview to activist of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, Rome, April 28th 2016.
I7: Interview to activist of Casa Madiba, Rimini, July 12th 2016.
I8: Interview to activist of Cinecittà Bene Comune, Rome, April 27th 2016.
I9: Interview to activist of Nonna Roma, Rome, October 9th, 2018.
I10: Interview to activist of Ex Asilo Filangeri, Naples, July 1st 2016.
I11: Interview to activist of Lab AQ16, Reggio Emilia, June 17th 2016.
I12: Interview to activist of La Polveriera Spazio Comune, Florence, May 26th 2016.
I13: Interview to activist of Mondeggi Bene Comune, Bagno a Ripoli, June 20th 2016.
I14: Interview to activist of Rete Diritti in Casa, Parma, March 25th 2016.
I15: Interview to activist of Ri-Maflow, Trezzano sul Naviglio, April 23rd 2016.
I16: Interview to activist of Ritmo Lento, Bologna, February 20th 2018.
I17: Interview to activist of Sparwasser, Rome, June 28th 2016.
I18: Interview to activist of Sparwasser, Rome, June 28th 2016.
I19 Interview to activist of XM24, Bologna, July 8th 2016.
I20: Interview to activist of TPO, Bologna, May 28th 2016.

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