

Master's Thesis
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You Must Be Crazy!

Fostering Solidarity and Political Participation in the City of Naples
through Grassroots Self-Management

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- *We have to fight for the right to invent the terms which allow us to define ourselves and our relations to society, and we have to fight that these terms will be accepted.*

This is the very first need of a free people, and this is also the first right refused by every oppressor.

Stokely Carmichael

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Introduction

This thesis aims to outline, by way of a thorough ethnographic analysis, an attempt to develop political engagement and values such as community resilience, mutualism, and political participation within the urban environment of the city of Naples. A city where social marginality and exclusion are part of a broader system of socio-economic and political knowledge inequalities, in the past two years Naples has seen the birth and growth of an innovative social movement born on the ashes of an abandoned asylum: the “Ex- OPG – Je so’ pazzo” (“I am crazy”, in Italian). Marginalized and excluded social strata of the city, such as the local homeless population, undocumented immigrants, and illegal workers, who have always found themselves incapable of accessing the knowledge and the resources necessary to enact practices addressed to social change, are being involved in processes of shared knowledge building thanks to the practices of the social movement. Such innovative practices are being experimented by the research population, the subject of this thesis, in a context of political disengagement and social atomization enforced by the neoliberal hegemony and its depoliticizing ideology.

The imagination of an alternate society through innovative social practices and the attempts to build forms of shared knowledge are slowed down by the neoliberal hegemony through two main ideological tools. Such tools, both part of a process of de-politicization of the masses, can be identified as the “humanitarian paradigm” (Ticktin 2011), which depoliticizes attempts of social change by harnessing structural knowledge of the existing power structures, and the hegemonic securitization discourses related to the function of the state. Any attempt to change the social reality is therefore relegated to the realm of the moral imperative to relieve the sufferings of the disenfranchised through volunteer work, preventing individuals to engage with wider political projects aimed at a true, radical change of the power structures in place.

Within this context, the political movement “Ex- OPG – Je so’ pazzo” is working towards the implementation of socially innovative practices aimed at the creation of a local community in which values such as political engagement, solidarity, and mutualism can orient the imagination of an alternative reality to the one framed by the hegemonic ideology. Through the reuse of a previously abandoned ex-asylum, the social movement is working on a political project side by side with the local population, in what can be called an innovative “socio-political laboratory”. The militants of the social movement are creating this innovative laboratory by implementing social services such as free medical and legal assistance, afterschool services, and cultural and recreational activities, all under a clear and elaborate political project. Such framing of the social activities of the movement is creating a virtuous dialectical relation between the militants and the people involved, through which the

imagination of alternate realities to the hegemonic one are made possible by a politically engaged social practice aimed at the construction of a community based on solidarity values. The immediate political results of such a laboratory that I have been able to witness revolve primarily around the betterment of the socio-economic conditions of disenfranchised people, such as the homeless and undocumented immigrants, who do not have access to state funded social services. Alongside these material results, I have also been able to witness a consistent spread of political consciousness and confidence in the effectiveness of the political action on those same individuals, coupled with a growing sense of community and solidarity between all the participants in this innovative socio-political experiment.

Through prolonged participant observation, interviews, and focus groups, I have managed to collect ethnographic evidence of the manner in which this socio-political laboratory works on different realms of intervention on the social reality. This thesis will therefore try to explicate through empirical data how socially innovative values regarding political involvement and solidarity are shared in specific structures of meanings and practices, where an increased political consciousness in the participants to the political movement's social activities is coupled with a growing knowledge of the social reality for the militants. Interviews with militants and local users of the services provided by the movement will function not only as ethnographic evidence, but also as explanatory stages of my own cognitive experience as a researcher within the field. Numerous vignettes will also be used along with other field material as a means to achieve a "thick description" (Geertz 1994) able to show in detail the complexity of the movement and its practices. Biographies and stories of struggle and personal growth will mix in a deeply engaged ethnography. Through substantiated descriptions and reflexive data, I will try to give an organic depiction of an innovative way to imagine a different social reality that puts political engagement and solidarity at the center of its revolutionary aim, while trying to defy the obstacles put in place by the neoliberal hegemony.

I am deeply convinced, as an academic, that anthropologists have a responsibility to "mitigate the suffering of others to the highest degree they can" (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002, 14), therefore, I am hopeful that this thesis will be able to engage at a societal and public level, and not only at an academic one. This thesis can be defined as the result of a collaborative relationship between the researcher and the research participants, framed by a mutual understanding of the researcher's position as a deeply engaged one. My main intent is, in fact, to provide an account of the stories lived on a daily basis by the militants and the participants of the movement "Ex- OPG – Je so' pazzo", with the hope of making their experience known outside of the Italian political context.

The first chapter of this thesis will provide an outline of the context in which the social movement "Ex- OPG – Je so' pazzo" carries on its practices, with a focus on the city of Naples and the building

in which they operate, as well as a brief story of the movement and its ideological stances. The second chapter will describe the ideological field of struggle of the research participants, alongside a detailed description of my own cognitive process of understanding this struggle detailed by an account of my ethnographic contact with the militants. The third and final chapter will provide ethnographic examples of the “socio-political laboratory” of the movement, outlining the meanings and practices at the core of the social movement’s activities.

Context, History and Structure: the Social Movement “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo”

Naples: an Innovative Grassroots Political Environment

The third largest Italian city by population, Naples is the cultural and economic center of the South of Italy. Stretched on the coast that goes between the Vesuvius and the town of Pozzuoli, Naples’ foundation dates back to Greek settlements established in the second millennium BC. For centuries, Naples has been the capital of the various kingdoms that came in succession in the southern part of the Italian peninsula, until it became part of the newly born Kingdom of Italy in 1861. Since the unification of the Italian peninsula under a Northern-led nation state, the city has been at the center of a national public discourse that portrays it as “a lazy and immobile city, hovering between modernity and backwardness, unable to show itself as fully western and modern” (Di Costanzo 2015, 30). Such representation of the city as divided in two parts, one modern and wealthy, and the other backwards and subaltern, reflects an external classification of the city that equates its territory with its citizens in a typically neocolonial discourse, shaped by the cultural hegemony of the North of Italy over the South.



Figure 1 - The city of Naples as seen from the roof of the "Ex-OPG" building (Photo credits: "Ex-OPG - Je so' pazzo").

In Naples, the concept of the “neoliberal city” reaches its fullest meaning. As Bayat (2012, 111) states, the neoliberal city “is a city shaped more by the logic of Market than the needs of its inhabitants; responding more to individual or corporate interests than public concerns”. In Naples, the difference of wealth between the central Kasbahs (Luongo and Oliva, 1959) and the modern and wealthy neighborhoods is almost excruciating to experience, as it is made ever more evident by the proximity

of the two. In fact, working class neighborhoods unfold just next to the polished streets of the city center with all their boutiques and wealthy costumers, as well as upper class quarters like the Vomero neighborhood which towers above the intricate alleys of the poorer *rioni* (small working class quarters).

In a city that seems to perfectly reproduce the contradictions and inequalities inherent to the late capitalist hegemony on an urban scale, the marginality of the most disenfranchised social classes is often framed as a “negation of the civil; the predominant communitarian dimension and a monolithic bloc of preindustrial traditions that stop any evolutionary process” (Guadagno and De Masi 1971, 397). The identification of the Neapolitan lower social classes and their relative urban space as “communal” as opposed to the “societal” aspect of the upper social classes and neighborhoods has been a framework that worked perfectly for the political discourses brought ahead by the various administrations of the city regarding the recondition of its urban structures and its population’s marginality.

The anthropologist Nick Dines spent multiple years in the city of Naples and gave ethnographic accounts of the power structures of the city (2013) and the discourses that legitimize them (2012 and 2013). In his description of the mayor Bassolino’s efforts to restructure the urban space of Naples, Dines (2012) highlighted the reproduction of the same stigma that frames the lower social classes of the city as “communal and preindustrial”, and “operates as a form of governance which legitimizes the reproduction and entrenchment of inequalities and injustice” (Tyler 2013, 212). Such stigmatizing discourses often legitimized by the city’s ruling class, find their roots once again in the northern hegemony over the Italian South and its representations, creating a dialectical overlap of the city of Naples and its most disenfranchised inhabitants. The administrations of Naples, through their interventions on the urban reality at a socio-economic and urbanistic level, have therefore reproduced the hegemonic meanings at the core of the discourse on the city (Dines 2012), leading to a dismantling of the welfare system and a decline in the political engagement of the lower classes of the city (Dines 2015).

The decline and depression of the city’s lowest classes following the heavy neoliberal restructuring of the city led by the Bassolino and Iervolino administrations reached its peak with the 2010 trash crisis. The desire for change in the lower classes, boosted by a distrust in the liberal representative establishment, led to the political rise of a new figure in the city’s political horizon: the candidate to the 2011 metropolitan elections Luigi De Magistris. De Magistris, a Neapolitan former judge and European Member of Parliament, framed his electoral campaign as anti-establishment, in support of the lower social classes and deeply against “neoliberal and authoritarian politics which are favoring the establishment of an oligarchic political structure in Naples as in the entire nation” (De Magistris

and Ricca 2017, 16). De Magistris easily won the 2011 elections and was re-elected in 2016 with a large majority, testifying to his popularity within the city's electorate.

De Magistris signed a drastic change from the previous liberal mayors of the city, and, as I have been able to witness during my period of research, reignited a sort of trust in the city's institutions and most importantly in the civic participation of all strata of society. De Magistris, while still acting within an institutional frame, managed to innovate the political environment of the city by creating necessary gaps to reengage its citizens with the "political realm". Such process of social innovation in which De Magistris managed to build his popularity and consent, relies on a series of reforms addressed at an internalization within the public sector of previously privatized services such as water supply through highly participated referendums. Among these anti-liberal reforms, the most relevant for the grassroots social movements of the city was the "Deliberation on the Commons"¹. The deliberation signed an epochal rupture with the hegemonic ideology that has enforced neoliberal policies on the city of Naples for years. This short extract from the deliberation gives a clearer understanding of the radicalism of such political act:

The metropolitan administration, believing to be necessary to give answer to the desire of participation to the public life of the city expressed by the citizens through the extraordinary mobilization of the latest referendum to make water supplies public once again, decided to grant the citizens' right to express themselves over the city's "commons" through the approval of this measure. The "commons" the administration refers to are water, labour, public services, schools, the cultural and natural heritage, parks, and beaches, informed by the principle of the transgenerational safeguard. Such commons belong to the citizens' community and their related enjoyment cannot be taken from the citizens, just as much as the possibility to participate to their management².

In the mayor's words, such deliberation "was intended to give dignity to grassroots initiatives, like occupations of abandoned public spaces carried on by groups or movements" (De Magistris and Ricca 2017, 43). By legitimizing such occupations, the administration evidently looked back at the long history of the Italian Social Centers, a uniquely Italian configuration of social groups that "starting from the seventies, managed to create new social and political spaces by setting up squatted properties which became the venue of social, political and cultural events" (Mudu 2004, 917). As the "Ex-OPG - Je so' pazzo" seems to attach its experience to such history of occupation, it needs to be understood that such experiences were rarely institutionalized and that the last experience of such kind to emerge in Naples before the "Ex - OPG" can be dated to several years ago. A revival and innovation of such

¹Comune di Napoli, Delibera di Giunta no. 258, April 24, 2014.

² *Ibidem*.

tradition is to be framed both within the innovative practices of the social movement and the progressive policies of the De Magistris administration.

The current mayor of Naples clearly innovated the political role that previous administrations framed for themselves, acknowledging the limits of his powers and opening up spaces and possibilities for grassroots experiences of self-management. In a city where socio-economic differences are tangible and where neoliberal policies and corruption have only exacerbated the conditions of the lower strata of the population, networks of solidarity and mutualism within such classes have created the space for new forms of political experimentation, where participatory politics are at the center of an utterly innovative urban-scale socio-political laboratory. While the De Magistris administration cannot be recognized as the sole engine that boosted experiences of democratic participation in Naples, it is safe to say that its innovative policies have created the rightful space and safe environment for such experiences to be institutionally legitimized and expanded through networks of grassroots solidarity. However, it would be an oversimplification to identify the beginning of the “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo” experience only from the legalization of the occupation that boosted the movement’s political presence on the urban reality. In fact, the administration opened up the space for already existing embryonal practices of grassroots political participation to thrive and expand along lines of solidarity and mutualism. In order to fully understand how such movement came to life and started to lead the way towards socio-political innovation on an urban scale, it will be necessary to add a historical context to the geographical and institutional one, outlining the history and the present structuration of the political collective that gave birth to the social movement.

History and Organization of the “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo”

When I first approached my research population, my main concern was to understand what being a militant really meant. Given my past proximity to an Italian grassroots social movement, I found myself in the ethnographic position defined as “strange familiarity” (Ouattara 2004), which calls for a “methodological and epistemological vigilance on the ambiguity between the emic and ethical dimensions” (Apostoli Cappello 2012, 173) of the ethnographer’s position. Understanding the emic meaning that my research population gave to the role of a militant was, therefore, fundamental to shift my anthropological understanding of it. Such category for the militants of the movement “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo” meant more than sharing the same political imaginary and the commitment to the cause of the movement. A past of political mobilization and a solid preparation in political sciences and theories are only two of a complex set of characteristics that the research participants recognize as central in the construction of a militant identity.

During my first days in the field, I got close to Pyotr, a militant born in the North of Italy, who then moved to Naples in search for a more engaged political environment. His initial status as an outsider followed by a slow process of integration within the militant identity of the group highlights what it truly means to be a militant of the “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo”.

“The point is that being a militant of this movement to me represents just another way of being an individual. We have another way to be together, to love each other, to respect one another, to acknowledge the other, and to get mad at each other. In the end, being a militant to me is all of this. That is, after exhausting weeks and months devoted to political mobilizations, social activities, and collective political growth through assemblies and experiences, we still find the time to meet all together and eat a sandwich, to laugh and remember things together. It is more than working together; it is more than being a volunteer together. It is to share an idea and evolve it while living for it together with your comrades. To me, it is just another way to be a human being.”

This account provided me with the key to understanding how the militant core of the movement frames its action and commitment, which can be defined not as a “volunteer action” (Melucci 1990), but as a particular form of “social action based on the sharing and collectivization of the subjective practice” (Salgado 2013, 184). The subjective commitment of every component of the militant core of the movement is shaped by the political action of the entire militant group, or as Melucci (1991) puts it, by “a collective action which is built through social relations in a field of opportunities and bonds”. Such meaning given to their militancy is also the structure through which the militants of the “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo” framed their practice towards the people of the neighborhood who participate to their activities. However, in order to grasp how such practice is unfolding, it is necessary to examine the history of the movement and the development of the meanings that frame their daily political action.



Figure 2 - The community of the “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo” (Photo credits: “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo”).

The political collective which eventually became what is now the “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo” has its roots, like many other movements of its kind, in a university political collective that carried on

struggles related to the right to education, named *Collettivo Autorganizzato Universitario* (CAU). In 2008, this university collective merged with a reality of politically organized unemployed named the “Clash City Workers”, to give birth to a political organization that wanted to shift the focus of the political discourse to the capital-labour contradiction and its developments within the field of education and employment. Given my initial disorientation regarding the different political backgrounds of the movement’s militants, Pyotr once again gave me the key to understanding such variety:

“The political background of most comrades is varied, but there is certainly a common ancestor to all of us. This ancestor is undoubtedly *Autonomia Operaia* (Worker's Autonomy) and all those workers' struggles of the '70s and '80s, which composed, at the time, the radical leftist opposition within the Italian Communist Party. In 2008, when our collective took the political conformation we still have, the goal was to try to reconstruct, in a time when the Marxist component of the movement was no longer represented within the Neapolitan political horizon, a political discourse that was not afraid to speak about the capital-labour contradiction as its focus. We were trying to distinguish ourselves among all those autonomous and “post-ideological” groups by framing our organization as ‘self-organized’, that is, organized from the bottom, without connections to the disobedient [the Italian development of the “Seattle generation”] or trade union realities.

The fundamental thing you have to realize if you want to understand us is that there was a willingness to carry on struggles at the labour and university level. We wanted to bring back a Marxist, materialistic historical analysis of the political phases of our society back in the Neapolitan public discourse. According to us, the emancipatory discourse had been abstracted for too long from the materialistic analysis that derives from the capital-labour contradiction. As good Marxists, we needed an analysis of the economic structure and then started with a political discourse”

This was the common denominator of the movement: the unemployed, students, laborers, all united under a scientific analysis of the social reality, which had at its core a reinterpretation of the Marxist-Leninist ideology and its organization structured around a materialistic analysis of the contradictions of society.

Italian grassroots movements have often been defined as “movements with a revolutionary rhetoric and a conflictual symbolic register, counterbalanced however by essentially reformist micro-ideologies” (Apostoli Cappello 2012, 173). The collective, as made evident by Pyotr’s statements, tried to break up with such tradition of the “Seattle generation’s movements” (Apostoli Cappello 2012), which, in the militants’ opinion, lost contact with the masses and framed their actions as too vanguardist and abstract from the material needs of the working class. Hence, they began to build networks with local associations, and after years of grassroots militancy, established the political collective “Fanon”, which issued the following document that describes the current stance of the “Ex-

OPG - Je so' pazzo" regarding their own political practices. The importance of this document has been underlined to me by numerous militants, and represented a key element for my own understanding of the political practices and meanings of the "Ex-OPG - Je so' pazzo".

"What we are in need of in this moment is a method. The method relies on analyzing the complexities of our social reality, not to get lost in them, as many postmodern thinkers would like to, but to address long-term tendencies to create an informed and organized practice.

Starting from Gramsci's analysis of voluntarism, we can understand that Italian political movements are mostly composed by individuals moved by an idea, but disconnected from the needs of their referring social bloc. Following Gramsci, an economic and political crisis generates a detachment of the masses from the state apparatuses, and results in the passivation of the masses and in a hyper-activism of the educated minorities. It is evident that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the hegemony has tried to relegate political engagement to its ideological expression in its most pejorative sense, therefore cutting any link between the political practice and actual social change. Starting from the 90s and the progressive implementation of neoliberal policies, with the consequent processes of individualization and commodification, we see in front of us an atomized social life and the incapacity of social and political movements to mobilize the masses. We, critically and painfully, have to recognize that our aggregation has mostly been based on an imaginary and a visceral rage more than on concrete solutions and material answers to social issues; we, too, have to admit that we have been volunteers, in the Gramscian acceptance of the term.

With this, we do not want to argue that voluntarism is useless: we argue that we need to make a better use of it; we need to go beyond it while preserving its inner tension, making it into a mass phenomenon. We need to analyze materially what political tools interpret a mass feeling, while creating a public that is receptive towards political engagement and class-consciousness. The solution is to create an organic network with the masses, while trying to involve them in their own political struggle."

The importance of this document resides in the concrete rupture from the dominant framework of the Italian militant experience carried on by the political collective which then became the "Ex-OPG - Je so' pazzo", and in its attempt to problematize its own position towards the masses it tries to mobilize. Starting from a Marxist-Leninist position, the collective tried to base its organization and inform its practice through a work of inquiry and analysis of the social reality to find methods to relate to the masses. Their interpretation of such ideology appeared utterly remarkable for its extreme reflexivity. One militant, during an interview, explained to me that the collective was trying to use the Marxist-Leninist ideology "not as a set of fixed points, but as a book that is necessary to read and from which you can save some pages while discarding others". Such reflexivity struck me for its anti-dogmatic

nature and made me realize how complex the process of creating a shared political imaginary is, as I will further explain in the next chapters.

After works of inquiry over the class composition of the Italian society, the collective wrote the essay “*Dove sono i nostri*” (Clash City Workers 2014), in which the militants scientifically analyzed the Italian material power structures in order to individuate ways to mobilize the working class. Moreover, the essay was also intended to “look for ways to experiment and find, in our reflection and practice, our method and our own political way, conscious that there is not only one, but that it is necessary to create the conditions to collaborate with the masses in order to find the right one” (Clash City Workers 2014, 202).

Starting from this analytical point, as Pyotr further explained to me, the militants realized that “a political imaginary and all its meanings, if not connected to the material level of the social reality, loses not only its legitimacy, but also all its social innovation potential”. This stage of the process of cognitive growth of the collective was the key to realizing the actual practices of the “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo”. The movement needed a way to ground its imaginary on the material level of the society it was attempting to change, and it is exactly in this moment that the occupation of the ex-asylum OPG of the *riione* Materdei in 2015 gave the collective an opportunity in such sense. Once again, seeing such phase of the movement through the eyes of Pyotr can prove useful to understand its relevance:

“There was a need for something different that would allow us to come in dialectical contact with the class in its entirety, so we decided to occupy this place. Here, when I said that people told us what to do, you can see that it is true. Obviously, there is always a political direction you follow, but the activities you see now, they all started from people's requests. Football field, afterschool service, legal assistance. They are all things that came from the local population's requests and made it possible for us to get in touch with people and understand their needs. All this made us realize that an exclusively political framework for our practice excluded us from the contact with the people, and therefore kept us from creating effective political innovation.”

The occupation, at first illegal because of the ownership of the abandoned asylum still in the hands of the penitentiary police, became institutionalized, as already mentioned, because of the De Magistris administration's progressive policies. While the decision to occupy was taken by the collective considering the favorable political conjuncture created by the administration, the militants continuously claim the independence in their choice to occupy. In the same manner, as they consider De Magistris a favorable figure within the metropolitan political horizon, they strive to maintain their independence and keep themselves vigilant regarding possible attempts by the administration to take advantage of the “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo” experience for its own political aims.

From March 2015 to February 2017, when my research started, the social movement now called “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo” managed to expand its network in the *rione* and the city, thus becoming a wide and organized social movement. As previously stated, the militant core of the movement, composed of sixty highly committed individuals of various ages, along with their social relations, frame the structure of the movement and the political meaning of their practice. Around this core, there are tens of social operators voluntarily working in the various social activities, who continually exchange ideas with the militants and the users on the political agenda of these activities through weekly political and organizational assemblies. The weekly general political assembly (*attivo politico*), the place in which the political decisions are discussed by the militant core in a horizontal way, frame all the other specialized assemblies. The militants have often underlined the importance of such general assembly, clearly giving importance to the absence of hierarchical structures and the dialectical process in which the decisions are made. Moreover, every month a public organizational assembly is held, in which the people of the neighborhood can propose new activities or more generally express their opinion on matters regarding the local community. Such public assembly has been the place where most of the social activities were conceived following the needs of the local community.

After two years of presence in the neighborhood and relations with the local population, the working activities that take place within the locals of the ex-asylum at the Materdei neighborhood are the following:

- The “People’s Ambulatory”, with three different clinics (a general, a gynecological and a pediatric clinic), a psychiatric help desk and a nutritional help desk;
- The “People’s Kitchen”, a professional kitchen used for the preparation of the weekly meals for the homeless, as well as for self-financing reasons;
- The “Migrants’ help desk”, with a pool of lawyers who deal with residency permit requests and a group of militants who organize the political mobilization of the immigrants;
- The “People’s Labor Center”, with legal help for all kinds of workers, plus a group of militants who support their political mobilization and receive reports of illegal work and exploitation.
- The “People’s Theater”, both a theater that gives the opportunity to non-professional actors to perform their plays, and an independent theater laboratory;
- The “People’s Afterschool Service” and the “Shared Kindergarten”, with professional educators who help the neighborhood’s children with their homework and organize social activities for them;
- The “People’s Solidarity Network”, based at the Ex-OPG, is a newly born organization that is attempting to bring together different realities that try to fight poverty and homelessness in Naples;

- The “People’s Gym”, with free classes of football, boxing, kickboxing, martial arts, a gym open three times a week and free dancing classes;
- A language school, with free Italian classes for immigrants and foreigners, and free English and French classes.

Such a diversity of activities has given the “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo” a broad contact with the local population, creating a dialectical process of engagement and a forge of meanings that is working within the frame of a “socio-political laboratory” towards the collective creation of an innovative imaginary. I will further expand on the ethnographic account of the functioning of such laboratory on both an affective cognitive and a more material level in the next chapters. However, before moving to my ethnographic experience of such practices, it will be necessary to describe the building in which the “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo” operates, and its inherent symbolic capital that has allowed the movement to implement such laboratory.

The OPG at Materdei, Reusing a Symbol of State Repression

I walk the streets of the old Naples’ city center, going uphill. The narrow alleys finally leave room for the open space of a broader street, crowded with a great number of cars, scooters, pedestrians, and shops of the most various kind. For a moment, that meshwork of pulsing life almost distracts me from what lies above it in all its magnificence. A massive, austere building, painted in yellow, with bars at its windows, towers on the horizon, its grimness mitigated by a colorful graffiti representing prisoners in the act of breaking free from the chains and the uniforms constraining them. I understand that this is the Ex-OPG at first sight, the inaccessibility of the structure in contrast with the bright green, yellow and red drawings on its façade: the sight of such contrasting grimness and majesty gives me mixed feelings. I start walking up the stairs to the entrance, and a strange feeling takes hold of my stomach. It is the building, towering over me, that makes me feel uneasy, almost observed and controlled by its old walls. Can it be the right place? Is it here that social services are being provided to the local population?

Utterly confused, I ring the bell and enter, and that feeling completely changes. What seemed an austere place of repression and imprisonment outside is, in its interiors, a place full of life, with kids running around, walls painted in the brightest colors, and people talking to each other while laughing or having a drink.

These are the first impressions I wrote down in my ethnographic notebook, as I was approaching the building that would have been my field for more than three months. The social movement subject of this research takes its latest and actual name “Ex-OPG” from the structure it first occupied and now

legitimately uses as the location for all its activities. The structure has a highly symbolic meaning and a long history, which needs to be fully understood in order to grasp the frame in which the social movement's practices take place and the symbolic capital that the movement uses to reinforce its meanings.



Figure 3 - The "Ex-OPG" building, once a monastery, then an asylum, now a community center (Photo credits: "Ex-OPG - Je so' pazzo").

Situated on top of the hill of Materdei, one of the central neighborhoods of Naples, the building was created as a monastery, but had been used as a prison and then an institution for the detention of the mentally ill by the Italian State for most of its recent history. The enormous building, known by the local population as "Sant'Eframo", the name of the ex-monastery, has therefore had a varied and long history, made of monks and criminals, prayers and repression. After centuries of activity, the majestic structure was abandoned in 2012, when the national law regarding the *Ospedali Psichiatrici Giudiziari* (OPG), which could be translated into "judicial psychiatric hospitals", was abolished and a legislative vacuum was left, with no institution taking care of the historic building near the city center. Conceived as criminal psychiatric hospitals, the OPG's were "total institutions" (Goffman 1961) where criminals who were also found to be psychotic were imprisoned. One of the symbols of the toughest sides of the Italian State repression, the OPG's were the last remnants of the "clearest triumph for positivism in the field of forensic psychiatry between Italian unification and World War I: the creation of the criminal insane asylum" (Gibson 2004, 3). In order to best understand what the conditions of the mentally ill imprisoned in the OPG's looked like, it will be necessary to read a brief extract of the diary of an ex-inmate, who visited the structure after the occupation by the "Ex-OPG – Je so' pazzo" collective.

"16 October 1989. The prison is inhumane. Nothing in our lives, a complete vacuum. What a desperation I feel! The inmates are racked up in cells that are too small and too filthy. Thrown on the beds, benumbed by the psychiatric drugs, that is how our life goes on. The stench of urine and feces

overwhelms me; it pervades my nostrils and does not allow me to sleep. I am scared. I am scared of what might happen to me. Is life ever going to come back to flow in my veins?"

Such a horrible account of what the life of the OPG inmates looked like accentuates what radical changes the ex-OPG at Materdei has gone through, in order to be transformed from one of the toughest symbols of State repression into an innovative socio-political laboratory. As previously stated, the OPG institutions were abolished in 2012, thus the structures that housed such institutions have been abandoned ever since, leaving immense buildings to decay from the lack of public funds. It was only thanks to the grassroots initiative taken by the "Ex-OPG – Je so' pazzo" and the support of the De Magistris administration that this process of decay of the OPG building could be stopped, leading to a radical rearrangement of its functions.

Such a radical shift has surely brought a strong symbolic capital to the militants of the movement, who were able to use it to their advantage in order to frame their activities, opposing the repressive practices put in place by the previous users of the structure. As Bourdieu described it, the symbolic capital is "the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate" (Bourdieu 1989, 17). In the case of the "Ex-OPG", such capital has assumed the form of the relic of a repressive past, slowly transformed into a civic laboratory that conveys radically alternative meanings to the hegemonic discourse over the role of the "right hand" (Bourdieu 1998) of the State. The very shape of the structure, with the prison cells still intact in the floors above the various rooms where all the vibrant social activities take place, reminds every individual who enters the building the cost of truly radical social change. This capital, as I managed to confirm through my ethnographic research, has a strong influence on both the militants and people who join the movement's activities. There was a specific moment during my fieldwork that made me fully understand how much the militants of the "Ex-OPG – Je so' pazzo" internalized in their discourses such symbolic capital in order to strengthen the innovative meanings of their practices.

One day, during the early days of my research, while conducting an interview, I noticed a group of kids following one of the oldest and most experienced militants of the movement in a tour of the structure. The militants of the "Ex-OPG – Je so' pazzo" are always available for a tour of the movement's activities for whoever asks; however, that was the first time I noticed children on a school fieldtrip being toured. The very presence of an elementary school classroom in the "Ex-OPG" building already conveys a strong rupture from the past of the structure, and the very interest of the teachers in showing the atrocious memory of such institutions to their students gave me a glimpse of the symbolic power of the "Ex-OPG – Je so' pazzo" laboratory.

Intrigued by the premises of such tour, I decided to follow the group of children. Fedka, the militant who was in charge of the tour, after having explained what the movement was doing for the

neighborhood in terms of free activities and services, brought the children upstairs to the prison cells which had been made into a museum of the building's memory. The kids, slightly scared by the dim light and grimness of the cells, started to get close to each other as Fedka talked to them about how the inmates were forced to live in the OPG.

“You see, people who were considered crazy had to spend their entire day in these cells. Tied to their beds, no one to talk to, being observed by the guards through these holes on the walls. These people surely did bad things, but they did it because they were ill. And if you are ill who do you need? If you hurt your leg, don't you go to the doctor? Well, these people were not allowed to see a doctor. They were just lying there, no one to visit them, no one to talk to.”

What Fedka was trying to do was to use the symbolic capital of the building in order to deliver a message to the kids. Although he did not directly indoctrinate the elementary school students about the flaws of the repressive functions of the state, the militant worked to make the children understand the illegitimacy of the raw repression of mentally ill citizens. By referring to such symbolic capital, Fedka allowed the children to reflect ethically and, in a certain way, politically over the uses of public space and the use of violence in a community.

One of the children looked at Fedka with sad eyes, and with a broken voice whispered that if he, one day, became ill, he would like to have someone help him. He said he felt sad for the people who had to live for years in those cells by themselves, and he thanked Fedka for the transformation of such a horrible building into a place where now he and his friends can play football every day.

Such an account shows that the symbolic capital of the “Ex-OPG – Je so' pazzo” building has had a remarkably strong influence over the processes of formation of the present community that now identifies with the social movement. This symbolic power is surely one of the clearest levels on which the movement works to foster political engagement and socially sustainable values in the people who join the movement's activities. However, the movement does much more than that, and the field of struggle against the hegemonic organization of society happens most remarkably at another level, even if strictly connected to the symbolic one.

Now, after having analyzed the context, the history, the structure of the movement, and the symbolic relevance of the building in which the militants operate, it is time to face the ideological and affective-cognitive battlefield for the struggle of the “Ex-OPG – Je so' pazzo”, and from there truly analyze the innovation of its socio-political laboratory.

A Struggle With (in) Ideology

Affective-Cognitive Reflexivity

The sun has just set behind the hills of the city, leaving a dim light over the busy streets of the historical center of Naples. The room has a stale smell of cigarettes, there to testify the long and wearying meetings and assemblies of the collective, a nebulous epitome of the honest and hard meaning of true political decisional processes. A cold beer in my hand, I look in the eyes of Nikolai. He is a philosophy professor, a 20-year-long militant, and, without a doubt, a pragmatic. We are discussing the ways a contemporary political movement can truly affect the lives of the people it seeks to help: at first, it seems that our conversation is developing exactly how I imagined my interview to have looked like. However, while doing ethnography, this rarely happens; most times, the researcher finds himself in an unexpected situation, learning things he would have never expected to hear. This is the case. Words flow from Nikolai's mouth like a stream, soft and continuous, and I am captured by the firmness of his voice.

“At the beginning of the history of the socialist-communist movement, the strong idea was that what was distorted in the modes of production was the fact that the ownership of the means of production was in the hands of individuals and not of the community. This political-economic point of view was considered the main contradiction, and then everything else followed: the government forms, the division into classes, antagonisms, etc. What happened then? It happened that the movements acted following this idea exactly: both in the commune of Paris and especially, then, in the October Revolution. That is, just enforce the collective property of the means of production and then solve all the social, cultural and political problems.

What happened then was that many comrades realized that you can solve the economic problems to a certain extent, but at the same time, you have to face a political problem: how do you make political decisions democratic? It is true that in the USSR it was very hard to accumulate wealth, a fact that surely created a more egalitarian society from a socio-economic point of view. However, the problem is, who is it that decides then? There, the party decided.

Even a better society model than [the capitalist] maintains some level of conflict. The problem is how to turn this conflict into a continuous production of institutions, that is, a movement that is continuously contesting itself towards a betterment of its practices.

So, emancipatory movements had to face an economic problem, but also a big political one. From there a fierce criticism emerged towards the organization of communist movements that, as you can see, brought us to having to start our political struggle again from zero. Now even organizing assemblies has become a struggle.

However, why is it a struggle? Because we are in front of a third level of contradiction brought by the capitalist hegemony. That is, capital brings social contradictions on the economic, political, and affective-cognitive levels. In fact, the neoliberal restructuring brought ahead from the 70s onwards, created a substantial individualization of society: on one side conforming individuals through the commodification of most of the components of our life, while on the other side, individualizing people through the axiom of individuals' uniqueness and originality. Capitalist ideology separates you from the people of your community; it destroys local communities themselves in its expansion. It does this through the creation of narrative and imaginative elements conjuring a uniform but fragmented world, where also a person living in a really peripheral area has a very different imaginary from his neighbor, most likely never really engaging with him. Late-capitalist ideology implements a strong process of de-socialization not only in the classical political-economic sphere (i.e. the master seeking to segment the working class), but also the affective-cognitive sphere. That is, people are also de-socialized from themselves. Individuals are dissociated; they cannot process the inputs and stimuli all around them. By not being able to stand all this stimuli and inputs, individuals find it hard to develop even a discourse on themselves. Many people cannot even read books anymore. What most people read is short information on the newsfeed of some social network; they are incapable of following long argumentations on paper.

What is obvious is the unwillingness to take the time to understand things. So a thing like dialectics, that is, this function of thought that bounces from one side to another and seeks to grasp the total movement of things, is impossible. There is the most complete rejection of complexity, and that is arguably the biggest triumph for the dominant ideology. Populisms are a direct consequence of this refusal of complexity. There is a desert around us, a desert of thought, of social relations, of imagination. This is what emancipatory movements have to face now, not only an economic and a political problem, but also an affective-cognitive one. We have to rebuild sociality, solidarity, humanity. Without this, there is no escape from our imaginative deadlock.”

Doing ethnography is not a simple matter. Entering a social environment as an external subject, with the aim of studying its complexity, obviously comes with a set of ideological assumptions. An ethnographer has a vague idea of how his own research will look like, what theories and assumptions he wants to challenge, what he can possibly learn from the population he is going to be in contact with for a long time span. Usually, such self-awareness of the ethnographer's own conceptions and cultural position in the field implies a reflexivity aimed at the interpretative deceits linked to the, oftentimes, artificial construction of the alterity. This was not my case. Nikolai represented no alterity to me, only proximity; he exemplified with beautiful dialectical brush strokes the thoughts and feelings that I could not express in words.

I found myself in a “strange familiarity” (Ouattara 2004), not only because I was an Italian individual doing ethnographic research on an Italian social movement, but also, and mainly, because I have felt

like the contact with the population I was studying truly affected the way I imagined my agency and the structures that circumscribe it. In fact, during my fieldwork, I felt a true friction between my own cognitive experience and the ideological structure around me for the first time; I acknowledged how my understanding of reality, my agency, and my emotions are constrained by the cultural hegemony. Perhaps having fallen into what Dei has called “ethnographic seduction” (2005), I completely nullified the distance between my informants and myself. However, such deep engagement allowed me to incorporate the militants’ meanings and practices, and therefore transported me into a cognitive and emotional journey that is the main framework for this ethnography.

Before entering the field, like any researcher, I had to elaborate a research proposal, outlining the main theoretical issues that I wanted to relate to through the collection of empirical data. Therefore, like any socio-cultural anthropologist approaching the study of social movements, I had to confront myself with the big theoretical black box of neoliberalism. Often used as a “shorthand for indicating all that is wrong with the present” (Elyachar 2012), or a “handy way to bracket the global political economy without actively engaging with it” (Schwegler 2009, 24), the neoliberal framework posited, nonetheless, the best a priori explanation for the societal issues I wanted to challenge through my research. Neoliberalism, or economic liberalism, can be characterized by three major features, on which most anthropologists agree: the deregulation of the economy and liberalization of trade (Steger & Roy 2010, 14), the development of a model that defines new models for labor, capital, and the state (Boas & Gans-Morse 2009, 144), and the ideology that views the “invisible hand” of the market as an ethic in itself (Treanor 2005). Aware of the debate on the cultural hegemony structuring the agency of the actors of social change, I approached my field willing to understand how the militants of the movement “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” were engaging with the ideological struggle against the neoliberal restructuring of society, mostly on a socio-political level.

However, the contact with my research participants made me aware that the struggle between the cultural hegemony of the dominant class and the subaltern classes trying to emancipate themselves happen at a much deeper level than the socio-economic one. The relevance of Nikolai’s words lies exactly in their proximity to the core of the dominant ideology’s contradictions and in the description of an innovative field of struggle against the dominant ideology. The aggressively individualistic ideology of neoliberalism is creating political alienation and social fragmentation on one side, but also a cultural friction (Tsing 2004) which is pushing disadvantaged social groups towards political mobilization and struggle for emancipation (Hale 2005). This friction happens with a greater relevance on the affective-cognitive sphere of human experience, where all meanings and emotions are created, and if a social movement truly wants to harness the neoliberal restructuring of society, it has to be aware of this main battlefield. This is exactly where the militants of the movement “Ex-

OPG – Je so' pazzo" carry on the hardest battle: in the realm of political meanings, of affections, and of mutual social relations. In a world where the cultural hegemony pushes for social fragmentation and cultural decline through isolation and disengagement, the reconstruction of social realities based on engagement for emancipation must happen at an atomic, affective-cognitive level.

In the following paragraphs, I will delineate numerous theories and provide ethnographic material on the manners in which the late-capitalist ideology works to circumscribe and individualize the affective-cognitive sphere of human experience, thereby harnessing the development of meanings and processes of political engagement aimed at the imagination of alternative social realities to the one framed by the capitalist cultural hegemony. By combining academic theories with interviews to the militants, I intend to provide a comprehensive depiction of the ideological field of struggle of the movement as it is framed by the research population itself, while relating it to political and philosophical theory. Moreover, I will argue that an effective counterforce to the hegemony's cognitive restructuring of the political realm may be the implementation of emancipatory socio-political laboratories like the "Ex-OPG – Je so' pazzo", where political engagement and solidarity can be fostered in a dialectical relationship between actors of social change and people living in conditions of marginality.

Post-Ideological Realism and the Sterility of the Political Imaginary

In the article "The End of History?" (1989) Francis Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy may have represented "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution", and the "final form of human government", referring to the sunset of the communist ideology and the relative triumph of liberal-democratic capitalism. The many criticisms towards Fukuyama's theories (Derrida 1994, Anderson 1992) have been widely accepted as founded claims, and the author himself revisited his arguments, making his initial remarks less stark and more open to further developments for the hegemonic form of societal organization. Even if the initial remarks of Fukuyama must be rejected for being utterly evolutionist and deterministic, one cannot help but observe how such theories now seem relevant, in the sense that the political imaginary has never been so circumscribed by the dominant ideology. After decades of neoliberal emphasis over individual responsibility, unregulated market relations, and a radical re-tasking the role of the State away from the provision of social services (Springer et al. 2016), it seems that the late-capitalist political imaginary over the structuring of society is now stronger than ever.

The theorist Mark Fisher describes such constraints of the political imaginary, by introducing the concept of "capitalist realism" (2009). In his view, the triumph of the late-capitalist ideology brought ahead a certain "widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic

system, but also that it is now even impossible to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2009, 2). Oppositions to the capitalist hegemony are mostly framed as acts of resistance, and any call for a radically new approach to the organization of society is described as utopian. Margaret Thatcher’s doctrine of “there is no alternative”, which settled in motion the neoliberal economic paradigm, truly seems to have taken over the political imaginary of the cultural hegemony.

When all other ways to imagine the political organization of society fade into forms of resistance often encapsulated by the dominant ideology itself, a certain cynicism takes hold of individuals, shielding them from beliefs that are not part of the cultural hegemony. The liberal framework of emotional and cognitive human experience has thus become accepted as a neutral way to understand reality. We live in a post-ideological world; we often hear in public discourses that left or right do not matter anymore. The Italian mainstream political context is no exception, with the main forces on the field calling for a “pragmatic” approach to societal issues that goes beyond ideological instances. Liberal politicians like the ex-Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, often argue in favor of their political instances by defining them as oriented “towards a solution of the problems, not an ideological analysis of them”³. However, what is described as a realist analysis of societal problems, based on pragmatism rather than ideological “bias”, often hides its purest ideological nature. As Slavoj Žižek clearly states,

If our concept of ideology remains the classic one in which the illusion is located in knowledge, then today's society must appear post-ideological: the prevailing ideology is that of cynicism; people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously. The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way ... to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*. (Žižek 1989, 33)

If the key to imagining political realities outside of the dominant ideological framework is now completely hollowed by the rise of the late-capitalist ideology as a form of realism, then it can be inferred that political engagement gives room to the Nietzschean concept of “spectatorialism” related to the German philosopher’s idea of the “last man” (1891). People who are part of social realities where the cultural hegemony has its tightest grip often do not want to engage with the political sphere beyond what is requested by the standard duties of representative democracy. The political sphere thus becomes something distant from the cognitive experience of individuals, an inaccessible space

³ Part of a speech delivered by Matteo Renzi in 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39M8HnGAfOc>

far away from the reality of the everyday. Social change becomes something that cannot be implemented through organized collective action, but only through institutional decisions of the ruling class. Obviously, such cognitive explanation of the political sphere leaves room for feelings of impotence and resignation.

During my research on the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo”, I focused my ethnographic attention not only on the militants, but also on the ordinary people joining their activities on a daily basis, hoping to investigate their attitude towards the movement’s activities. What became quickly evident was that many of the people involved in the social activities promoted by the militants framed their participation as apolitical. In fact, most reported to have a positive attitude towards the militants’ social commitment in the neighborhood; however, they refused to frame their involvement as political. Such widespread feeling is best exemplified by the thought of a Neapolitan mother who was waiting for her son to finish his daily activities at the “Social Afterschool Service” organized by the movement.

“Politics? My son, I am sorry to disappoint you, but politics as the way it was does not exist anymore. Left, right they are all the same. All we can count on is ourselves. Sometimes something like this place comes up, and it is definitely good, but what interests me is their commitment to the community, not their political orientation. It is just empty talks. Here, we only have time to think about survival and all the debts we contracted; mutual help is the only thing that truly matters.”

This woman’s declaration perfectly clarifies how the contemporary discourse on political engagement is completely constrained by the late-capitalist ideology. Even if the Afterschool service of the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” has the clear political aim of creating a community based on solidarity and mutual exchanges without monetary transactions, the interviewed woman did not see such an activity as political; she even rejected the idea of political acts as something that could have a positive impact on her life. Such disbelief in the political sphere is not a result of apathy, but of what Fisher (2009) calls “reflexive impotence”. He states, “They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can’t do anything about it. But that ‘knowledge’, that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs; it is a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Fisher 2009, 21).

It is exactly this feeling of impotence that restrains future innovative developments of political strategies aimed at the imagination of more equal organizations of societies, and this field, the affective cognitive sphere where meanings are created, is where the social movement “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” has been focusing. In order to enforce a truly innovative framework of social relations based on solidarity and political engagement, the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” must work on the processes of de-socialization and disengagement enforced by the late-capitalist ideology,

counteracting feelings of “reflexive impotence” with true radical alternatives, not with simple acts of resistance.

Such feeling of impotence can be identified as a cultural construct, a result of ideological assumptions being thoroughly assimilated as unbiased structures of reality, influencing individuals’ present social life and the imagination of future developments. By framing the political sphere as distant and unrelated to the everyday experience, individuals prevent social change from happening, and this arguably shows to be the most effective ideological tool against the contestation of the power structures in place. Such a rigid hegemonic structure working on the affective-cognitive human experience undoubtedly influences cultural meanings and social practices, addressing them towards an individualistic set of values and politically disengaged practices. It is for this reason that a social movement seeking to counteract such ideological framework has to intervene on the affective-cognitive sphere of the human experience. However, how could the practices of a movement be addressed towards such sphere in the context of a triumphant cultural hegemony? Before answering such a question, it is necessary to elaborate further on the ideological tools that enforce the hegemonic circumscriptions on the individual and collective affective-cognitive sphere related to the imagination of political possibilities.

Cognitive Capitalism and Political Disengagement

The concept of “reflexive impotence”, as described by Fisher, is strictly related to the individualization of the affective-cognitive experience of reality as structured by the late-capitalist hegemony. It is remarkable that in a world where social inequalities and stratification of access to resources and mobility are on the rise, as reported by the OECD⁴, political participation is at such a low level. Fisher individuates the cause of this feeling of impotence in the individuals’ “structural position, stranded between their old role as subjects of disciplinary institutions and their new status as consumers of services” (Fisher 2009, 22). Such shift in the governance of individuals, which has been framed as “cognitive capitalism” (Fumagalli and Lucarelli 2007) or “post-Fordist mode of production” (Amin 1994), can be considered the main evolution of the cultural hegemony towards the extension of bio-power within the affective-cognitive sphere of the individuals. Neoliberal policies have worked within the framework of cognitive capitalism in order to shift socio-political responsibility towards the individual, therefore dramatically harnessing the ability of individuals to organize in communities and movements of struggle for emancipation. As has been argued by many social theorists (Deleuze 1992, Lazzarato 2012), such level of governance on the affective-cognitive

⁴ Detailed report at <http://www.oecd.org/forum/issues/oecd-forum-2015-income-inequality-in-figures.htm>

sphere of individuals is enforced by cognitive capitalism through neoliberal policies aimed at creating an “indebted subject” in place of a subject-within-society. As Maurizio Lazzarato explains:

Contemporary neoliberal politics produce a human capital or ‘entrepreneur-of-the-self, more or less indebted and more or less poor but always precarious. For the majority of the population, becoming an entrepreneur-of-the-self is limited to managing one’s employability, one’s debts, the drop in one’s salary and income and the reduction of social services according to business and competitive norms. (Lazzarato 2012, 139)

Individuals of capitalist societies, caught up in their indebtedness enforced by the neoliberal ideal of having the “freedom” to access services in the market, become individual capitalists themselves, investing in their own lives and focusing on the developments of such investments. Education, healthcare, even political decisions, therefore, become areas of social life that shift towards the individual’s affective-cognitive sphere, and it is exactly due to this process that “capitalist realism” takes the stronger hold on the imagination of social realities following such individualization-of-the-social process. Fisher (2009, 17) explains such triumph of the “capitalist real” as a successful installation of a “business ontology”, where “everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as business”. Through such ontology, cognitive capitalism takes hold of people’s time through indebtedness and precariousness, therefore pushing the cognitive structuration of social needs towards the individual sphere. As Žižek (2015, 44) puts it: “individuals find themselves in the condition that, deprived as she or he is of the ability to govern his or her time, or to evaluate his or her behaviors, his or her action is strictly curtailed”.

Such immobilization of the political imaginary caused by the individualization of the affective-cognitive sphere has the “implicit concession that capitalism can only be resisted, never overcome” (Fisher 2009, 64), and therefore circumscribes not only political possibilities, but also an understanding of the social reality in its complexity. Political movements that wish to harness such hegemonic processes must face this exact cognitive process circumscribed by the dominant ideology. As we were discussing the processes of political aggregation put in motion by the movement “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo”, Semyon, one of the most experienced militants of the collective, explained to me such struggle for the politicization of the masses in the contemporary Neapolitan context:

“You see, times constantly change, and the political ones even faster. The level of politicization has dropped immensely, and now we need to be aware that when we talk about something, it mostly reaches other militants, because outside of that, people do not really care about politics. In the nineties, it was very different. At that time, there were still many people who were too absorbed to make a living to care about politics, but there was also a grey zone between them and the various militants, an area made by politicized people, who liked to read about politics and liked to create

their own personal political opinions. There was, in fact, more room for us to start discourses on a broader scale, to frame our action politically, and be sure that many people would have understood them. Now, it is different. When you think about a political action addressed to convey some sort of message, the first thing you have to worry about is legibility. People are deeply apolitical, but also completely soaked by media influence, so it is easier for the established power to turn things around in its favor. It is a good thing for the establishment that the people do not care about politics. People are politically ignorant, therefore they believe whatever the media feeds them, and the weight of political legibility falls entirely on our shoulders. We militants need to be careful about every political action we make, and we also need to be aware of how the hegemony is going to use our own discourse against us, using the de-politicization of the masses in their favor.”

From the words of this militant who has witnessed twenty years of grassroots political militancy and engagement of the masses, it is easy to understand to what extent the hegemonic influence over the affective-cognitive sphere has undermined the ability to understand social issues in their complexity and to formulate true political alternative to our social reality. It also shows the burden that has fallen on the social movements that struggle for more than a mere resistance to capitalist expansion: the burden of bringing people back together in the imagination of different realities from the ones circumscribed by the dominant ideology. Social inequalities, racial and gendered marginalization, and the other great social issues of our time are never put at the core of a political discourse that faces the complexity of our socio-political reality. Collective political engagement has been eradicated from the affective-cognitive sphere of individuals by the dominant socio-political ideology, with repercussions being felt on both political meanings and practices, which are heading steadily towards an ever more tangible immobilization of the political imaginary.

However, if, as Semyon puts it, “people are politically ignorant”, that means that we live in a world where the political has been completely removed from the social sphere. Have the people seriously given up on understanding the complexity of our reality, and therefore on acting effectively towards social change? Once again, my own personal experience as an ethnographer could prove useful to engage with these questions through a brief analysis of the contemporary political discourse and my own cognitive journey in the understanding of it.

Humanitarianism and Social Marginality: De-Politicizing the Political

When I arrived in Naples to start my fieldwork, I carried with me ideas concerning activism and voluntarism, which I had developed in years of activity with various associations and organizations. One of the firmest certainties I had was that the “personal is political”, therefore being truly convinced that small actions at a personal level could influence social change. The same went for organized

voluntarism; being a part of NGO's and associations that were trying to engage with cases of exceptional inequality made me feel like my actions actually worked towards the creation of a better society. During my past volunteering experience with disenfranchised immigrants in Italy, I had always felt that every meal that I offered them, every ride to the lawyer, every medicine I brought them, I was doing my small part in a process of change that was happening at a larger scale. I was certain that by being so active in helping others who were forced to passively accept their condition of marginality, my political practice was well structured and addressed in the right direction: relieving the suffering of one was like relieving the suffering of all.

Once again, my research population slowly changed the way I understood the political reality around me. Slavoj Žižek, in his documentary "The Pervert's Guide to Ideology" (2014) states that the process of acknowledgment of the ideological structures that circumscribe our affective-cognitive sphere and our agency is a painful one. As he says, "one has to be literally and violently forced to recognition, and the process is an utterly painful one". That is what I experienced. Acknowledging my limits, recognizing my selfish satisfaction in cleansing my conscience from my privileges through small humanitarian acts was a painful process. One has to experience both cognitively and emotionally a strong rupture from his certainties in order to understand how the dominant ideology frames political meanings. Such rupture was brought to my face by Tikhon, a doctor who has been working to relieve the suffering of hundreds of homeless, immigrants, and poor for decades, before finding out that there was something amiss in the way he was fighting for what he believed to be right.

"Since I started working as a medic, I have always felt the urge to integrate my professional activity in a broader social framework, and back then, at the beginning of my career, humanitarian associations were on the rise. I started volunteering at different associations that made the fight against poverty and lack of access to the health care system the focus of their activity. We helped the homeless and poor families in their need for basic health care and access to medications, but somehow such volunteer work could not satisfy me. It seemed to me that we were only trying to fix some volatile and temporary problem, like filling the holes in a sinking ship. It seemed to me that, back then, we were moving without direction. We were just making our skills available for the issues identified by the associations we were working for; we had no feelings of real solidarity guiding us. I swallowed up such mode of intervention for almost ten years, and then one day I just got up and quit. I kept my job as a family doctor, the only thing that would allow me to ground my feelings for social justice in a practical program of intervention, even if it was part of the mainstream State health care. I was disillusioned by the humanitarian idea of helping others. It seemed to me that through our work we were helping the poor but also forcing them to remain poor. The homeless had to remain homeless, as the poor had to remain poor."

Tikhon's experience truly struck me for how powerfully it made my certainties vacillate. He felt like his drive to help others was constrained by something; that a certain "humanitarian paradigm" (Ticktin 2011) was keeping him from affecting social change at a more radical level. Here we see how the immobilization of the political imaginary enforced by the cultural hegemony that was detailed in the previous section works at its best on collective political engagement, bringing it to the individual scale of moral commitment. Ticktin effectively exemplifies such ideological constraint addressed towards the imagination of alternate political realities while describing a conversation she had with Xavier Emanuelli, founder of Médecins Sans Frontières:

He suggests that a doctor's role is to care, first and foremost; to ease immediate suffering rather than to dispense with the reasons for the suffering. This is certainly true; but translated into the sociopolitical realm, this has meant that, rather than change the conditions in which people live and thereby improve human life on a broader scale, the focus is on alleviating pain in the present moment. While most would argue that we always need both responses, albeit at differing times, the problem here is that all too often only one is put forward for the most disenfranchised—longer term improvement in life conditions is displaced in favor of emergency response (Ticktin 2011, 62).

Such humanitarian paradigm, which influences discourses and practices regarding politics of intervention addressed towards the management of poverty, social marginality, and structural inequalities, uses a mode of intervention which is aimed at "filling the gaps" left by the absence of a true political project aimed at the construction of a better social reality. This is exactly what Tikhon was referring to while talking about his experience with the Neapolitan disenfranchised. The late-capitalist cultural hegemony works here at the deepest level, influencing individuals' affective-cognitive understanding of social reality and the ways to enforce true social change. Certainly, people who offer their time to relieve the suffering of the disenfranchised are moved by noble moral commitment and surely have the best intentions to positively affect dynamics of social change. However, what is amiss in the contemporary political sphere is the lack of a political-economic analysis over the power structures that enforce inequalities of access to the means of existence. The dominant political discourse is framed by a refusal to analyze the complexities of our social reality in order to create political meanings and practices aimed at a reconfiguration of our society towards an equal and socially sustainable horizon.

Processes of marginalization of social groups and stratification of access to resources and mobility are pure political projects, both in their meaning and in their practice, and therefore cannot be counteracted by humanitarian acts disconnected from a broader political project. The discourses over a post-ideological context for our contemporary society mentioned in the second section of this chapter, as well as the humanitarian paradigm, must be understood as attempts to depoliticize

resistances and imagination of alternatives to the dominant socio-political ideology. The triumph of the late-capitalist ideology resides here: while creating a “capitalist realist” framework, the cultural hegemony is free to work on the ideological sphere related to political engagement and trust in the ability to affect the social reality while enforcing a material process of exacerbation of social inequalities at both global and national scales. Such context of political disengagement at an affective-cognitive level, coupled with increasing socio-economic inequality, creates the best environment for the dominant socio-political ideology to structure itself as the only imaginable reality, and therefore enforce neoliberal policies at a steady pace.

The cultural hegemony and the paradigm of “capitalist realism” conjured the best ideological environment for the repression of emancipatory political meanings at the affective-cognitive level, through the implementation of a public discourse on the death of ideologies and the humanitarian paradigm as the main framework for practices aimed at social change. Through the nullification of the political sphere at the affective-cognitive level of human experience, a “post-political era” (Kiersey 2011, Swyngedouw 2014) has emerged in the public discourse, where concepts such as ‘class’ and ‘radical emancipation’ are being considered relics of a past reality. Only that, in a context where the dominant ideology overlaps with realism, “the neoliberal ruling class can re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation” (Harvey 2005, 19), and therefore “class war can continue to be fought, but only by one side: the wealthy” (Fisher 2009, 29).

A New Path

Tikhon, with the account on his gradual growth in knowledge of what was missing in his approach to social change, partially and temporarily pushed me out of my own structural bias and made me realize the many ways in which I could have unfolded my own political agency. What he did was not only make me understand how he felt incomplete with his past humanitarian practices, but also tell me the story of a new beginning for him, the story of a renewed ambition to positively affect the miseries of our society.

“Only now, with my position at the political movement “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo”, have I realized that what I needed was a politicization of my intervention on the people in need of medical assistance. Back then, I did not know what I was looking for, so I kept trying to look for it through an extensive contact with the disenfranchised people of the working class quarters of the city.

That was the beginning of the best story of my life. I not only started volunteering at the ambulatory, but also became a political militant, and for the first time in my lifelong search for a right way to use my skills for the good of the community, I felt like I had found the right place for me. In a little over a year of activity, I helped thousands of people without access to health care to join our network of

medics and specialists. I helped the ambulatory expand into gynecology and pediatrics branches; I managed to involve many other people willing to make a true impact on a reality made of in equality of access to health care. Moreover, and most importantly, I managed to develop a political consciousness about my role in a society driven by values such as solidarity and mutualism.

With the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” I discovered the beauty of doing good for my community while having a political aim in mind, working both on the immediate relief of suffering while fighting the broader suffering caused by classism and exploitation. The Ex-OPG experience changed me from within, and I saw this change in the other militants walking this revolutionary path with me. In here, you can breathe an atmosphere of relentless honesty combined with a strong political will to make an impact on the local community through the effort of practical actions. Such an amazing environment is orienting not only the values of the people who are being helped by us, but also the ones of the militants themselves, who, in my opinion, are growing more and more aware of the importance of mutualism and solidarity.”

Tikhon’s interview has arguably been the most relevant to me throughout the entire research. He not only managed to apply the necessary pressure to distinguish the ideological biases in my political practice, but also showed me a new path. He, first, made me understand that a different framework for political actions is possible, that it was happening, there in Naples. Thanks to this interview I started to comprehend what the socio-political laboratory of the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” was creating through to the contact with the disenfranchised of the neighborhood and the courage needed to engage fiercely the political realm, in a reality where “reflexive impotence” is the main attitude towards social change.

In the next chapter, I will delineate, with detailed ethnographic accounts, how the practices and the meanings created at the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” are truly innovative and are succeeding in the creation of a political space where it is once again possible to imagine different social realities.

The “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” Socio-Political Laboratory

Ethnographers are often thought of as interpreters of the complexity of social reality, as educated professionals who, from their higher theoretical standpoint, can look at their research populations and find the key to understanding their complexities. In my case, it was the people of the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” who gave me such a key, framing my position not as an academic interpreting social complexities, but as a student learning what social innovation really means. During my fieldwork in Naples, I truly understood that, as stated by Tim Ingold (2017, 22), “anthropology is to study with people, not to make studies of them”. The evolution of my understanding of the political realm and of the ideological biases that slow processes of social change is a process made possible by the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” socio-political laboratory. The very fact that I am writing about such changes in my cognitive perception of the social reality, as Ingold (2017) would put it, is a product of an ethnography mostly shaped by the laboratory itself and the impact it has had on me.

Nikolai kept talking to me throughout my fieldwork, almost holding my hand and guiding me into what he and his fellow militants patiently built through the years, giving me the best account he could of what the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” laboratory meant for his imagination of a better social reality than the one framed by the cultural hegemony.

“Our idea is to use the social activities, not only as a vehicle for political legitimacy, but especially on four well-defined levels. The first obviously is to create social consensus around the place. The second is to respond concretely to the class needs where the state fails to do so. The third level is social inquiry, like what we did with the book “*Dove sono i nostri*”, because it allows us to actively face the class and its problems, and therefore have access to knowledge about social spheres with which we have no direct contact. The fourth level concerns the affective-cognitive sphere, and it means to make people talk to each other, solve their problems and develop elements of self-governance. Several individuals may then know other people in this sort of laboratory, creating a context in which people do not simply have access to a service, but also where they can exchange views with others. Therefore, the militants and the operators are not in charge of the activity, but by talking with the users, they have to organize themselves and discuss different political approaches, learning practices and meanings from each other.

Let us take as an example the climbing course, a small activity within the “People’s Gym”. The users of the service, alongside the teachers, must organize their activities, promote them, and clean and improve the spaces in which they train. Therefore, even in such a small context, people learn to promote, to discuss, and to participate in assemblies. These little practices develop intrinsically political mechanisms, which could never be developed in a classic climbing gym where people have to pay for a service without participating in its organization. You see here how such laboratory tries

to affect the affective-cognitive level. That is, people's alienation and political disengagement becomes a sense of belonging. For example, the users of the climbing course now go out together; they created a small community. They managed to create a core of a small, cohesive society within a larger society in which they were divided and alienated. We believe that this process, which is very molecular and may seem very small and ephemeral, is the best seed for actual social change.”

As Nikolai clearly testified in the interview, the initiatives carried on by the movement “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” work on the affective-cognitive sphere of the individuals who join them, creating an environment that is capable of fostering political engagement, community building, and knowledge sharing. Such process happens in a dialectical manner, which involves all the actors participating in the socio-political laboratory: militants, social operators, and users. In such laboratory, the subjectivity and the agency of the participants are the focus of the processes of social innovation aimed at the creation of new political imaginaries. It is exactly in this feature of the laboratory that the innovative power of the social movement takes its highest form. As Boni (2012, 45) puts it, “the generation of new imaginaries can be considered a successful social movement’s outcome only when such movement does not propose again the commodified logic of the late-capitalist ideology, but when they express a revolution of the dominant standards”. This means to revolutionize the lower social classes’ subjective approach to the dominant ideology in order to create cognitive space for the subversion of the fixed meanings of the cultural hegemony.

Such dialectic process of innovation carried on by movements such as the “Ex-OPG” has already been described by Vicari Haddock and Tornaghi (2013) as the “value orientation dimension of social movements”. As they argue in their work, social movements can orient “a wide range of values that are negated by processes of social exclusion and which are, on the other hand, pursued and established as central in the various initiatives” (Vicari Haddock and Tornaghi 2013, 264). However, their theorization of the process seems to lack a fundamental perspective. Such a description implies a unidirectional process, in which the activists target the values negated by dynamics of social exclusion and act through innovative initiatives to re-establish them as central within the community in which they are operating. From Nikolai’s words, however, it appears evident that the orientation of values is in fact a dialectical process, in which the values negated by processes of social exclusion are highlighted through the social initiatives by both the militants and the participants. Consequently, such dialectical processes aimed at the individuation of the proper values for the community then establish a political process able to work on the creation of an alternate imaginary to the one that enforced the dynamics of social exclusion. This is the essence of the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” socio-political laboratory, and the aim of this chapter will be to offer ethnographic evidence of its mechanisms.

The Struggle for Virtual Residency

As I arrived in Naples and joined my research participants, I learnt that the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” was involved both socially and politically on so many different levels of the neighborhood’s life, that I soon realized that I had to make a choice on where to focus my ethnographic attention. After a few days of pondering what social activity and political struggle could best represent the practice of the social movement in its totality, I met Alexei, a quiet, twenty-eight year old militant in charge of the poverty management branch of the movement. His polite behavior, mixed with an almost seraphic attitude towards the time and energy-consuming activities he was in charge of, certainly captured my attention. I started observing his practices and participating in all the activities of the movement addressed towards the homeless and the poor. It did not take me long to understand that the newly born “People’s Solidarity Network”, managed by the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” but composed of many different Neapolitan associations that deal with homelessness, was a coherent example of the “socio-political laboratory” that I was trying to understand. As Alexei later on stated,

“I would say that most of the ‘Ex-OPG’s activities are linked to the fight against poverty. That is, such fight is a struggle that allows us to understand the social relations of the lowest social classes in the best way possible. It allows us to be connected to the economic and social levels in their entirety, and therefore gives us a clear link to the general class struggle.”

Alexei clearly underlined how the class struggle is the focus of all the activities of the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo”, and therefore, to understand its practices, I had to look for fields of struggle that could posit an example of the lowest social classes’ lack of access to services and resources. The practices of the “Solidarity Network” give an exemplary vision of the movement’s laboratory because they not only create a direct connection between the movement and the social blocs they want to involve, but also because they frame a clear political stance towards certain hegemonic neoliberal practices of the state. Such practices were best represented during my fieldwork by the increasingly securitarian bills passed by the liberal Italian central government, fostering the growing sense of insecurity in its citizens.

Through the “Minniti-Orlando decree”, the neoliberal transformation of the vision of the welfare state as a means for solidarity into that of a “Penal State” (Wacquant 2009) has reached its climax within the Italian context. The decree explicitly states the necessity of an increased attention on public security, defined as “the public good for the livability and the decorum of the cities, to be pursued also through the contribution of local authorities”, and to be achieved through the “elimination of marginality and social exclusion factors, and the prevention of crime, particularly of a predatory

nature”⁵. Such decree, by definition of the Italian Minister of Internal Affairs, Marco Minniti, carries “urgent security provisions for the Italian cities”, clearly aligning the Italian legislative environment to that “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) in security matters framed as a priority for most neoliberal governments. As it has been argued in the past (Wacquant 2009, Bourdieu 1998), such securitarian measures exonerate the state from tackling the growing socio-economic inequalities in Italian society through social policies, therefore “punishing the poor” (Wacquant 2009) as a public policy to address social marginality. As the decree’s text explicitly states, its goal is the “elimination of marginality and social exclusion factors” by increased policing, calling for urban “decorum” and sanitization of public spaces through repressive policies. Such vision of the marginalized and disenfranchised population frames them as failed citizens, and carries material implications for such social classes in terms of access to resources and social services. Working within such a context of criminalization of social marginality, the “People’s Solidarity Network” has been trying, in Alexei’s words, to “weave back those social ties that have been broken by social marginality and structural exclusion”.

The experience of the “Network” started with a cold wave during the winter of 2016 that brought many Neapolitan homeless close to hypothermia, and for which the only measure enforced by the local government was to open the subway stations during the night⁶. The “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” militants decided to open their doors to as many homeless as possible, granting them a shelter for as long as the cold wave lasted. Following such opening, many local families decided to help the movement by donating food, while many Neapolitan humanitarian associations decided to contribute to the initiative in various ways. Alexei sees such confluences of independent actions of solidarity as the pillars on which the “Solidarity Network” was founded.

“This experience has not only allowed us to talk about homelessness with the people who experience it on a daily basis, but also to denounce the failures of the neoliberal ruling class, and to propose possible alternative paths to solve the problem.”

This embryo of the “socio-political laboratory” managed to establish the first connections between different actors, humanitarian associations, individuals, and families that felt the need to collaborate for the implementation of a political agenda for the improvement of the life conditions of socially marginalized individuals. I spoke to different people involved in humanitarian associations, who often underlined a sense of powerlessness in their daily volunteer activities to help the homeless. Most of

⁵ DECRETO LEGISLATIVO February 20, 2017, n. 14 "Disposizioni urgenti in materia di sicurezza delle città", [Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 93 del 21 aprile 2017](#)

⁶ Full text of the Mayor’s Decree on the subway stations can be found here: <http://www.comune.napoli.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/31887>

their frustration came from the fact that their efforts were going nowhere, that the people whom they were trying to help, even if fed and with a transitory roof over their heads, had no chance to actually get out of their marginality.

Willing to create a different framework for the practices addressed towards social change in the city than the one framed by the “humanitarian paradigm” (Ticktin 2011), the movement decided to give a political answer to both the issues of the marginal individuals of the city and the frustration of the social actors trying to change the reality of social marginality. The birth of the “People’s Solidarity Network” is the practical outcome of such political answer. Here different associations, volunteers, homeless, and disenfranchised individuals work together at a specific political project that aims at counteracting increasingly securitarian measures of the state in matters of social marginality with the creation of a community based on values such as solidarity and mutualism. In another interview, Alexei further clarified which meanings the activists of the “Solidarity Network” see in their political practice.

“We want to create mechanisms for the identification of those who are truly responsible for the exacerbation of social marginality. The ruling elite brings individuals to think that marginality is caused by the marginalized people themselves. However, this process must go hand in hand with an awareness of a whole set of rights. In fact, solidarity and mutual help must be linked to the awareness that one must be politically engaged and be a part of a political program that can help actors of social change find the right practices to counteract the ones of the dominant ideology. We are trying to do this, and the main problem that this political project has highlighted was the one of ‘virtual residency’, on which the movement already had some ideas, but, thanks to the network we managed to put on the agenda of the political debate of the city.”

The first and current main practice that the socio-political laboratory of the “People’s Solidarity Network” managed to identify was the issue of “virtual residency”. Thanks to the contact with the homeless during the cold wave, but also to the activity of the “People’s Ambulatory” doctors, who often give medical assistance to homeless and undocumented immigrants, it became evident that most marginalized people could not access basic social services because of their legal status. The lack of residency, within the Italian legislation, entails the impossibility to access basic social and civil rights such as universal healthcare, education, public housing, and identification documents⁷. While the Italian law theoretically covers homeless individuals by transcribing them in the civil registry as “virtually resident”, such process rarely happens, and most of the homeless people who entered the “Solidarity Network” were not aware of this basic right.

⁷ The account on the rights connected to the residency status is provided by the association “Avvocato Di Strada”. <http://www.avvocatodistrada.it/adriservato/Diritto%20alla%20residenza%20anagrafica/MOROZZO2009.pdf>

Following the emergence of such issue on both a material and a knowledge level, the “People’s Solidarity Network” decided to start a “Help Desk for the Right to Residency”, in which lawyers, activists, and volunteers offer their expertise to help homeless and marginalized people in the legal process for the recognition of their rights. This formal process is coupled with a more political and affective one, in which the person who uses the “Residency Help Desk” is followed by the activists in his daily struggle with the law, but also inserted in a network of social relations and solidarity. The following report of one of the “Help Desk” sessions highlights how the practice of the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” intertwine the political sphere to a more strictly affective-cognitive one:

We are sitting behind the desk, listening to a homeless 30-year-old man telling us his story. As we are writing down all the information the lawyers need in order to start the application for virtual residency, a young man comes in, an enormous backpack on his shoulders. Alexei asks me to talk to him while he finishes with the man at the desk. I approach the boy; he must be in his twenties, probably coming from sub-Saharan Africa, his sad face hollowed by the hardship of homeless life. I ask him a few things about him in English, but he looks at me with empty eyes, not opening his mouth once. He shows me his papers: he comes from Nigeria and his name is Ferguson. I bring him some water and a dish of potatoes from the kitchen, and only then, he starts talking. He is 18 years old, and he escaped Nigeria because of the death of both his parents. He has no one; he knows nobody in Naples. He was granted a visa as a refugee, but getting the visa implied that he could not be hosted anymore in one of the structures provided by the State for the asylum-seekers, so he has been homeless ever since. He does not speak Italian and he does not know anybody in the city. He stares at me, and with a broken voice asks if he could be my friend. [...]

A few days have passed since Ferguson first arrived at the “Ex-OPG”, and with the help of the “Solidarity Network”, he has found public housing in which to live, and after being visited by the doctors of the “People’s Ambulatory”, I see him chatting with some people at the bar of the “Ex-OPG”. As I approach him and ask him how he is doing, he says to me that everything is still very hard and scary, but now he knows somebody, and he has a place to meet new people. He says to me that he has started the application for virtual residency and that he is happy about it, but the thing that changed his life the most was being there, with some people to talk to after months of solitude.

When I left the field, the “People’s Solidarity Network” had been following eleven homeless individuals since its birth one month before, with the “Residency Help Desk” growing in popularity within the local population. More associations are getting involved in distributing food and blankets while trying to involve the marginalized individuals in need of help within their network of social relations and helping them to participate in the political struggle for the improvement of their limited

access to resources and services. Therefore, while the institutions, under the Minniti decree injunction, kept issuing bans for marginalized people selling flowers in the streets⁸ and kept calling the homeless a disruption of the “urban decorum”, the socio-political laboratory put in motion by the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” has worked to counteract such neoliberal discourses and practices through acts of solidarity.



Figure 4 - Activists of the "Network" prepare a meal in the "Ex-OPG" kitchen (Photo credits: "Ex-OPG - Je so' pazzo").

The political project framing the humanitarian actions of the people involved in the “People’s Solidarity Network” allows its practices to not only be addressed to an immediate improvement of the life conditions of the homeless, but also to the creation of a cohesive community along patterns of solidarity and mutualism. While the militants expanded their knowledge on the needs of the homeless population in the neighborhood in order to create a more incisive political project tackling those issues, the volunteers of the associations finally found a way to give political relevance to their social actions. Moreover, the individuals living in conditions of exclusion and marginality now have a community around them and do not feel alone in their struggle anymore. The creation of such a community is the best example of what the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” socio-political laboratory means: bringing together different needs to different abilities in a dialectical process that helps the creation of new social ties within the framework of political meanings revolving around the imagination of a different social reality.

When we think about homeless people and their needs, we think about a house, clothes, a fire, and food. Then, after talking to them, after relating to their lives and their experiences, we learn something very different. As Alexei told me before I began participating in the “Help Desk”,

⁸ Barbuto, Paolo. “Napoli, primo Daspo a un ambulante, protesta Dema contro i vigili” *Il Mattino*, May 11, 2017. http://www.ilmattino.it/napoli/cronaca/napoli_vigili_daspo_ambulante-2432939.html

“The biggest problem of the homeless is not the lack of a home or food. If you truly listen to them, you will learn another story. What they need is to feel useful to someone, to feel like a part of some social fabric. Once we all start to talk to them, to listen to them, we can start building that fabric. Then the rest will come by itself.”

The Acerra Mobilization

If social marginality in the city of Naples is well represented by the homeless population, complete social exclusion is certainly embodied by the social bloc of undocumented immigrants. Mostly arriving in the Italian peninsula through the Mediterranean Sea, undocumented immigrants are managed by the Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs, and, if granted the status of asylum-seekers, divided into publicly owned shelters (SPRAR) or privately managed ones (CAS), while waiting for their visa application to be processed. In the structures of the province of Naples alone, there are over 4076 asylum-seekers⁹, and over ninety percent of them find themselves within the private CAS system. The CAS shelters, acronym for *Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria* (which can be translated into “Emergency Shelters”), were initially created in 2015 by the Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs as an emergency measure to cope with the “large influx of foreign citizens seeking international protection”¹⁰. Such shelters steadily outnumbered the public SPRAR system, normalizing the “state of exception” of the CAS’s themselves, transforming such emergency measures into structural ones. The CAS’s, mostly run and managed by private cooperatives, are rarely monitored by any government institution, but are provided by the Italian government with thirty-five euros a day per person sheltered. Theoretically, the CASs’ managers, through such funding, are required to provide the asylum-seekers with food, accommodation, and generic assistance to the person including linguistic mediation, information, assistance in formalizing the request for international protection, cleaning services, provision of seasonal linen and clothing, hygiene products, pocket money (2.50 € a day), and a phone card on their arrival. However, the lack of monitoring by government institutions allows the private cooperatives to cut the expenses for the hospitality of the asylum-seekers while receiving the same funds from the government, thereby maximizing their profits. As the report “InCAStrati”¹¹ (2016, 28) states, “the choice of the ‘emergency management’ often bypasses the ordinary normative for the entrustment of the services, rendering public procurement and funding opaque, lowering public scrutiny over the implementation of interventions for the asylum-seekers, producing private speculation and fertile soil for criminal infiltrations”.

⁹ “Prefettura di Napoli” (2017).

¹⁰ DECRETO LEGISLATIVO August 18, 2015, n. 142. <http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/09/15/15G00158/sg>

¹¹ Report “InCAStrati”, by the associations Cittadinanzattiva, Libera e LasciateCIEntrare, 2016.

During my fieldwork, I managed to speak to over ten asylum-seekers being hosted in the CAS structures, and they all described their conditions as horrifying, with scarcity of food and inappropriateness of accommodation, not to speak of the complete lack of services like Italian language classes and legal aid for the visa applications. The “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo”, through prolonged contact with the undocumented immigrant population, has increased its knowledge regarding the material and affective-cognitive needs of the asylum-seekers, therefore giving birth to the “Migrants’ Help Desk” for legal matters and to the “Italian language school for Immigrants”. Moreover, the social movement opened the doors of the “People’s Ambulatory” to all the asylum-seekers who are not able to access healthcare in their CAS; most importantly, it also gives material and knowledge support to the asylum-seekers and undocumented immigrants for a variety of mobilizations. One of the most effective tools developed by the movement’s socio-political laboratory is the “People’s Monitoring”, through which both the militants and the immigrants are able to organize occasions of grassroots monitoring on the activities of the CAS’s, reporting exploitation by the private cooperatives that manage the shelters.

The ethnographic case outlined in this section aims to describe the collaboration of the militants of the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” and the asylum-seekers of three CAS’s of the city of Acerra. Such collaboration was channeled in the implementation of a political struggle grounded in the material needs of the immigrant population and the shared knowledge built through the movement’s socio-political laboratory. The following field note will serve as a proper contextualization of the Acerra mobilization and the meanings behind the process of knowledge building that make the movement’s practices possible.

As I enter the bar of the “Ex-OPG”, I see a man speaking excitedly to Lizaveta, a lively and professional 25-year-old militant. She seems to be having a hard time understanding the English of the man talking to her. As soon as she takes a glimpse of me, she calls me and asks me the favor to translate what the man is saying to her. The man’s name is Stephen, and he comes from Senegal. He currently holds the asylum-seeker status and he is hosted in one of the CAS’s in Acerra, a small city located about fifteen kilometers from Naples. He is heated up because his friends at the “camp” [the way the immigrants call the CAS’s] have started a protest; that is, they are not signing the cooperative’s papers until the basic services they are supposed to get are not fully provided to them. He is asking for help and seems truly worried about what could happen to his friends who are protesting. After I translate his words, Lizaveta explains to me that the cooperatives, in order to access the government’s funds, need to provide a daily paper with the signatures of all the immigrants they are hosting in their shelters. She tries to tell him that an isolated protest like that will only cause the strikers to get evicted from the camp, but Stephen keeps saying that it is not up to him, that all his

friends only listen to Gary, one of the oldest immigrants of the camp. Lizaveta tries to calm him down, and assures him that the militants will visit the CAS the following day, trying to find a way to solve the situation. He seems somewhat relieved, and, after shaking our hands, he leaves the structure.

The man described in the vignette independently visited the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo”, worried for the fate of his friends on strike and therefore asking for knowledge and material help to the militants of the “Migrants’ Help Desk”, as he knew that they were willing to give all the possible support to political struggles carried on by the asylum-seekers. Lizaveta immediately showed her support to the man, and consequently called an emergency assembly of the “Help Desk” to deal with the matter. The first act of the militants and the social operators was to stop the protest, which could have proved counterproductive for its small size, while explaining to the strikers the reasons behind such decisions. The asylum-seekers of Acerra immediately understood the circumstances and accepted the collaboration with the militants, recognizing their higher level of knowledge of regarding political mobilization in the Neapolitan context. The second step taken by the militants and the immigrants of the CAS’s of Acerra, now united in the struggle, was therefore to perform an act of “People’s Monitoring”, documenting the living conditions of the immigrants in the CAS’s and consequently exposing them to the local media. In order to understand what conditions the immigrants were forced to live in the “camps”, it will be necessary to report the words of a young man who experienced them directly.

“We started the protest because our living conditions in the camp are deplorable. For example, since we arrived three months ago, we have been visited by a doctor only once. The food is always of the same kind and it is very scarce. Our dishes are empty more often than not. However, the biggest problem is regarding the documents: since we arrived, no applications for visas have started, and when we ask information about it, the manager always threatens to evict us, saying that he is able to find a replacement for us in no time if we do not keep quiet.”

This account is part of a video shot by the militants of the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” within one of the CAS’s of Acerra and consequently sent to most of the local media agencies, giving substantial coverage to the story on the metropolitan area. The media coverage of the conditions in the camps certainly put pressure on the institutions that were supposed to monitor the private shelters, exposing the inappropriateness of the system of the CAS’s. On a parallel level to the media pressure on the institutions, the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” called for an assembly in Acerra, managing to mobilize a few hundred individuals for a rally in front of the *Prefettura* (the office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs within the province of Naples). The rally was framed as a call for drastic changes of the living conditions in the CAS’s and to acknowledge the rights of the asylum-seekers.

The rally, composed of hundreds of immigrants, militants, and social operators of the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo”, went on for a relatively short time, before the government officials allowed a delegation of the CAS’s of Acerra into the *Prefettura* for negotiations. After the delegation came out of the office, I asked Lizaveta, who was inside to support the asylum-seekers, an account of the happenings. Her words are certainly the most appropriate way to describe the exceptionality of the Acerra mobilization.

“We were immediately received by the *Prefetto*, in the sense that we arrived in front of the *Prefettura* and we did not even have the time to organize a delegation before he called us inside. Another comrade and I went up, along with three migrants from Acerra, one for each CAS.

To be honest, we did not expect to be received by the *Prefetto*. The rally was actually to apply political pressure on the mayor De Magistris in order to push him to take a stance on the matter, as we did not expect it to end today. We explained to the *Prefetto* the situation of Acerra, and on this topic, he showed embarrassment because the *Prefettura* manifested great deficiencies in knowledge about the situation in the CAS’s. Moreover, they acknowledged their errors, and they guaranteed that the pocket money would be given to the men living in the CAS’s, that Italian language courses will start over the next few weeks, and above all that, while we were rallying, they had already sent some personnel to monitor the reported CAS’s. All this obviously happened because there was media coverage. The fact that these facts came out on the newspapers, in my opinion, somehow alerted them and made them act quickly. Well, as we came down, there was so much enthusiasm, because the boys did not expect a win, especially because we had warned them not to expect much, that the victories arrive over time. The political analysis of this struggle is therefore extremely positive, and it gives us an important datum. It is no coincidence, in my opinion, that the *Prefetto* instantly received us and guaranteed the delivery of the pocket money. It is no case that the *Prefetto* sent officials to monitor a CAS that presumably had always been following the rules. This struggle is obviously a success because we, the comrades who have been carrying this work for a year now, have been recognized as a credible interlocutor. We made all our knowledge obtained through the work of the “Help Desk” weigh more than the institutions’ ignorance.”

Lizaveta’s account of such an outstanding victory for the joint work of the militants, the social operators and the asylum-seekers, clearly underlines the importance that the shared knowledge of the social actors played in their political practice. Facing a situation of extreme social exclusion, the immigrants dwelling in the Acerra’s CAS’s truly saw their life as completely “bare”, that is, “stripped of any political rights” (Agamben 1998). The very existence of the CAS’s, structures that were originally thought of as emergency measures but then became the normality of the asylum-seekers management, materializes the “state of exception” described again by Agamben (2005). The immigrants find themselves dwelling in Agamben’s “camps”, defined as “the space that is opened

when the state of exception begins to become the rule” (Agamben 2005, 22), where the extremely awful living conditions are coupled with the impossibility to access any services and resources, while not being granted any political right to fight against their condition of social exclusion.

In such context of extreme deprivation of means of existence and human and civil rights, the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” socio-political laboratory, composed by militants, social operators, and immigrants themselves, created an innovative political practice grounded on the shared knowledge of the militants and the asylum-seekers. The militants provided the immigrants with logistic and mobilization knowledge support, while the inhabitants of the CAS’s referred to the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” as their main interlocutor for their struggle. Such process of knowledge sharing, built through the daily work of the “Migrants’ Help Desk” and the experience of the immigrants about the CAS’s, created a virtuous political practice that eventually proved successful for the rightful demand of basic rights by the socially excluded asylum-seekers. As Lizaveta underlined, the knowledge gap between the institutions and the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” socio-political laboratory created the necessary advantage for the requests of the movement to be accepted, therefore generating an important precedent of grassroots influence over institutional power.



Figure 5 - One of the "Ex-OPG" militants during the rally in front of the "Prefettura" (Photo credits: Sarah Lee).

As explained earlier, the socio-political laboratory of the movement managed to work because it inscribed a daily social practice usually carried on by humanitarian organizations (that being all the activities of the “Migrants’ Help Desk”) within a broader political framework of intervention on the social reality. As Lizaveta further explained,

“The Acerra victory was important not only for the immigrants, who were able to make their political agency weigh in the struggle for their rights, but also for the social operators of the “Help Desk”. They were able to witness that by pursuing a political project, their daily social work assumes a greater value, because it goes beyond the simple assistance to the immigrants. They finally affected the social reality, and they were able to witness that an informed political struggle can always win.”

Once again, the political framework around the movement’s daily activities created a space of resistance to the dominant ideology, which framed the immigrants as “bare life” and all the civil society’s attempts to create acts of solidarity as humanitarian practices.

The laboratory worked to create a community in which practices addressed towards social change can gain political meaning through shared knowledge. The asylum-seekers managed not only to create a rupture from their excluded status by being part of a resilient community, but also to deploy their own political agency in the building of a shared knowledge that managed to have a practical impact over the practices and the meanings concerning their own lives. Such empowering process allowed the asylum-seekers and militants to work on the creation of an innovative social fabric that is the foundation of the imagination of alternate social realities to the one framed by the dominant ideology, opposing solidarity to exclusion, political engagement to bare life.

A Specter Is Haunting Naples: the Invisibility of Illegal Labor

As the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” laboratory is successfully having an impact on the lives of many marginalized and excluded individuals, the militants have repeatedly confessed throughout my fieldwork the deep frustration that they continuously experience regarding a field of struggle that is utterly dear to them. Varvara, one of the oldest and most experienced militants who is also one of the coordinators of the entire movement, explicated such shared frustrations in a meaningful interview:

”I do not think that the greatest contradiction that we have to face in our daily practice is the one related to poverty or different accesses to citizenship. To me and to most of the comrades, the greatest contradiction is the capital-labor one. The problem is, and you need to follow me in this, that we are moving [politically] in a complete vacuum. There are no leftist political movements or parties in the Italian context that are actually engaging with the issues related to such contradiction and therefore creating class-consciousness on the topic. Our movement is trying to engage with such issues, but we also have to consider that we can act at full-strength only on struggles that give us a clear chance to foster political consciousness and to build a certain social fabric. This means that we can act successfully only in the fields where we find a response from the class, otherwise we would be doing elitist politics. This is why, while we still work on a daily basis on the capital-labor contradiction, we are failing to frame it as our most important struggle. The “Solidarity Network” and the

“Migrants’ Help Desk” are definitely our most successful activities right now, not because we consider them the main contradictions in our society, but because in such fields of struggle, we are finding political validation of our activities. There is still a lot of work to do on the consciousness of the lowest classes on issues related to labor and we will surely continue, but I have to admit that it is a little frustrating to see such little response on an issue so dear to us.”

Varvara, who has been a Marxist-Leninist militant for over twenty-five years, is clearly politically bound to the labor-capital contradiction, and the scarce response on such issue from the local population frustrates her, just as much as it does all the militants who work daily at the development of the practices of the “People’s Labor Center”.

Born from the experience of the “Clash City Workers” collective, the “Labor Center” was the first activity to start in the newly occupied “Ex-OPG” and it involves some of the most experienced militants of the movement along with a pool of volunteer lawyers. As briefly outlined in the first chapter, the “Labor Center” was conceived to provide legal and mobilizing support to workers in their struggles against their employers, and grounds its practice on years of scientific inquiry over the class composition of the Italian society (Clash City Workers 2014). The “Labor Center” represents another relevant example of the “socio-political laboratory” described in the previous sections, since it sees once again the users of the service provided participate in the political project of the movement. The instances that are made clear by the workers serve as meanings for the building of a shared knowledge addressed at a structural betterment of the working conditions of the lower classes, once again framing such process in a dialectical relation between the imagination of political realities and the material needs of the working class. Nevertheless, as stated by Varvara, the practices related to the capital-labor contradiction fail to have the same grip on the local population as the other activities described in this chapter.

The causes of the lack of responses to the activities of the “Labor Center” from the Neapolitan working classes are identified by the militants in both the historical conjuncture and the ideological framework of the neoliberal labor market. It is utterly important to underline that the historical, social, and economic marginalization described in the first chapter of this research has brought Naples to experience a long tradition of socio-political radicalism, traceable back to the mid-seventeenth century “*lazzaroni*” mobilizations, which were aimed at obtaining both moral and material rewards from the aristocracy (Baglioni 2008). Such tradition of workers’ mobilization in the city of Naples had been continued in more recent times by the movement of the unemployed, fostered initially by the spread of the sixties students’ movements and an increased political engagement related to workers’ rights (Baglioni 2008). More lately though, as noted by the militants of the “Labor Center”, political marginalization, combined with high youth unemployment rates, has brought to a

“normalization of exclusion and political distrust” (Bay and Blekesaune 2002, 12), significantly decreasing workers’ political mobilization and engagement in the city of Naples.

Finding themselves in such context, the militants of the “Labor Center” continue relentlessly in their daily activity of legal assistance and social mobilization. However, in order to create political consciousness in the crumbled Neapolitan working class, they often have to find innovative ways to frame their practice. During my fieldwork, I have been able to witness a fine example of such practices, in which the socio-political laboratory of the movement designed an innovative framework for the political mobilization of the city’s workers through the collaboration of the “Labor Center” with an unexpected partner: the “People’s Theater” and its actor-militants.

The idea of using the acting skills of the militants of the “People’s Theater” in a context of political mobilization came up during one of the weekly general political assemblies, when the militants were discussing about an effective way to denounce practices of illegal labor within the city during the traditional demonstrations held for Labor’s Day. As the leftist militants of Naples usually organize traditional marching demonstrations for the 1st of May, the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” militants decided to give a stronger emphasis on issues related to illegal labor through the use of an innovative informational medium. Illegal labor is one of the most widespread forms of labor exploitation in Naples, with over forty-five percent of the city’s companies not providing social security and other workers’ rights guaranteed by the Italian law to their employees¹². Such social plague, in the militants’ view, had to be underlined as one of the main fields of struggle of the “Labor Center”; therefore, the militants had the idea to convey stories of unemployment and exploitation using a different medium than the rally or public speech. The choice fell on the militants of the “People’s Theater”, who were happy to have a chance to put their artistic skills at the service of exploited laborers and to give a truly political meaning to their activity. As the “People’s Theater” already conveyed an innovative way of framing theatrical activities, by allowing small collectives to bring their creations to the scene and by organizing a completely free laboratory with acting classes provided by professionals, this was the first time that their activity was used within a political mobilization framework.

The idea that was conceived in the assembly consisted of acting five different stories brought by illegal workers to the “Labor Center” in different locations within the city center, trying to spark the attention of the passersby, while distributing flyers on the activity and struggle of the “Labor Center” against the illegal labour market. Five militants of the People’s Theater enacted the stories of the workers, while some other thirty militants, dressed up as ghosts to underline the invisibility of such subjects in the eyes of the institutions, chanted strategic sentences to give a more dramatic slant to

¹² “Direzione Provinciale del Lavoro di Napoli, Rapporto CLES 2015”,
<http://sitiarcheologici.lavoro.gov.it/DTL/NA/news/Documents/Relazione%20CLES%20anno%202015.pdf>

the stories being told. I found myself in the midst of the organization of such innovative demonstration, and after wearing a long bedsheet, I pretended to be one of the invisible illegal workers of the city.

Walking the streets of Naples with a bedsheet over my head makes it hard to breathe in the heat of this May 1. We have been walking along the streets and alleys of the city center, towards strategic points where the militants knew they would have found both a broad public and businesses with illegal workers to address directly. At first I feel a little embarrassed, dressed up as a ghost, chanting key words such as “Illegal” and “Invisible” with all the other militants, while a few actors of the “People’s Theater” tell the stories of different workers. Then I see the curiosity of the people around us; they give us all their attention, and more often than not, they give us a nod of approval. I start to relax, and I chant my words with a firmer voice. Finally understanding the effectiveness of our action, I focus on the stories being told by Pyotr in a dramatic tone. “I am Giuseppe; I am twenty-six years old. I work twelve hours a day for forty euros. I bring you your pizza and your coffee: this is my task. My lunch break? Ten minutes between one shift and the next one. Moreover, if I hurt myself as I am working I have no safeguard. I work all day just to maintain my family. Do you think I have a contract? Not even the shadow of it.” A man who was looking intensely at Pyotr approaches him as his story is reaching its end, and once he is finished, he looks at him in the eyes, takes his hand and shakes it for many seconds. I almost saw a tear down his cheek as the man was smiling at Piotr, while his lips repeatedly spoke the word “Grazie”.

This innovative demonstration, which mixed the theatrical medium with highly political meanings, had the double effect to spark both the attention of the people who witnessed it and that of the local and national media. In fact, a mere hour after the end of the demonstration, most of the national newspapers highlighted the “Labor Center” demonstration as one of the main initiatives within the national context of mobilization for Labor’s Day. At the same time, hundreds of people that were in the streets during the demonstration complimented the militants for the initiatives and asked additional information on the daily activities of the “Labor Center” of the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo”. Later that evening, when asked to share a reflection over the events of the day, Pyotr seemed excited and happy, but his voice also carried a heaviness, as if the victory of the day was only a symptom of the gravity of the life conditions of the illegal workers in the city. Pyotr is not only militant, but an illegal worker too, and such struggle seems to touch him deeply.

“Today we have tried to honor Labor’s Day talking about work, non-work, illegal work. On the street, people took all our fliers, and then said, “You’re right; I am an illegal worker too”. The boys working at the bar smiled and greeted us, and then with a wink they hinted at us that their employer

was there, so they could not speak. These are signs of a damn serious problem that politicians cannot pretend not to see. While the bourgeoisie capture the profits of tourism, and the media and politicians rub their hands, our generation has to raise its head and say together that even if they do not consider us, we exist!”

The mobilization of illegal workers, harnessed by decades of neoliberal dismantling of unions and workers’ rights and by a systematic de-politicization of the working class consciousness, has proven to be one of the most difficult fields of struggle for the militants of the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo”. Nevertheless, the socio-political laboratory of the movement has managed to create innovative political meanings through the collaboration of a more classical practice of mobilization of illegal workers with the “People’s Theater” and its forms of art addressed to the politicization of individuals.



Figure 6 - The militants enact the invisibility of illegal labor (“lavoro nero” in Italian) through the streets of Naples (Photo credits: “Ex-OPG - Je so’ pazzo”).

By combining information regarding the working conditions of one of the most marginalized social groups of the city with an innovative medium like performative acting, the militants of the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” managed to inform the local population, while sparking their attention as much as the media’s, in an original way. In a political environment of disillusionment and disengagement, the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” socio-political laboratory is attempting to foster political participation and consciousness through innovative practices, framing their activity as dialectic and a part of a broader political project aimed at the communal building of alternative forms of shared socio-political knowledge.

Conclusion

The aim of this research thesis is to tell the stories of the militants and the local population involved in the creation of a community in which values such as solidarity, mutualism, and political engagement thrive through socially innovative practices and shared forms of knowledge. In a context such as the neoliberal city of Naples, where socio-economic inequalities are made evident by the structural segregation of the marginal strata of the population (Bayat 2012), the social movement “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” created a socio-political laboratory in which political knowledge is shared through dialectical relations and practices between the political militants and the city’s marginalized individuals.

The first chapter of this thesis outlined the political context of the city of Naples, with a particular focus on the city’s administration and its innovative attitude towards grassroots experiences of self-management and political engagement with the city’s issues. As the administration provided a fertile terrain for the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” experience to emerge, it has been underlined that the movement maintains an independent stance and frames its practices as the result of grassroots experiences of self-management and political struggles. Nevertheless, the current administration of the city allowed the movement to freely use the ex-asylum and all its symbolic capital, which has been proven to posit a fundamental framework for political practices that challenge the neoliberal hegemony and its ways to manage social marginality and exclusion.

The ethnographic account of the spatial, political, and symbolic context in which the social movement enacts its practices has brought the analysis to the second chapter and its investigation of the ideological field of struggle of the movement’s socio-political laboratory. As detailed by interviews conducted with some of the most experienced militants I encountered, the movement addresses its actions towards the affective-cognitive sphere of the individuals, trying to counteract hegemonic processes of de-politicization of the masses carried on by processes such as “reflexive impotence” (Fisher 2009) and the “humanitarian paradigm” (Ticktin 2011). Such outcomes enforced by the neoliberal hegemony keep marginalized social strata from engaging the political realm of their lives, and restrain efforts addressed towards social change from politically affecting the power structures in place, therefore exacerbating inequalities of access to resources, services, and knowledge.

The aim of this thesis has been to show that the social movement “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” is trying to counteract such hegemonic processes with the creation of a community framed by a socio-political laboratory that fosters processes of shared knowledge building, mutualism, and political engagement. The third chapter expanded specifically on such processes by outlining three specific ethnographic cases that empirically grounded the notions underlined by the militants’ interviews. These three cases

highlighted how marginal social groups are participating in the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” socio-political laboratory not only by using the services provided by the militants, but especially by participating in a political process of shared knowledge building addressed to the implementation of an informed political struggle. In the case of the homeless population and the undocumented immigrants, the need to access services and knowledge has created a dialectical relation with the militants involved in their struggle, therefore engaging the political side of their material issues and creating the space to imagine a different reality to the social exclusion they experience on a daily basis. As for the mobilization of the illegal workers, the “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” socio-political laboratory has managed to relate to an extremely disengaged and apolitical social group by combining different experiences and communication mediums, thereby creating room for the city’s illegal workers to gain political consciousness on their status.

The ethnographic cases outlined in this thesis have profoundly shaken my own personal understanding of the degree of de-politicization in contemporary societies, and throughout the research, I have given relevance to my reflexive approach to the field and the cognitive process I have gone through in order to grasp the meanings and the practices of my research participants. While being confronted with dynamics of marginalization and exclusion enforced by the State and the late-capitalist ideology that frames its actions, I have been able to witness the possibilities that can be opened up by grassroots experiences of self-management and engagement to the political realm. The “Ex-OPG – Je so’ pazzo” socio-political laboratory can surely be defined as a virtuous example of a counter-hegemonic framework for both modes of interventions on our social reality and for the ways individuals can imagine life within a community. By creating a community based on solidarity and mutualism, the users and the militants of the social movement not only try to harness the neoliberal restructuring of Naples’ society and of people’s affective cognitive sphere, but they also positively work to imagine and dwell a different idea of society, one that sees solidarity as its main value.

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